

**Interracial Intimacies:  
Domestic Servants and the East African Asian Home, 1940s-1960s**

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In her hybrid memoir-cookbook, *The Settler's Cookbook* (2008), South Asian author Yasmin Alibhai-Brown paints a telling portrait of her childhood home in 1950s Uganda through a scene of domestic conflict. When her racist cousin, Shamsu, accuses her family's Black Ugandan servant, Japani, of stealing a pair of cufflinks, Alibhai-Brown is caught in the middle. After Shamsu unleashes an onslaught of racist language ("They are all thieves, these *kala junglees*. Mother-fucking thieves, stupid too") and kicks Japani, Alibhai-Brown "ran to stand between them, crying, an infant protesting against injustice, rage without power."<sup>1</sup> Recounting this incident compels Alibhai-Brown to reflect, "East African Asians have yet to recognize or regret their complicity in the degradation of black Africans in Uganda, Kenya, and Tanganyika and Zanzibar."<sup>2</sup> In one stark, emblematic image of both overt racism and interracial solidarity, Alibhai-Brown captures the contradiction that characterized relationships between brown and black East Africans throughout the 20<sup>th</sup> century.

As Sana Aiyar argues in *Indians in Kenya: The Politics of Diaspora*, interracial relations or "entanglements" between brown and black East Africans in the 20<sup>th</sup> century were defined by "the simultaneous coexistence of solidarity and friction."<sup>3</sup> In 1890, the construction of the British East African Railway—an expansionist colonial project—brought tens of thousands of South Asians (known as "Asians") to East Africa as indentured laborers. More quickly followed suit as traders and merchants looking for economic opportunity.<sup>4</sup> The period from the early 1900s up to East African independence in the 60s was characterized by confluence and conflict, with colonial

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<sup>1</sup> Yasmin Alibhai-Brown, *The Settler's Cookbook: A Memoir of Love, Migration and Food* (London: Portobello, 2008), 108. Note that the term "*junglees*" means primitive or savage and the term "*kala*" means "black" or "blackies," often used by East African Asians to describe Black Africans. Both are derogatory terms.

<sup>2</sup> Alibhai-Brown, *The Settler's Cookbook*, 108.

<sup>3</sup> Sana Aiyar, *Indians in Kenya: The Politics of Diaspora*. (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2015), 13.

<sup>4</sup> Sana Aiyar, *Indians in Kenya*, 5.

policies positioning “Asians” as middlemen in the social pyramid and fanning the flames of interracial resentment.<sup>5</sup> Exacerbated by ethnocentric nationalism, racial tensions escalated after independence, leading to the mass exodus of East African Asians in the 70s.<sup>6</sup> This paper explores the intimate entanglements of brown and black East Africans during the period of the late 40s to late 60s in an understudied context: the East African Asian home.<sup>7</sup>

Scholarship on interracial relations between East African Asians and Black East Africans tends to focus on two public arenas of encounter: politics and commerce.<sup>8</sup> It is in these highly visible spheres that the tropes of the cunning *dukawallah* (Asian shopkeeper) and greedy Asian capitalist emerged and took hold.<sup>9</sup> Though domestic encounters were not as perceptible, they were certainly not insignificant in shaping racial relations. The employment of Black East African men as domestic servants, or “houseboys,” in East African Asian households was ubiquitous; black servants are ever-present in accounts of East African Asian life in the early and mid-20<sup>th</sup> century, from colonial reports to memoirs to novels, often mentioned off-handedly. Yet there is a scarcity of both primary and secondary sources that dedicate attention to this specific

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<sup>5</sup> Sana Aiyar. *Indians in Kenya*, 7.

<sup>6</sup> Informal exodus took place across East Africa (see Sana Aiyar’s chapter entitled “Uhuru and Exodus” in *Indians in Kenya*), but the climactic expulsion of East African Asians from Idi Amin’s Uganda in 1972 is often framed as the defining event in the history of relations between East African Asians and Black East Africans. However, the story is not merely one of conflict and alienation culminating in exile. Exploring how these groups of people interacted on a personal and everyday basis can offer insight into the ways in which tension and conflict existed alongside friendship and intimacy.

<sup>7</sup> See Savita Nair’s essay, “Gender, Space, and Power: Indian Immigrant Women in Colonial East Africa (c.1920-1940)” which challenges the dichotomized and gendered opposition of home vs. work, or domestic space vs. public space. For the purposes of this essay, I am discussing East African Asian women who did spend most of their time at home, but as Nair points out, there were also many brown women who vacillated between public and private spaces, working in the shops as female *dukawallis*. Sometimes East African Asian homes were hybrid domestic-shop spaces, in themselves. There were even instances where brown men, brown women, and their black servants all worked alongside each other in shops.

<sup>8</sup> See “Ocean and Narration” In Gaurav Desair’s *Commerce with the Universe: Africa, India, and the Afrasian Imagination*, as well as “From the America of the Hindu to White Man’s Country” in Sana Aiyar’s *Indians in Kenya*.

<sup>9</sup> Common subjects of scholarship in this field include East African Asians who were political and economic allies to Black East Africans, such as trade unionist Makhan Singh and liberationist Pio Gama Pinto, as well as those who were enemies—wealthy merchants with sub-imperialist motives like Allidina Visram and A.M. Jevanjee (See Sana Aiyar. *Indians in Kenya*, 25).

domain of interracial interaction. In this essay, I explore questions that few in this field have directly engaged with. For instance, how did brown employers and black servants interact across racial differences outside the public eye? How did they navigate the complexities of power and intimacy in the East African Asian household? What was the relationship between daily individual interactions in the domestic space and the greater political climate of the 1940s-60s?

I will focus on three pieces of East African Asian literature that offer previews into employer-servant relations: Yasmin Alibhai-Brown's *The Settler's Cookbook* (2008), M.G. Vassanji's "Ali" in *Uhuru Street* (1991), and Yasmin Ladha's *Lion's Granddaughter and Other Stories* (1992). Alibhai-Brown's and Vassanji's pre-independence narratives highlight the mixed stew of sentiments, both warm and bitter, that brewed in these spaces, providing a new model for understanding the history of black-brown relations in East Africa. Further, Ladha's post-independence short stories intertwine the public and private spheres, revealing that the East African Asian household was not just an isolated microcosm for but was also actively influenced by interracial dynamics that played out on political battlefields, and vice versa.

