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Remembering Interracial Intimacies: South Asian Perspectives on Black/Brown Sex and Romance in Colonial East Africa

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ABSTRACT

Bringing together historical evidence, postcolonial fiction and memory work, this study recovers South Asian cultural attitudes towards interracial heterosexual romance from the margins of East African history. It asks why Black/brown intimacy was treated as taboo and denied legitimacy within South Asian diasporic communities in British-ruled Zanzibar, Uganda, Kenya and Tanganyika. In doing so, it shows how those who pursued relationships across racial lines challenged South Asian patriarchal structures and anti-Black prejudice. The article examines honour-based gender norms and colourist hierarchies that shaped the performance of South Asian manhood and womanhood overseas, interrogating how women's interracial desires were policed in punitive ways—and how this violence has been preserved in collective memory.

It's often said that Asians would not marry Africans; actually they did and they didn't.

M. G. Vassanji.¹

Sexual relationships between people of African and South Asian heritage were shrouded in stigma in colonial East Africa. According to orthodox and nationalist narratives, interracial intimacies across the Black/brown colour line were impermissible and did not take place.² The South Asian diaspora followed strict endogamous traditions within tight-knit caste communities, attracting criticism from postcolonial leaders like Idi Amin for being a 'closed community' who prohibited their daughters from marrying Black men.³ Following the mass-scale settlement of

South Asians in East Africa after 1880, however, there emerged an ever-growing population of people of mixed African and South Asian ancestry, known locally as '*chotara*'.⁴ Despite enduring cultural taboos, interracial intimacies discreetly unfolded. As Yasmin Alibhai-Brown recalled in her memoir of 1960s Kampala, you would see 'caramel-coloured children [...] on the streets, a quiet reminder of what was really going on'.⁵

Using memory-driven oral and literary records to write interracial heterosexual romance back into East Africa's history, this study explores why Black/brown relationships were often coded as deviant and denied cultural legitimacy within the diasporic imaginary.⁶ In doing so, it foregrounds tales of South Asians whose affections and desires dissented from conservative traditions, uprooting the systems of heteropatriarchy and anti-

Content Warning: This article includes references to violent episodes, including sexual violence, and quotations containing racist and discriminatory terminology are presented in their original historical context. Readers may find this material distressing. Please note that the N-word is reproduced verbatim to preserve the integrity of the historical record and to avoid censoring a Black author's own articulation of African experiences of racism.

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Blackness that undergirded them. This article begins by outlining the colonial and scholarly biases that have obscured histories of Black/brown relations in East Africa and the non-archival sources through which interracial sex and romance have been preserved in collective memory, contending that diasporic memory narratives can simultaneously recover neglected histories and reinforce enduring myths and stereotypes. Before moving to the accounts of sexual stigma and forbidden desire that lie at the heart of this article, I offer a brief overview of the marriage cultures, gendered honour codes and colourist prejudices that governed Asian interactions with Africans. Weaving together historical and memory-based materials on Black/brown intimacy, what follows is an interrogation of the performance of Desi masculinity in the East African setting and a discussion of how the delineation of racial boundaries intersected with the gender-based policing of women's behaviours, which involved violence against women. Comparative in its geographical scope, this study speaks to the shared, gendered experiences of South Asian migrants who lived in the British Protectorate of Zanzibar (1890–1963); the Protectorate of Uganda (1894–1962); the British East Africa Protectorate (1895–1920) which became the Crown Colony and Protectorate of Kenya (1920–1963); and Tanganyika Territory (1916–1961).

1 | Historiography

Although scholars of literature, gender studies, religion and anthropology have taken interest in transgressions of East Africa's Black/brown colour line, historians of 'intimacy' have largely remained focused on the white/Other binary. Studies of interracial liaisons in African settings continue to privilege European perspectives, usually focusing on relationships between white men and Black women. Despite Jennifer Cole and Lynn Thomas's volume *Love in Africa* (2009) advocating for more careful consideration of emotion and the affective realm of African social history, cross-cultural romance in Zanzibar, Uganda, Kenya and Tanganyika remains a significant blind spot.⁷ Furthermore, regional historiographies only occasionally feature Black/brown couples and mixed-race individuals, such as Kenya's Joseph Murumbi, the son of a Goan father and Maasai mother who became Vice-President in 1966. Where there is a dearth of written historical material on South Asian cultural attitudes towards interracial sex and romance, postcolonial literature provides a valuable entry point into this topic. Memoirs, novels and plays created a visionary space in which East African writers could engage freely with illicit or scandalous themes. Concerning this rich corpus of writing produced after the 1960s, the figure of the '*chotara*' generated interest from literary theorists as both a symbol of racial union and a vilified body.⁸ Yet Black/brown couples and their children were more than recurring literary motifs: they were historical agents who navigated complex ethno-racial landscapes. Behind the symbolism and metaphors lie real experiences that are yet to be integrated into historical narratives.