The regional term, "East Africa," in this paper refers to the countries of Kenya, Uganda, and Tanzania. Additionally, I will use the terms "brown" and "black," taking after Sana Aiyar who uses these terms in discourses on race, as they are separated from contested "territorial affiliations and civilizational claims" imbued in terms like "Asian" or "African". Throughout the 20<sup>th</sup> century, several different terms were cycled through to refer to both brown and black East Africans. Some scholars have recently espoused the term, East African Asians (which I also use throughout this paper), however most of the writing on this diaspora uses the terms "Indians" or "Asians," while referring to Black East Africans as merely "Africans." I argue that separating the ethnic category of "Asian" from the nationality marker, "African," perpetuates the mutual

exclusivity with which these terms were invented and institutionalized during and after the colonial era. With the rise of African nationalism in the 1960s, East African Asians had to fight to be seen as “real” Africans. The exclusionary nationalist discourse which associated true Africanness with Blackness was part of the engine that forced most East African Asians out of East Africa in the late 20<sup>th</sup> century.

### **I. The Black “Houseboy” and The Brown Household**

The study of East African Asians is a relatively specialized and sparse one. Writers most vocal about the East African Asian experience in anglophone literature, such as M.G. Vassanji, who is the most prolific and well-known of them, belong to what I call the exile generation—those who came of age during the postcolonial period and left East Africa for Western countries in childhood or young adulthood. It is not surprising that this generation was the first to write extensively about their East African experience, given the growth of English education during this time, as well as the emergence of a literary market for books on themes of diaspora and migration. Emerging from the trauma of exile and separation, many of these writers attempt to make peace with the friction-ridden histories that pushed their families out of East Africa. Laying claim to an embattled sense of identity both for themselves and their families, East African Asian writers of the exile generation express a sense of nostalgia that sometimes verges on revisionism. However, everyday interracial conflicts do arise in their works, often revolving around the themes of theft and violation—whether depictions of Black Africans as thieves or sexual assaulters—perhaps reflecting the sense of theft and violation that the exiles endured, themselves, when forced to leave their childhood homes.

The voices of brown women have only begun to noticeably emerge in the past couple of decades, challenging the historically gendered construction of “the East African Asian,” which has been largely defined by male experiences, particularly those of indentured laborers or *dukawallahs*.<sup>10</sup> Little has been written on the relationships between brown employers and black domestic servants because it was typically East African Asian *women* who spent the most time with servants in the middle-and-upper-class brown households. The voices of brown women and working-class black servants are some of the most difficult to find in historical archives and literature.<sup>11</sup> Though excavating reliable historical information about private interracial relationships is a challenge, literary writers have been obsessed with the theme of taboo black-brown romantic and/or sexual relationships because of their explosive symbolic value, representing the possibility for and shortcomings of unity between black and brown East Africans.<sup>12</sup> Despite the deeply entrenched taboo of social contact, romantic or platonic, between them, the domestic space was intriguingly the one place where brown women and black men acceptably and consistently crossed over. Yet these nonromantic private interracial relationships

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<sup>10</sup> Felicity Hand, “Impossible Burdens: East African Asian Women's Memoirs.” *Research in African Literatures* (Indiana University Press, 2011), 101. In this article, Hand discusses the genre of the memoir and East African Asian women writers like Yasmin Alibhai-Brown, Neera Kapur-Dromson, and Parita Mukta. Additionally, it is important to note that, within the small pool of East African Asian female writers, a significant portion are Khoja Ismaili Muslims. Ismailism is a branch of Shia Islam defined by the following of one Imam descended from the Prophet Muhammad. The trend of Ismaili women writers is likely due to the progressive Imam of the time who advocated for their unveiling and education in colonial East Africa.. For more on Ismailis in East Africa, see Ali Asani’s “The Impact of Modernization on the Marriage Rites of the Khojah Ismailis of East Africa” in *Journal of Turkish Studies*.

<sup>11</sup> Language is a significant barrier in accessing stories of both brown women, who mostly spoke Indian languages like Gujarati, and black houseboys who spoke Kiswahili and other tribal dialects.

<sup>12</sup> See Stephanie Jones’s “The Politics of Love and History: Asian Women and African Men in East African Literature” in *Research in African Literatures*. From accounts of railway workers who married Black East African women or took them as concubines in the early 20<sup>th</sup> century (see Cynthia Salvadori’s *We Came in Dhows*) to novels set in the mid-late 1900s featuring romantic black-brown relationships (i.e. several of M.G. Vassanji’s books including *The In-Between World of Vikram Lall*, *Uhuru Street*, and *The Magic of Saida*), interracial romances are a very common topic of focus.

have received significantly less attention. I argue that the daily intimacies fostered in the home can help provide a fuller history of interracial entanglements in East Africa.

While we lack first-person accounts from a black perspective, a bird's eye view of the history of East African domestic labor suggests that employer-employee relations may have played a strong role in fueling interracial resentment.<sup>13</sup> There is a strong dissonance between the low wages that black employees received in brown homes and the visible rise of wealthy brown businessmen in the public sphere of commerce.<sup>14</sup> In the early 1900s, domestic servants formed almost half of the working class in the city of Dar es Salaam, and ninety seven percent of Tanganyika domestic servants were black men.<sup>15</sup> Employers were a mix of white Europeans and South Asians, and European employers in early colonial times often had several different servants, each in charge of specialized household tasks.<sup>16</sup> Rising demand for domestic labor eventually led to the creation of a formal regulatory system. Using race-based prosecution data, David M. Anderson argues that the colonial system's "pattern of sentencing was racially determined," with European and Asian offenders often receiving more lenient treatments and Black African laborers receiving harsher punishments.<sup>17</sup> Highlighting the limitations of archival court records, he acknowledges that there is significantly more data on European employers than

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<sup>13</sup> See Rosalind Morris' *Can the Subaltern Speak?: Reflections on the History of an Idea* (2010)

<sup>14</sup> Some staple names include the Visrams, Jeevanjees, and Mehtas (again, see "From the America of the Hindu to White Man's Country" in Sana Aiyar's *Indians in Kenya*.)

<sup>15</sup> Janet M. Bujra, *Serving Class: Masculinity and the Feminisation of Domestic Service in Tanzania*. (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press for the International African Institute, London, 2000), 109. Note: Though we know they were predominantly black, we do not know much about domestic servants' tribal or religious affiliations, or whether they came from cities or rural areas. However many literary texts and primary source interviews reference "villages" as their servants' homes or refer to them as "village boys," suggesting that many servants did come from rural locations. The fact that some were live-in servants also suggests that they lived far from urban centers where many East African Asian employers likely lived. However, these are just speculations.

<sup>16</sup> Pariser, "Masculinity and Organized Resistance," 112.

<sup>17</sup> David M. Anderson "Master and Servant in Colonial Kenya, 1895–1939" in *Journal of African History* (2000). 483.

Asian employers.<sup>18</sup> He also stresses that “most infractions by labour or by their masters did not come to court at all” in part because “few Africans were aware of their rights under labour law, and it is very likely that those who were had little faith in the colonial courts to uphold their rights.”<sup>19</sup> After WWII, however, Anderson points out that the mechanization of Kenya’s economic sectors, transforming a casual-labor-based workforce into a wage-labor-based one, “heralded an era of rapid labour law reform” with increased trade union activity.<sup>20</sup>

In addition to an increase in organized resistance, the post-WWII period also saw a change in public perceptions surrounding the respectability of the profession. According to Robyn Pariser, domestic labor was considered a “skilled, dignified occupation” that, despite its “female nature,” was high-paying and respectable for black men in the 1920s and 30s; however, in the economic downturn and population boom of the 40s and 50s, domestic labor became more unskilled, “exploitative and poorly paid.”<sup>21</sup> Pariser argues that this shift humiliated East African domestic servants by thwarting their ability to attain financial and social capital as the male heads of their families, and that labor unions rose in an attempt to preserve servants’ “honor and masculinity.” While there were financial and social aspects that made the occupation respectable in the early colonial period, there were also enduring emasculating aspects of the job that remained unchanged, such as taking orders from female employers.<sup>22</sup>

Unlike Europeans, most brown employers could not afford multiple servants. Even after WWII, when most Europeans shifted to the cheaper option of fewer, more generalized servants, white employers were still known to pay their servants more than brown ones in large part due to

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<sup>18</sup> Anderson, “Master and Servant in Colonial Kenya,” 479.

<sup>19</sup> Anderson, “Master and Servant in Colonial Kenya,” 479, 483.

<sup>20</sup> Anderson, “Master and Servant in Colonial Kenya,” 484.

<sup>21</sup> Pariser, “Masculinity and Organized Resistance,” 109, 110.

<sup>22</sup> Pariser, “Masculinity and Organized Resistance,” 110.



the inextricable nature of class and ethnicity in the colonial social pyramid.<sup>23</sup> Moral judgements also tended to get looped into economic entanglements; in her book, *Serving Class: Masculinity and the Feminisation of Domestic Service in Tanzania* (2000), Janet Bujra cites several East African servants who perceived Asians as being inherently worse employers and by extension, worse *people* than Europeans.<sup>24</sup>

While sources that thoroughly investigate interracial interactions between black servants and brown employers are few and far between, putting the scattered fragments of insight we *do* have into conversation can yield patterns that illuminate the broader implications embedded in these relationships. Rather than public-facing sources such as newspaper articles, court cases or legal records, I turned my attention to more private and nontraditional sources, including Carleton University's Ugandan Asian Oral History Project; KhojaWiki, an online, crowd-sourced repository of personal and family migration histories; and Cynthia Salvadori's collection, *We Came in Dhows* (1996). Multiple conflicting perspectives arise across these various sources; there are heartening stories of love and friendship, with many East African Asians seeing servants as part of their families. Equally, stories of racism and mistreatment abound on either side.<sup>25</sup> Some key anecdotes from each of these three sources can help provide a sense of the range of stories that exist in this realm.

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<sup>23</sup> Pariser, "Masculinity and Organized Resistance," 112.

<sup>24</sup> Bujra, *Serving Class*, 136-137. Bujra bases her discussion of Tanzanian houseboys on original interviews she conducted (in Swahili, translated to English) with 78 Tanzanian servants and 60 employers. Her book is, therefore, a very significant and rare source of black domestic servant perspectives and voices, though mediated through her analysis and personal lens.

<sup>25</sup> Many East African Asians employed racist language and stereotypes when talking to and/or about servants, and black Africans in general. Many harbored racist conceptions of Blackness as associated with criminality, stupidity, dirtiness, and general inferiority. Brown East Africans often used terms such as "Blackkeys" or "kala". Janet Bujra's *Serving Class* contains examples of servants harboring racialized resentment for Asian employers who treated them poorly (see pg 136-137).

One interview in Carleton University's Ugandan Asian oral history archive supplies a key anecdote that not only hints at pervasive mistreatment of servants, but also signals a kind of retrospective regret on the part of employers.<sup>26</sup> When orally recounting his life in Uganda from his home in Toronto, Shiraz Lalani, states, "We were not integrating and only keeping to ourselves and our whole intention was to make money and use those Africans," arguing that Idi Amin was not entirely wrong in his accusation that Asians were "milking the economy" of Uganda.<sup>27</sup> Lalani continues, "Reflecting back, I don't think [servants] were treated properly. They were not even paid properly for the amount of work that they were doing. There was no such thing as overtime, they were required to come seven days a week, anytime that we want[ed] them. So we had no idea until we came here... We didn't do it right." In this interview, Lalani appears to speak for the larger Ugandan Asian community, not just his own middle class family, and insinuates a widespread mistreatment of servants. His tone reflects a sense of guilt and regret, which is not uncommon among East African Asians who, decades after exodus, reflect on interracial relations in their home countries—especially writers of the exile generation, like Yasmin Alibhai-Brown who will be discussed later in this essay.

Another anecdote from KhojaWiki begins to illustrate the complexities of living within a system of institutionalized racism that is predicated on racial division but does not entirely eradicate the possibility of human connection across those divisions.<sup>28</sup> Shariffa Keshavjee, a Kenyan Asian, recalls an incident on a train from Kisumu to Mombasa in 1946 with her mother

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<sup>26</sup> The Carleton University Oral History Project contains transcribed interviews with East African Asians who left Idi Amin's Uganda in the 70s and now live in Canada.

<sup>27</sup> Shiraz, Lalani, Interview with The Ugandan Asian Archive Oral History Project at Carleton University (Toronto, Ontario), 2015.