This article contributes to a small, emerging historiography on Black/brown relationships in East Africa that contends they are not absent within the historical record, just inconspicuous. It demonstrates that these elusive histories can be recovered in some ways by cross-referencing archival and non-archival sources. I build on Lawrence Mbogoni's pioneering work on inter-

racial mixing in colonial Africa and Daphné Budasz's historical study of late-nineteenth and early twentieth-century intermarriages between South Asian migrant men and African women.⁹ Where previous studies mirror the colonial archive's androcentric bias and its prejudice against 'illegitimate' relations, I adopt a broader definition of intimacy – one that encompasses casual and transactional encounters as well as the gendered experiences of brown women who formed affectionate bonds with Black men. After all, South Asian ideas of romance are capacious, and languages of love can be manifold.¹⁰ South Asian perspectives on Black/brown intimacy in the region, particularly women's viewpoints, are yet to be examined from a historical standpoint. My research also complements an expanding body of scholarship on African perspectives on cross-cultural relationships. Accounts from African women sex workers in colonial Nairobi collected by Luise White, for example, revealed South Asian men were among their most regular and highest-paying clients.¹¹ Moreover, James Brennan's study of Tanzanian racio-nationalism highlighted the 1940s print debates on interracial relationships, which 'lamented the perceived loss of African patriarchal rights over women'.¹²

Positioned within an expanding interdisciplinary literature on Desi love, this article also complicates the historiography of South Asian migratory experiences in and out of East Africa. Over the past seventy years, this field of study has grown considerably. Following the cultural turn in the humanities, scholarship moved beyond general surveys of Asian relations with Europeans and men's contributions to the regional economy to include discussions of identity politics, anti-colonial solidarities and everyday urban encounters. This research is, however, constrained by an overemphasis on monoracial categories and a rigid diasporic framework that treats the Asian minority as a discrete, bounded entity, thereby reinforcing an artificial rupture between diasporic and nationalist histories. By centring narratives of affect and shifting attention onto the domestic sphere, this article examines how a racialised and sexualised 'South Asian' identity was constructed, sharpened and performed in East Africa, at times through violence and, in the most extreme cases, femicide or suicide. In doing so, it poses many challenging questions. In what ways was belonging to, or exclusion from, South Asian society a gendered experience? What do stories of interracial love and desire reveal about the historical contingency of 'racial' boundaries? To what extent did casteism shape racialised and sexualised perceptions of Black bodies in the diasporic imaginary? And how did mixed-race children – whose very existence unsettled the definition of 'South Asian' – negotiate their precarious positionality at the margins of the diaspora?

2 | Fiction, scandal and collective memory

Given the fragmented archival record on interracial relationships and South Asian women's experiences, my research blends historical and memory-based sources, including oral histories, works of literary fiction and family histories produced after the 1960s.¹³ This mixed methodological approach speaks to the combined challenges of excavating marginalised women's perspectives and recovering the 'hidden histories' of intimate relationships which were, in many respects, culturally prohibited. Within South Asian thought, love was often construed as a potentially destabilising force – capable of threatening

kinship structures and unsettling the obligations that sustain social cohesion. The oral record includes Cynthia Salvadori's interviews with Punjabi Muslim migrants in Kenya, which were collected in the late twentieth century; Yasmin Alibhai-Brown and Anne Montague's interviews with interracial couples in early 1990s Britain; Richa Nagar's interviews with thirty-six Zanzibari Asians in the mid-1990s; Akbar Keshodkar's research on Asian endogamy in post-revolutionary Zanzibar conducted in the early twenty-first century; correspondence collected by Anneeth Hundle as part of her doctoral research on South Asian re-integration into Uganda after 1972; and Lawrence Mbogoni's interviews with Goans about interracial unions in colonial Kenya and Uganda.¹⁴ References to Black/brown sex and romance also appear across a substantive body of fiction produced by a generation of displaced East African-born South Asians, such as Peter Nazareth, M. G. Vassanji, Jameela Siddiqi and Bahadur Tejani. These were not the only contributors to this East African literary canon, however. Their contemporaries included Goan-born Lino Leitão, who lived in Uganda in the 1960s until 1972; Malawian playwright and novelist David Rubadiri, who studied in Uganda in the 1940s–1950s; exiled Gikūyū Kenyan writer Ngūgĩ wa Thiong'o; and 'mixed Zanzibari' author Abdulrazak Gurnah.¹⁵ The family memoirs of Yasmin Alibhai-Brown, a British journalist raised in Kampala's Ismaili community; Parita Mukhta, whose family migrated from Gujarat to Kenya; Neera Kapur-Dromson, a Nairobi-born Punjabi author; and Muzzafar Khan, a Kenyan-born man of mixed Maasai/Punjabi descent, also offer important perspectives on this topic. In order to contextualise texts that are often dismissed as fantasy and to tease out the lived experiences of those whose lives prompted an emerging prose on interracial unions, I conversed with several authors about the historical and autobiographical roots of their work.

From a historian's perspective, the sequential distortion within memory-based narratives poses an interesting challenge, along with the fact that some of these sources are classified as fiction. Though imaginative, the works discussed within this study primarily belong to a genre of East African novel that was explicitly informed by autobiographical experience and family history. In some respects, they are factual renditions of the past; in others, they are creative engagements. As Peter Nazareth explained, the 'fiction' category offered greater freedom not only in terms of circumventing Uganda's censorship laws but also in terms of using literary techniques to more fully articulate 'inner lives, ambiguities, the conflicts, the grey areas'.¹⁶ These print cultures were also an important means through which the diaspora forged a collective identity, in spite of their diverse traditions and beliefs. This began with multilingual South Asian newspaper networks across the East African region in the early twentieth century and was cemented through English-language prose following the turbulence of the early years of independence, which culminated in the mass exodus of tens of thousands of Asians out of Zanzibar, Tanzania and Kenya in the 1960s and their forced expulsion from Uganda in 1972.¹⁷ Marking the beginning of a 'rush to remember' through the production of memoirs and historical fiction, common experiences of anti-Asian hostility and mass displacement created new affinities between East Africa's 'twice-migrants'.¹⁸ In their postcolonial writings, distinct national and ethnic identities were often blurred, giving rise to a variety of texts set in unnamed or pseudonymised East African countries that featured imagined Desi ethnicities. Dispersed and

scattered across the globe, literature provided a supranational platform through which twice-migrant authors could share and construct cultural memories of exile, persecution and migration. Indeed, it is well-established that literature can influence identity formation and memory-making by creating common reference points, instilling them with meanings and shaping public understanding of historical events.¹⁹ Through fiction, diasporic writers found new ways to grapple with their colonial heritage. Many experimented with chronology to explore lineage, constructing multigenerational narratives reaching back to the late nineteenth century. In doing so, they drew connecting threads between the early years of Asian indentured migration and the class- and race-based tensions that erupted after independence.

What is striking about these non-conventional historical sources – whether fiction, memoirs or anthropological data – is their shared thematic and figurative repertoire. Regarding interracial dating and the treatment of 'chotara' children, recurring tropes, narratives and linguistic patterns appear with remarkable consistency. Moreover, even within the supposedly unshackled world of fiction, traditional idioms continued to manifest as unconscious biases; expressions of intimacies implicitly followed gender-coded patterns in which women's desires are quietened. Significantly, these patterns transcend geographical and ethno-religious boundaries. It is also noteworthy that this shared pool of memories about Black/brown sex and romance exists almost entirely outside of archival records and academic history-writing. That these stories endure in diasporic memory at all attests to the prevalence of Black/brown relationships as a subject of slander within Asian communities. Rumour and gossip – often dismissed as unreliable – nonetheless provide valuable insight into a 'world of fears and fantasies'. Embedded in gossip, moreover, there is 'intimate anger and judgemental scorn'.²⁰ With this in mind, collective memory warrants critique for being static and self-serving; it can perpetuate historical inaccuracy as well as racial caricatures and myths that appear elsewhere within South Asian and European knowledge productions on Africa.²¹ Embedded within the diasporic imaginary, Vijay Mishra theorised, is 'an episteme of real or imagined displacements, self-imposed sense of exile'.²² Hence, whilst this body of literature broaches the subjects of cultural hybridity and interracial harmony, it also self-consciously reifies the constructed binary of diaspora/Other, advancing what Sana Aiyar termed the 'reproduction of "Indianness" in diasporic enclaves'.²³