<sup>28</sup> KhojaWiki specifically collects written submissions from ethnic Khojas, from the Western Gujarat region of India.

and their ayah, Fatima.<sup>29</sup> Keshavjee explains, “When the conductor came into our second class compartment and found an African woman there, he made her get off the train. Such was life in colonial Kenya. My mother was in tears.”<sup>30</sup> The strong emotional reaction of Keshavjee’s mother suggests genuine care and affection for Fatimah, as well as indignation on the ayah’s behalf. Moreover, the resignation imbued in the statement, “such was life in colonial Kenya,” exemplifies the lack of choice or control for many individuals in a rigid colonial system that structured their relationships and everyday interactions.<sup>31</sup>

Some black servants reciprocated the care that their brown employers had for them. In *We Came in Dhows*, Cynthia Salvadori presents a rare, Black East African perspective in a section contributed by Shamsudin Raweno Otieno, entitled “The First Luo Ismaili”.<sup>32</sup> In it, Otieno recounts, “When I was twelve years old I went to work as a houseboy in an Ismaili household in Kisumu... [My employer] was very friendly to me, the whole family was... I was like part of that family, they loved me like their own child.”<sup>33</sup> Otieno confirms that he genuinely felt part of his brown employers’ family, and the comparison of employer-servant relationships to familial ones is a recurring thread throughout accounts of life in East African Asian households in the

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<sup>29</sup> An ayah is a female domestic servant, similar to a nanny. Though not as common as “houseboys,” when Black East African women worked in Asian households, it was most likely as ayahs.

<sup>30</sup> Shariffa Keshavjee, “Bwana Mzuri - Memories of Hasham Jamal - A Pioneer in Kisumu,” (KhojaWiki).

<sup>31</sup> For more on colonial systems that perpetuated racial hierarchies, particularly in terms of access to fertile land, see pg 24 of Sana Aiyar’s *Indians in Kenya*.

<sup>32</sup> Salvadori has a background in history, photography, and anthropology and *We Came in Dhows* is largely made up of her own interviews with those she calls “ordinary people” in the South Asian diaspora about their lives or their family members’ lives in East Africa in the late 19<sup>th</sup> and 20<sup>th</sup> centuries. In addition to interviews, Salvadori also includes some written testimonies and other artifacts including photographs, passports, and land deeds provided to her by the East African Asians she was in conversation/contact with. Snippets of more traditional archival sources can also be found in *We Came in Dhows*, including newspaper clippings, legal reports, and even some excerpts from the writing of European settlers and administrators. Salvadori essentially puts nontraditional sources on the same plane as traditional archival ones, which has an equalizing effect and suggests that oral histories and other unconventional artifacts should hold just as much (if not more) authority as the archive. Moreover, the visual layout of the book intentionally resembles a scrapbook, supporting Salvadori’s radical act of collage—putting together incomplete bits and pieces, rather than a whole account of any one life, and presenting their compilation as a historically valuable and necessary resource in understanding the experiences of South Asians in East Africa.

<sup>33</sup> Cynthia Salvadori, *We Came in Dhows* (Nairobi, Kenya, 1996), 122.

20th century.<sup>34</sup> Otieno also notes that he “first learned Indian cooking” in his employer’s house, which points to another common theme across various accounts: the emergence of the East African Asian kitchen as a site of intercultural exchange.<sup>35</sup> Not only did servants often learn to cook South Asian dishes, but brown women also learned to speak a kind of “Kitchen Swahili” through interacting with black servants in the home.<sup>36</sup> Additionally, Otieno converted to the religion of Ismailism because of his employers, which adds another dimension of cultural integration and connection to his story.

Many of the themes and sentiments found in the scraps of personal stories above can also be found in East African Asian literature—that is, in the few texts that offer a more sustained engagement with the topic of domestic labor. Though there is value in putting scattered bits and pieces together, I will now turn to longer texts to explore specific employer-servant dynamics in more depth. Two recent literary works—M.G. Vassanji’s short story, “Ali” in *Uhuru Street* (1991) and Yasmin Alibhai-Brown’s hybrid memoir-cookbook, *The Settler’s Cookbook* (2008)—offer a rare, intimate perspective on interracial relationships in the brown household in the 1940s and 50s. Though this perspective comes in fragments, through short chapters within larger narratives, these authors go beyond the off-handed remarks found in the kinds of sources referenced above, and their narratives of domestic life offer a valuable window into the history of black-brown relations in East Africa.

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<sup>34</sup> While endearing and demonstrative of genuine care, being considered “part of the family” does not necessarily mean equal treatment of servants as family members. See pg 20 of *Serving Class*, where Bujra paints a detailed portrait of a Tanzanian houseboy, “Abu,” who, though he said he *felt* like part of the Indian family for which he worked, always ate at the *kids* table. Bujra argues that this had an infantilizing effect, placing him in a perpetual state of childhood within the brown family.

<sup>35</sup> Salvadori, *We Came in Dhows*, 122. Also see the stories entitled “Kitchen Rules” from Bhanumati V. in on pg 120 and “Indo-African Culinary Blends” from Shariffa Keshavjee on pg 121 of Salvadori’s *We Came in Dhows*.

<sup>36</sup> Salvadori, *We Came in Dhows*, 122.

## **II. Employer-Servant Entanglements in Pre-Independence Narratives: Yasmin**

### **Alibhai-Brown's *The Settler's Cookbook* and M.G. Vassanji's *Uhuru Street***

In *The Settler's Cookbook* (2008), journalist Alibhai-Brown intertwines recipes with prose as she chronicles her family's first migration from India to Uganda in the early 1900s and their second migration to the UK in the 1970s. *Uhuru Street* by Kenyan-born and Canada-based author M.G. Vassanji is a book of short stories following various East African Asian lives in Dar es Salaam, Tanzania from the 1950s-80s. One story entitled "Ali" is about a child narrator's relationship with his domestic servant named Ali. In both texts, servants are transient characters; though we do not know where they came from or where they go after leaving the narrators' lives, we can glean valuable insights about their relationships inside the East African Asian home through the authors' lenses.

At the outset of the chapter in which Alibhai-Brown introduces and discusses Japani, her family's servant in the 1950s, she explains, "Most servants had to surrender their 'impossible' African names when they worked for Asians and Europeans, who baptized them 'John' or 'Joe'... short occidental names, easy to shout, sounding like blows to the ear."<sup>37</sup> The writer's sardonic tone indicates that she is cognizant of the absurdity of "impossible" African names (after all, South Asians, too, had "impossible" names). By describing their new names as "blows to the ear," she also critiques the common abuse of servants. However, after highlighting the servant renaming phenomenon, Alibhai-Brown points out, "Always mindful of his dignity, Japani had arranged his own renaming," framing this as an exception.<sup>38</sup> Though Japani's own renaming paints Alibhai-Brown's family in a slightly less domineering light, Japani nonetheless had to

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<sup>37</sup> Alibhai-Brown, *The Settler's Cookbook*, 108.