3 | Racial boundaries and endogamous traditions

South Asians have a long history of trade and interaction with East Africa's Swahili littoral. Under British rule, however, they permanently settled in the interior on an unprecedented scale. Approximately 40,000 South Asian men took up indentured labour contracts in the region between 1895 and 1903, of whom approximately 7,000 remained in Uganda and Kenya thereafter. They were accompanied by thousands of skilled tradesmen and professionals of middle-class backgrounds, predominantly from Gujarat and the Punjab, whose settlements expanded into Zanzibar and Tanganyika (which was administered as British territory after the First World War). These migrants were diverse in their ethnic and linguistic backgrounds: the largest religious group to migrate from British India were the Ismaili

Muslims, whilst Hindus and other Muslim communities, such as the Bohras and Ithnā'ashiris, were notable too.²⁴ Acting as the 'middlemen' of colonial East Africa's tripartite-structured towns and trading-centres, Asian men used their privileged position to dominate the region's economy as money-lenders, entrepreneurs and *dukawallahs* (shopkeepers). As they were soon accompanied by their wives and children, settlers practised endogamy along racial, religious, class and caste lines; under the direction of British policy, they were virtually segregated from Europeans and Africans, organising themselves into 'a number of small, closely-knit, exclusive communal groups'.²⁵ South Asian women arrived in greater numbers after the 1920s, recorded as making up approximately 47.4% of the diaspora in Tanganyika by 1957, 46.9% in Uganda by 1959 and 47.7% in Kenya by 1962.²⁶ Communal boundaries were seemingly self-evident, with arranged marriages within tight-knit religious-ethnic sub-castes being the norm. It is a well-studied phenomenon that endogamy was part of the stringent moral and cultural code that dictated South Asian gender norms and reinforced long-standing caste-based hierarchies, further solidified under colonialism. Across Desi cultures and religions, marriage – as a publicly celebrated contract or religious union – was understood as an arrangement between two groups, not between two individuals. Arranged marriage was part of the kinship structure upon which sects were built and through which they attained 'strength, recognition, and leverage in wider society and polity'.²⁷ Accordingly, transgressions of prescribed marital alliances could disrupt the networks sustaining social and economic support, with consequences that extended beyond one's immediate family or clan.

The question of love-marriage was a deeply contentious issue for various religious sects, with irregular romantic liaisons being perceived as a 'threat to kin-based relations of property and inheritance'.²⁸ As Perveez Mody explained, husbands and wives were expected to enter marriage as strangers. Love, as it was understood, would develop over time, shaped by asymmetrical, gendered ideals of devotion – to God and to one's husband.²⁹ Wives were expected to serve husbands and in-laws, embodying ideals of obedience, chastity and sacrifice, whilst men held authority over household decisions and property. Rooted in strict customary codes, marriage traditions reinforced patriarchal hierarchies by binding women's value and mobility to male-controlled structures of family, caste and community. Regarding gender in Northern India, Prem Chowdhry recognised:

At the centre of these codes stands the woman, the control of whose sexuality and its bestowal in marriage, intrinsically linked with the question of control of her reproductive and productive labour, is crucial to patriarchal forces with their concern for caste purity, status, power, and hierarchy. [...] Any breach of this ideology of guardianship, control, and dependence, however small, is considered to be very threatening. [...] An assertion of one's 'choice' in marriage is also perceived as an affront to the most desirable concepts of modesty and chastity.³⁰

Women often acted as key custodians of these entrenched gendered traditions. Nevertheless, marriage practices and expressions of love were not singular nor static.³¹ From the late nineteenth century, shifting relationships with individualism led South Asians of the subcontinent to campaign for the right to marry a person of one's choice, with love-marriage couples seeking legal legitimacy under the British Raj.³² This is discussed in depth in Mody's historical assessment of the petitions brought against the British Raj's civil marriage law for Indians (Special Marriage Act of 1872), which gave recognition to matrimony outside of traditional religious frameworks. Examining debates on desire versus duty, Mody concluded that love-marriage couples '[inhabited] a social space of extreme moral ambivalence' in Desi society.³³ Many diasporic South Asians remained burdened by this long-standing cultural angst about love, but in Africa, feelings of trepidation evolved, taking on a new, anti-Black dimension in response to the prospect of race-crossing.