<sup>38</sup> Alibhai-Brown, *The Settler's Cookbook*, 108.

choose a new name, and one taken from a “Hindi film ditty” and thus more palatable (or rather, more “possible”) to the Asian tongue.<sup>39</sup> The author also never uses Japani’s real or *full* name, hinting at a solipsistic tendency of East African Asian families to overlook their servants’ existences outside the context of their own lives.<sup>40</sup>

Similarly, in Vassanji’s short story, Ali has no last name. The narrator first describes him as “coal black” and notes his tattered clothing; rather than his name, history or personality, Ali is defined by his race and poverty, the two key factors that characterized domestic servants across the profession.<sup>41</sup> Before we meet Ali, the narrator explains that his family has gone through several untrustworthy servants, lamenting, “One more village boy would have to be house-trained. And after that, how long would he last?”<sup>42</sup> Upon arrival into the narrative, Ali is presented as a replaceable commodity, just another servant in a long line of disposable people. The narrator goes on to posit that, if “smart enough,” Ali will eventually go on to a richer, European home, suggesting an employment hierarchy wherein the lower-class Asian household is seen as a stepping stone or entryway job for black servants.<sup>43</sup> The narrator also wishes his family could afford “well-trained servants” who ran households like a “well-oiled machine,” envying his Grandmother’s servants, “Chagan” and “Magan,” whom she describes as precious “gems.”<sup>44</sup> While “Ali” could well be a servant’s real name, the narrator’s grandmother does use

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<sup>39</sup> Alibhai-Brown explains that Japani’s “favourite Hindi film ditty was titled ‘Mera Jutta Hair Japani’: ‘My shoes are Japanese; these trousers were made in England; on my head a Russian cap, but my heart is purely Indian.’ It was a freedom song he couldn’t have understood. Or maybe he did and didn’t want us to know that he too longed for foreigners to let go so Africans could regain their lands and hopes” (pg 108).

<sup>40</sup> The exclusion of last names appears to be a trend across sources (whether literature, like Vassanji’s and Ladha’s short stories, or oral histories/interviews) that make any mention of domestic servants. This may contribute to the challenge of tracking down East African domestic servants in history and recovering their lives and stories.

<sup>41</sup> M.G. Vassanji, *Uhuru Street: Short Stories* (Toronto: McClelland & Stewart, 1992), 13.

<sup>42</sup> Vassanji, *Uhuru Street*, 13

<sup>43</sup> See Bujra’s *Serving Class*, pg 14. This supports an observation about labor mobility that Bujra notes in *Serving Class*; she notices from her interviews that many servants saw employment in Asian households as a kind of entry-level job and ultimately wanted to work for Europeans.

<sup>44</sup> Vassanji, *Uhuru Street*, 13

nicknames for her servants, “from the old ditty that runs, ‘My Chagan and Magan are of gold,’” harkening back to Alibhai-Brown’s observation about renaming.<sup>45</sup> The positioning of Ali as another gear in the machine that is the “Asian” household, coupled with the reference to Grandmother’s nicknaming and calling her servants “gems” serves to further commodify and objectify the servants.

However, Alibhai-Brown and Vassanji also position servants as occupying a vital place in the household, not just as commodities or mere strangers. In *Uhuru Street*, the narrator recognizes Ali as “indispensable” to the family’s daily routines and even recounts fond memories of Ali carrying him on his shoulders and telling him spellbinding stories.<sup>46</sup> Alibhai-Brown expresses a similar sense of nostalgic affection, writing, “I have never forgotten him, my Japani, the sweetest, most loyal man I knew then.”<sup>47</sup> Both narratives are presented, though, from the naive perspective of children whose role in the hierarchy of employment is a complicated one; though they are not the direct employers of domestic servants and have little power in household decision-making, children are still served by and benefit from the economic exploitation and/or abuse of domestic servants.<sup>48</sup> Additionally, children may not have been aware of the economic dynamics at play in the employer-servant relationship. Alibhai-Brown’s childhood self and

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<sup>45</sup> Vassanji, *Uhuru Street*, 13. Interestingly, both “Chagan”/“Magan” and the name “Japani” in Alibhai-Brown’s memoir come from Hindi film “ditties”—short simple songs from films which people who do not speak the language can easily pick up on. A whole other paper could be written about the role of Bollywood films in East African culture and among Black East Africans.

<sup>46</sup> Vassanji, *Uhuru Street*, 15.

<sup>47</sup> Alibhai-Brown, *The Settler’s Cookbook*, 115.

<sup>48</sup> The experiences of writers of the exile generation who had interactions or relationships with servants in East Africa would have been limited to childhood and their accounts are naturally limited by the confines of both memory and naivety.

Vassanji's child narrator both express a sense of confusion and surprise as to *why* their servants stayed with their families despite low wages and poor working conditions.<sup>49</sup>

Just as Alibhai-Brown remembers Janani to be loyal, she also portrays herself, perhaps too simplistically, as wholeheartedly loyal to him. Returning to the opening image of this essay, with Alibhai-Brown standing between Janani and her racist cousin, the author depicts herself as morally positioned on Janani's side but ultimately powerless.<sup>50</sup> When she then asserts that "East African Asians have yet to recognize or regret their complicity in the degradation of black Africans," the author separates herself by writing "their" instead of "*our* complicity," suggesting her own innocence.<sup>51</sup> But would Alibhai-Brown have the same image of herself as Janani's staunch defender if she had grown into adulthood in East Africa, like the generations of brown women before her? Is hers perhaps a diasporic vision of unflinching racial solidarity—of *what could've been*—that she projects onto the past?

Vassanji's narrator offers a more cynical view, recognizing the complexity of his role as a child in a servant-employing family.<sup>52</sup> He explains, "Much as I liked Ali, and despite our special relationship, it was I who proved my elders right and caused Ali to leave us," when he caught Ali watching his child sister taking a bath.<sup>53</sup> After the incident, Ali was immediately dismissed. Despite the narrator's loyalty to the servant, who had become like family, he knows that his

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<sup>49</sup> Alibhai-Brown writes, "even though he earned less than the lowest-paid black servants in the neighbourhoods, Janani stayed faithful to us, oddly protective of this irregular family" (pg 110 of *The Settler's Cookbook*). Similarly, Vassanji's narrator ponders, "And herein lay the wonder. What kept him with us? Not the pay, certainly; and not the working conditions, for ours was a modest household with no benefits to speak of" (pg 15 of *Uhuru Street*).

<sup>50</sup> Alibhai-Brown, *The Settler's Cookbook*, 113.

<sup>51</sup> Alibhai-Brown, *The Settler's Cookbook*, 114.