In British-governed East Africa, where it was often difficult for South Asian families to find a 'suitable' wife for their sons within their respective community, men of all religious-ethnic backgrounds tended to return to the South Asian subcontinent to marry if they could afford it.³⁴ Wives were expected to emigrate to East Africa to care for their husbands and raise children.³⁵ In most Desi traditions, pre-marital relationships were frowned upon, especially for women and especially outside of one's sub-caste. To defy these customs was to put one's entire family *izzat* (honour/reputation) at stake. Jameela Siddiqi, who was raised in Kenya until the age of five and lived in Uganda from 1957 to 1972, reflected:

If an Asian Hindu girl married an Asian Muslim boy – or a Sikh girl dared to get together with a Khoja Ismaili boy – it was considered the height of disgrace, often resulting in the suicide of family members on both sides as well as severely jeopardising the marriage chances of siblings and distant cousins.³⁶

Similar sentiments were reiterated to Alibhai-Brown by her aunt on her wedding day in 1972, 'Marriage is [...] about duty and *izzat*. Spoil your name and you can never buy it back'.³⁷ The idiom of *izzat* is deeply gendered. Men are positioned as its guardians and enforcers, whilst women are constructed as its bearers. For women, *izzat* is embodied, tied to the regulation of their physicality. As a result, a woman could jeopardise her family's honour through perceived acts of sexual or social impropriety. This is encapsulated in the traditional Hindi saying: 'the honour of every family is connected to its daughter'.³⁸

Whilst South Asian religious, ethnic and caste groups essentially functioned as 'semi-independent units', in the East African setting, Richa Nagar noted, 'Asians as a whole [...] largely remained socially, politically, and spatially isolated from their African neighbours'.³⁹ Although the popular narrative of Asian extraction and exploitation is an oversimplified one, South Asians did in many ways participate in and benefit from the oppression of the African masses. It is difficult to overstate the profound and enduring legacies of colourist ideologies in Desi thought.⁴⁰ Dhruva Gupta illustrated that prejudices against dark skin can be

dated back many centuries, with anti-Blackness being rooted in caste ideology.⁴¹ In the colonial period, colourism was reinforced by European hierarchies such as that of ethnographer H. H. Risley, which codified South Asians by skin colour – from ‘dead black’ to ‘flushed ivory’.⁴² Anti-Black prejudice was also informed by Europe’s dominant racial stereotypes of African ‘savagery’.⁴³ Many South Asians exemplified a repulsion towards African society and culture, with daily interactions largely limited to servant/master relationships within the workplace. In the words of Dharam and Yash Ghai, ‘On the part of the Asians, there was an intense feeling of snobbery born of a belief in the superiority of their own culture’.⁴⁴

By seeking to protect the privileged economic position they were afforded under colonial rule, Asian men attracted resentment from the African population and were accused of being ‘exploiters’ and ‘blood suckers’ in the years leading up to independence. East African nationalisms were in many respects heteropatriarchal projects, as evidenced in emerging discourses around gender-based control and sexual access to women’s bodies across Zanzibar, Uganda, Kenya and Tanganyika alike. African patriarchy began to measure the diaspora’s loyalty to the nation in terms of their willingness to integrate with the Black populace – socially, culturally and *sexually*. Asian men were not only blamed for economic exploitation but were also accused of engaging in exploitative romantic relationships with African women. In the mid-1940s, a prolonged debate unfolded in a Tanganyikan newspaper, where several African men submitted letters cautioning *dada weusi* (Black sisters) ‘not to be deceived and not to cherish [foreign men]’, warning that foreigners would never treat them as true equals.⁴⁵ For instance, A. Ramsay Mwamanda condemned the mistreatment of an African woman by her *mhindi* (South Asian) husband in western Tanganyika. The man concealed the marriage from his family and friends, who would ‘cause him trouble and dismiss him’ if his African wife was discovered.⁴⁶ This discourse reflected the rise of racial-nationalist narratives shaming *wanawake weusi* (Black women) for forming relationships with outsiders, casting them as selfish, disloyal to the nation and motivated by capitalist greed. In the minds of many East Africans, racial inequality manifested itself in the form of nonreciprocal access to each other’s womenfolk. ‘Why do *wahindi* (South Asian) men marry Africans, whilst Africans do not marry the daughters of *wahindi*?’ asked Dvr. Naftal, an askari in the South East Asia Command, in 1945.⁴⁷ Two decades later, this sentiment was echoed in the Black Malawian novelist David Rubadiri’s 1967 novella, *No Bride Price*. Set in fictional Uganda, Rubadiri offered what is likely the first published work about an East African man’s forbidden lust towards a South Asian woman. The Black Ugandan protagonist Lombe implicitly desires Sandra, an Indian woman whose family is visiting from the subcontinent. In a heated exchange, her brother Chaudry declares, ‘Everyone here is scared to ask the right question — the question that Daddy would not care to answer — would Daddy let his daughter marry a nigger?’⁴⁸ Here, Rubadiri’s choice of racial expletive signals the Indian family’s deeply rooted presumption of African inferiority. Although incendiary in their rhetoric and biased in attributing sexual agency solely to men, both Naftal and Rubadiri raised a pertinent question about the gendered and racialised dynamics that characterised visible Black/brown romantic relationships in this period.

4 | Relationships between South Asian men and African women

Although there is a growing literature on transnational Desi masculinities, little has been written about how diasporic masculinities were historically perceived, enacted and remoulded amid cultural and political change in Zanzibar, Uganda, Kenya and Tanganyika.⁴⁹ As per the colonial hierarchy, Asian settlers in East Africa negotiated ideas of manhood within a new racial order, one in which they ranked ‘above’ South Asian women as well as African men and women. With Black women capturing the hearts of many South Asian men, however, the question of exogamy exposed the ‘cracks’ in the colour line, unsettling both patriarchal authority within the Asian community and the facade of racial difference around which colonial society was structured. With Asian men’s expressions of love towards African women absent from the colonial archive, fiction offers a creative avenue into these affective worlds. Bahadur Tejani framed the tender ties between the Indian protagonist, Samsheer, and his Ugandan lover, Nanziri, as ‘[a long story...] of hearts lonely and afraid that have come together, cautious at every step. Their struggle is hidden. The palpitations of each heart are known and understood by each and are rarely to be seen’.⁵⁰ Historical documentation reveals that significant numbers of South Asian men chose to form intimate relationships with African women during the early years of settlement. In M. G. Vassanji’s 2003 novel *The In-Between World of Vikram Lall*, set in colonial/postcolonial Kenya, the first-person narrator remarks that ‘The British railway workers were not known for their abstinence’.⁵¹ Indentured labourers who arrived in Uganda and Kenya after 1895 were not the only Desi men who lived and loved across the Indian Ocean, however. Asian traders also inhabited the Swahili Coast and Zanzibar, where commercial expansion under the Sultanate had encouraged their settlement.⁵² According to Ladis Da Silva, there were a few ‘stray cases’ of Goan men who found African ‘mistresses’ upon arrival in Zanzibar during the nineteenth century.⁵³ The government-printed *Zanzibar Gazette*, too, reported in 1894, ‘In years gone by, the Hindi traders were not in the habit of bringing their wives with them to Zanzibar and the East African coast, and it was their usual custom [...] to contract temporary alliances with Swahili women’.⁵⁴ During the 1890s, Black/brown relationships also attracted interest from British officials from a race science perspective. Advocates like Joseph Renner Maxwell and Harry Johnston promoted ‘diluting’ the Black race with ‘yellow’ (South Asian) blood, whilst critics such as Frederick Lugard and John Kirk warned of racial ‘degeneration’. Johnston viewed mixed Black/brown people as a ‘satisfactory hybrid’; Kirk labelled them as ‘one of the worst mixtures there can be’.⁵⁵ The debate nonetheless revealed that such unions were highly conspicuous.⁵⁶

These relationships also garnered attention from British administrators in East Africa’s interior. Around 1899, Frederick Jackson of the Imperial British East Africa Company described what he saw as transgressive ‘Oriental’ sexuality at ‘beastly coolie camps’ near Lumbwa station and Fort Ternan in western Kenya. Allegedly, many ‘Lumbwa’ men (who prefer the term Kipsigis) complained that local girls were lured into camps ‘crowded with prostitutes, small boys, and other accessories of bestial vices’.⁵⁷ Charles Eliot, who served as commissioner of British East Africa (1900–1904), recorded in 1905 that ‘There must be growing up at this moment