<sup>52</sup> The other children in the short story are also not so innocent. When Ali starts working for the family, the narrator describes the games his brother, Firoz, would play on the servant. Firoz suggested that Ali sip hot tea from the spout of a teapot to taste for sugar and another time, suggested Ali turn on an iron by merely holding the plug, allowing electricity from his body to flow into it (see page 14 of *Uhuru Street*). Firoz's "amusement" with Ali is demeaning, as it is based in a presumption of Ali's unintelligence.

<sup>53</sup> Vassanji, *Uhuru Street*, 18.



allegiance lay first and foremost with his *real*, brown family. Further, his remark about proving his elders right suggests that the family was suspicious of Ali from the beginning. Not only was Ali illicitly watching the narrator's sister, but he also said he would marry the girl, threatening an even greater transgression because interracial marriage threatened the endogamic practices that East African Asians worked hard to maintain. Cultural boundaries quickly go up with the abrupt firing of Ali, but they falter just as easily with the servant's immediate replacement. Though race-based reservations about bringing black men into proximity with brown women at home may have been put at bay when hiring domestic servants, these fears were not eliminated, and could be easily evoked with the slightest hint of romantic or sexual transgression.

In addition to sexual relationships, food is another vehicle through which cultural boundaries between communities are inscribed, as Dan Ojwang has pointed out.<sup>54</sup> However, the "Asian" kitchen was often a site of dynamic intercultural exchange. Both Vassanji and Alibhai-Brown make note of black servants learning to cook South Asian food from brown women at home.<sup>55</sup> Alibhai-Brown underlines the larger cultural fusion this enabled: "African servants working for Indians picked up much of the cooking, so that ghee and mchuzi (curry) have become part of the vocabulary of East African cuisine."<sup>56</sup> In *Serving Class*, Janet Bujra quotes a Black Tanzanian woman whose father worked as a cook for an "Asian" home and taught *her* how to cook Indian food. She then, in turn, taught her own son how to cook this food, hoping

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<sup>54</sup> Dan Ojwang, "Gastropolitics and Diasporic Self-Writing" in *Reading Migration and Culture in Context: The World of East African Indian Literature*. (Palgrave Macmillan, 2012), 74.

<sup>55</sup> When hiring, the grandmother figure in Vassanji's story (who is known for having high quality, "well-trained" servants) expects potential servants to know how to cook South Asian dishes like biryani as a sign of experience working in East African Asian households.

<sup>56</sup> Alibhai-Brown, *The Settler's Cookbook*, 108, 90. In a similar vein, Kenyan writer, Ngugi wa Thiong'o has written, "Christmas and feasts in Kenya mean plentiful cabaci, thambutha, and mandathi, our version of the Indian chapati, paratha, samosa. The spices, curry, hot pepper, all so very Indian, had become so central a part of Kenyan cuisine that I could have sworn that these dishes were truly indigenous." (see wa Thiong'o's "What is Asia to Me?" in *World Literature Today*, page 15). One possible explanation for exactly *how* "Indian" cuisine infiltrated East African culture was in East African Asian homes, where women often taught their houseboys how to cook cultural dishes.

it would help him find a job as a domestic servant. The exchange between brown employer and black servant in the East African Asian kitchen thus makes its way into Black East African households, trickling down through generations and eventually seeping into East African cuisine at large.<sup>57</sup> Moreover, with increased demand for domestic servants in the late colonial period, the relaxation of racist cultural norms (which formerly kept servants out of kitchens in some caste-Hindu households) allowed for “new human solidarities [to] begin to emerge,” Dan Ojwang says.<sup>58</sup> Ojwang writes that, in *The Settler’s Cookbook*, “Ordinary gestures of cross-cultural transaction... make it possible for the author to imagine a shared humanity in the face of the pervasive racial suspicion.”<sup>59</sup> While endogamy and cultural boundaries were enforced both inside and outside the home, the kitchen was a unique space in which these boundaries could be relinquished.

Cultural fusion through cuisine had a particularly symbolic effect for East African Asian women, as it allowed them to participate in a kind of cultural porosity that counteracted the strict standards of purity imposed upon their bodies. As Alibhai-Brown underlines, “when it came to crossover sex and marriage the old taboos came down with swords in hand.”<sup>60</sup> East African Asian women were guarded by their communities against Black African men who posed a threat to their sexual purity and the ethnic purity of the diasporic South Asian community at large.<sup>61</sup> Yet Alibhai-Brown’s multicultural recipes, blending Swahili, Gujarati, Arab, and English foods,

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<sup>57</sup> Bujra, *Serving Class*, 84.

<sup>58</sup> Ojwang, “Gastropolitics and Diasporic Self-Writing,” 74. Note that, even though brown women and black men often cooked together, they did not necessarily *eat* together. Alibhai-Brown highlights that it was not until the last night in Uganda that many Asians invited their servants to dine with them, stressing that this had “never happened before” (see *The Settler’s Cookbook*, pg 231).

<sup>59</sup> Ojwang, “Gastropolitics and Diasporic Self-Writing,” 74.

<sup>60</sup> Alibhai-Brown, *The Settler’s Cookbook*, 160.

<sup>61</sup> Ojwang, “Gastropolitics and Diasporic Self-Writing,” 11.

affirm that East African Asian women did play a role in boundary-crossing and cultural mixing, and have adapted native East African elements into their own cuisines as well.

Overall, from tenderness to abuse, loyalty to betrayal, and fluid cultural exchange to firm ethnic boundaries, Alibhai-Brown and Vassanji paint complex portraits of employer-servant relationships, wrought with contradiction and friction. These domestic narratives provide a more nuanced model for understanding black-brown relations in East Africa than the common, dichotomous comparison between historical allies and enemies. It was not just that there were *some* East African Asians who were allies to Black East Africans in independence struggles and others who were antagonists, or that there were some Black Africans who saw a future for “Asians” in Africa and others who didn’t; contradictions existed *within* individuals and within individual relationships on a daily basis.

### **III. The Intermingling of Public and Private Spheres: Yasmin Ladha’s Post-Independence**

#### **Short Stories, *Lion’s Granddaughter and Other Stories***

While the narratives of Alibhai-Brown and Vassanji provide a representation of and model for understanding broader political tensions, East African Asian writer Yasmin Ladha’s post-independence stories merge the political and domestic spheres. Though almost a decade younger than Alibhai-Brown and Vassanji, Ladha is also a migrant of the exile generation; in the late 70s, she left her Tanzanian home for Canada, where she became a creative writer. Her first collection of stories, *Lion’s Granddaughter and Other Stories* (1992), offers various iterations of an archetypal setup: a mixed-race child protagonist and narrator, Aisha, her brown Grandmother,

and their black servant, Juma.<sup>62</sup> Throughout these stories, Ladha illustrates how the political realm actively influenced daily, domestic interactions and vice versa.

Firstly, in the short story entitled “Aisha,” we see how Tanzanian President Nyerere’s post-independence nationalization campaign (which stripped many East African Asians of their property and transferred it to Black Africans) affects Grandmother’s relationship with Juma.<sup>63</sup> A key confrontation between Grandmother and Juma takes place after the servant voices his desire to marry a girl of a higher-class tribe and begs for Grandmother’s help paying the dowry. He explains, “I know she is above me, but times have changed.”<sup>64</sup> After this, Grandmother quickly snaps, “Don’t mouth freedom and *Uhuru* at me.”<sup>65</sup> Juma then implores, “You are my Mother and Father, Mama. I have grown up here... Mama, you must help me.”<sup>66</sup> Here, Jumma implies a long-standing, close bond between him and Grandmother, comparable to a familial bond. However, when Juma again asserts, “Mama, times have changed,” citing Aisha’s mother’s relationship with a black man as proof, Grandmother explodes: “Why you pig’s semen!... All this

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<sup>62</sup> Juma is a common Swahili/East African name and could well be the given name of the servant in Ladha’s story, rather than a nickname made by the employer. Additionally, in a story set in post-independence Tanzania, the choice to make the protagonist the child of a brown woman and a black man is likely not an unintentional and certainly not an inconsequential one. For East Africans, the departure of British colonists created hope for the emergence of national unity. The union of Aisha’s parents across a deeply entrenched racial divide can be seen as a symbol of the potential for harmony. However, the negative reception of Aisha as the product of that attempted union by her society, her grandmother, and herself reflects the sense of disillusionment that defined the postcolonial zeitgeist. From the kids at school who mock her “wooly hair and flat-wide nose” to the white doll she idolizes, herself, which was a gift from her grandmother, Aisha is associated with an overwhelming sense of alienation (see *Lion’s Granddaughter* pg 29). As a walking representation of heterogeneity within the nation, Aisha is incapable of fitting in or belonging. Her seemingly permanent outsider status may be emblematic of the failure of the postcolonial nation to reconcile internal rivalries and foster true unity in its nation-building project. She is a bitter reminder of *what could have been*. Like Ladha, many other East African Asian authors of the exile generation also tend to linger on the missed opportunity for interracial solidarity in the post-independence era.

<sup>63</sup> For more on nationalization and race, and the conflation of African nationalism with Blackness, see “Ocean and Narration” In Gaurav Desair’s *Commerce with the Universe: Africa, India, and the Afrasian Imagination*.

<sup>64</sup> Yasmin Ladha, *Lion’s Granddaughter and Other Stories*. (Edmonton: NeWest Press, 1992), 32.

<sup>65</sup> Ladha, *Lion’s Granddaughter*, 32. Note: The term “uhuru,” meaning “freedom” in Swahili, was commonly invoked in independence movements across East Africa and was associated with African nationalism after independence.

<sup>66</sup> Ladha, *Lion’s Granddaughter*, 32.

lion noise because your black cocks can't remain idle for long. Be it yours or that black father of Aisha's who ran away, fresh after seeding my daughter... I couldn't stop Aisha's Mother but your *Uhuru* I can stop."<sup>67</sup> The invocation of both Uhuru and Aisha's Mother hit emotional pain points for Grandmother, prompting her to lash out in the form of racially charged insults and threats.

After this climactic conversation, Grandmother's treatment of Juma also takes a drastic turn. Previously, Juma took leisure time as he pleased and was entrusted with the keys to Grandmother's house and all its cupboards.<sup>68</sup> He was treated like family. But after the *Uhuru* confrontation, Aisha notes, "Grandmother has taken over, becoming a giant eagle, and Juma goes all shaking dumb before her."<sup>69</sup> Grandmother revokes Juma's keys and continues firing racist insults at him throughout the rest of the story. To East African Asian women like Ladha's Grandmother character, Nyerere's *Uhuru* proposed a vision for a national future that did not include them. The resentment that this archetypal character likely holds towards Nyerere and his supporters is indicated in another short story in *Lion's Granddaughter*, "Peace Flats," when Grandmother indignantly reacts to a Nyerere speech that Juma has playing on the radio at home one day. In his speech, Nyerere calls for unity and brotherhood among Black Africans against "Indians" whom he invokes through labels like "the fat class," "the enemy" and "capitalists."<sup>70</sup> Grandmother quickly shuts off the radio and asserts, "That hyena means Indians... Let other Indians hug Africans. This country has become a Mecca Haj, everyone brother-brother, hah! ... I

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<sup>67</sup> Ladha, *Lion's Granddaughter*, 33.

<sup>68</sup> Ladha, *Lion's Granddaughter*, 27. Across literature and first-hand accounts, there appears to be a common motif of locking up the doors, cupboards, etc. of East African Asians spaces to which Black East Africans had access, such as homes and shops. Even Alibhai-Brown invokes this image of "locking up" the cupboards at home or storefronts on the streets at various points in her memoir. This motif not only emphasizes a widely-believed stereotype of black criminality and thievery, but also suggests a larger, fundamental issue of *trust* between black and brown East Africans—a suspicion that even decades of intimacy and friendship in the home or elsewhere may not be able to fully erode. Thus, the access Juma has in Ladha's story is potentially quite exceptional, perhaps representing another symbol of the promise of equality and interracial unity post-independence that is built up only to be shattered.

<sup>69</sup> Ladha, *Lion's Granddaughter*, 27.

<sup>70</sup> Ladha, *Lion's Granddaughter*, 66, 68.

have no fat property Nyerere can nationalize.”<sup>71</sup> As an East African Asian who does not identify with the stereotypical, wealthy and fat “Indian,” and also as a woman who is not necessarily included in the gendered (“brother-brother”) harmony Nyerere champions, Grandmother feels unfairly antagonized and alienated in the country she calls home. Seen in this light, Grandmother's use of racist language and treatment to keep Jumu in his place and exert control in the one realm where she can—the domestic realm—is also an expression of helplessness. Unable to protest Nyerere's actions, the Grandmother instead settles for 'stopping' Juma's “*Uhuru*”.

Inversely, *Lion's Granddaughter* also illustrates how brown employers' racist mistreatment fueled black servants' resentment and got tied into greater political antipathy through the radio—a conduit through which public, political affairs infiltrate the private domain. Across Ladha's collection of stories, escalating interracial resentment in the post-independence period is registered through the dialogue between East African Asian women in Aisha's life and the radio. In the story, “Be A Doctor,” Aisha quotes Leo Elvis, a fictional Black Tanzanian comedian who comes on the radio following Nyerere. Elvis states, “This black servant, spindly like spider legs works for one woman. You know her? Oh my brothers, my nephews, you must know her! ... One fat Indian mama. She does nothing; nothing but fans herself. Her black servant cooks, he cleans, he washes, he dries.”<sup>72</sup> Elvis insists that his listeners “must know” this woman, implying that she is a common figure or trope; the “fat Indian mama” that Elvis invokes is essentially a female equivalent of the cunning Indian *dukawallah* trope.<sup>73</sup> After a string of additional racist insults, Mrs. Bhajaj—an East African Asian and family friend who Aisha is with in this scene—turns off

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<sup>71</sup> Ladha, *Lion's Granddaughter*, 68.

<sup>72</sup> Ladha, *Lion's Granddaughter*, 22.

<sup>73</sup> Throughout this radio segment in the story, Leo Elvis goes on to call this figure several other vulgar or offensive names such as an “Indian Queen Elizabeth of us Blacks,” a “fat darkie” and an “Indian money frog.” He uses racially charged language and paints a picture of the Indian mama as a neo-colonizer by comparing her to the British queen, which again supports the idea of this trope as a female equivalent of the sub-imperialist Indian merchant.

the radio and angrily states, ““That mother fucker... Who gave Leo Elvis the warm shillings to go to America if not an Indian. No, this is not mentioned. And don't I send Cook Kwesi's son to the same school that my children go to?”<sup>74</sup> Notably, Mrs. Bhajaj cites her generous, private treatment of her black servant, Kwesi, to disprove Elvis's portrayal of “Indian” women as heartless employers. Like the Grandmother character, Mrs. Bhajaj is frustrated by a stereotype that obscures her own experience and the positive aspects of her relationship with her servant. Not only do domestic servants' experiences impact African nationalist discourse, but Aisha also clearly picks up on the impact of that discourse on her brown female elders.<sup>75</sup> Through this relentless discourse between radio and home, and the blurred boundaries between public and private, Ladha reveals the insidious, cyclical nature of interracial tension, with one group's resentment only reinforcing the other's.<sup>76</sup>

In “Peace Flats,” we additionally see how black political discourse about “Asians” affects how Juma, the domestic servant, treats Aisha in the home. After Aisha appears to have befriended and developed a crush on a black boy at school, Juma sexually assaults her while making vulgar, politically inflected comments. When the two are alone in the house, Juma grabs Aisha, pulls up her skirt, and asks, “You like Black Boys? What's the matter? Indian stick no

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<sup>74</sup> Ladha, *Lion's Granddaughter*, 22. There also appears to be a trend among East African Asians to provide money for food and/or school fees to their servants' children (sometimes in place of raising wages), as a kind of familial or even philanthropic gesture that is at once generous and degrading. The British, too, would often provide servants “gifts” instead of increasing pay. See Bujra's *Serving Class* for more on these kinds of wage “supplements.”

<sup>75</sup> Witnessing brown women's explicitly negative reactions to political discourse on the radio is not the only signal that Aisha registers. Though as a young girl, she may not have understood the political and economic implications of Tanzanian President Nyerere's nationalization policies, Aisha notices the sobering effect they have on the spirits of the East African Asian community. In “Be A Doctor,” Aisha describes typical Saturdays in Tanzania as a child, reminiscing about the river picnics her family used to go on with some other East African Asian families. In her memory, these days were full of song, laughter, and play. But the mood shifts “one Saturday, after East Indian buildings, mills, and schools are nationalized.” Aisha describes, “Mrs. Bhajaj drives slowly to River Chekacheka. We don't sing Hindi songs.” (see pg 21 of *Lion's Granddaughter*).

<sup>76</sup> In “Uhuru and Exodus” in *Indians in Kenya*, Sana Aiyar discusses the ways in which Indians were, in many ways, scapegoats blamed for the failures of nation-building and shortcomings of post-independence governments (see pp. 267, 271).

good?” When Aisha screams, he shoves her against a wall, covers her mouth and scoffs, “Flabby Indian capitalist can’t even please his woman now the Government has taken away his property—*La!*” Through Juma’s invoking of Nyerere, nationalization, and the stereotype of the fat (or “flabby”) Indian capitalist while violently assaulting Aisha, politics becomes inextricable from this private assertion of power, and even appears to be a potential motivator of it. The political atmosphere of intensified blame on East African Asians for hindering African independence that Juma cites was also developing in parallel with degradation of domestic labor in East Africa that Pariser points out. The increasing sense of emasculation among male servants in the mid to late 20<sup>th</sup> century that Pariser posits may also come into play here, as Juma’s assaults on Aisha are assertions not just of racial power but also of masculine dominance. Grandmother’s verbal commanding and abuse of Juma is an emasculating aspect of being a domestic servant, along with the overall decrease in respectability of the profession, but the one East African Asian that Juma *can* assert power over is Aisha, a young brown girl to whom he has direct access.

#### **IV. Conclusion**

In this paper, I have sought to highlight the value of studying the domestic space as a crucial site of historical inquiry into black-brown relations in East Africa. Though there is much insight we can gain from examining stories from writers of the East African Asian exile generation, more targeted research can be undertaken to uncover the voices of black domestic servants and older brown women who preceded the exile generation. The focus on employer-domestic servant relationships and private, domestic affairs in general as a model for understanding interracial relationships has many applications beyond the East African context, especially in other



postcolonial societies that have grappled with the tension between ethnocentric nationalism and internal diversity.

What unites the three literary texts discussed in this essay is a persistent chain of cause and effect; what happens between black and brown East Africans in homes influences political sentiments and likewise, broader political tensions also affect how individuals act, interact, and react behind closed doors. Employer-servant narratives from mid-20<sup>th</sup> century East Africa reveal the pervasiveness of interracial resentment and the porosity of boundaries between the private and political realms. Through their writing, Alibhai-Brown, Vassanji, and Ladha highlight the messy and multifaceted nature of domestic interracial intimacies, which were capable of leading to genuine affection as well as serious violence and trauma. Literature of the East African Asian diaspora thus offers a new understanding of how power dynamics were constantly being negotiated and re-negotiated every day, sometimes turning the East African Asian household into a political battlefield of its own.

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