a considerable number of children born of Indian fathers and African mothers'. In the region of the Athi River basin, Eliot explained, numerous Kamba women had been cohabiting with Indian 'coolies' because it was a 'time of great famine'.⁵⁸ As in many accounts, Eliot portrayed interracial unions with African women as a matter of convenience or desperation rather than driven by preference or genuine affection. As colonial anxieties about South Asian men's relationships with African women intensified, they became central to an India Office investigation into indentured labour and migration. In 1909, the Sander-son Committee questioned colonial officials about the sexual behaviour of South Asian labourers and traders, confirming the presence of 'a fair population of [South Asian/African] half-breeds growing up'.⁵⁹ Notably, the colonial discourse scrutinising Asian men's sexual behaviour omitted any mention of white men's promiscuity; after all, 'gravely improper' sexual conduct among British officers had been banned by the Crewe Circular of January 1909.⁶⁰ Kenyan novelist Peter Kimani suggests British officials deflected attention onto Asian men to obscure their own liaisons with African women.⁶¹ To deter Black/brown unions, the Commission recommended that indentured migrants serving terms of over a year be accompanied by a designated proportion of South Asian women. Whilst the subsequent shift in gender demographics likely influenced marriage patterns — with women making up 36% of East Africa's Asian population by 1931—these men's sexual and romantic desires towards African women were not suddenly extinguished following the arrival of greater numbers of South Asian women.⁶² After all, cross-cultural intimacy was shaped not merely by convenience but also by less tangible forces: individual choice and acts of defiance, sexual desire and fetishisation, as well as romance and love.

Casual sexual liaisons between South Asian men and African women took place throughout the entirety of the colonial period, being normalised in men's social circles. Many Asian men talked openly among themselves about visiting African nightclubs.⁶³ In his novel *The General Is Up* (1984), which is set in early postcolonial Uganda (fictional 'Damibia'), Ugandan-born Goan author Peter Nazareth showed that Goan men regularly visited these clubs to pick up African women sex workers.⁶⁴ In her non-fiction work, Selma Carvalho noted too, 'it was not uncommon for Goan men to bed *hampulem*, African women', with some of the earliest liaisons on the mainland dating back to Goan clerks visiting prostitutes in Nairobi in the first decade of the twentieth century.⁶⁵ Other sources reveal that the Muslim *malaya* (sex workers) of Eastleigh in Nairobi primarily served South Asian Muslim men who helped them obtain property there in the period 1946–1952, whilst the practice of taking African 'mistresses' was commonplace among the married Bhatia men of the rural Lindi–Mtwara area of Tanganyika.⁶⁶ Extramarital sexual exchanges of this nature were hidden from Asian women. In Jagjit Singh's radio play 'Sweet Scum of Freedom' (1972), set in fictional 1960s Uganda, an African sex worker, Anna, declares she cannot leave her twin babies with their Asian father because 'he'll die if his wife finds out'.⁶⁷ In Northern Indian cultural contexts, upper-caste men's sexual relations with lower-caste women were framed through the idiom of *mard* (मर्द), a Hindi concept of idealised masculinity associated with power, status and control.⁶⁸ Accordingly, casual sex with lower-status women was acceptable since it reproduced the power hierarchy: in this scenario, the brown man's dominance over Black womanhood.

Sometimes this dominance was violently expressed, as in the case of Amina Hali, a Nairobi-based sex worker who was disfigured by her Indian boyfriend in the late 1940s.⁶⁹ With anti-Blackness and heteropatriarchy deeply entrenched in South Asian settler thought, the diaspora was complicit in *misogynoir*, the systemic devaluation of Black women.⁷⁰ This intersection of racial and gender stereotypes was made explicit by a 70-year-old Bhatia man from Lindi–Mtwara in the 1990s, who asserted: '[T]he best kind of sexual enjoyment that you can ever get in life is with an African or mixed woman. An Indian woman is simply incapable of giving you that kind of pleasure'.⁷¹ Outlined within discursive studies of colonial-era race-crossings, Black women's bodies were explicitly eroticised, hypersexualised and subordinated; according to South Asian heteropatriarchal ideology, they were not 'honourable' or deserving of love.⁷²

Whilst discreetly engaging with a woman of lower social rank was acceptable to many Asian men, marriage was generally not. As revealed in Sorabji Darookhanawala's travelogue 'Africa in Darkness', when a Punjabi man in Kisumu asked a 'Kavirondo girl' to be his wife and married her according to Luo or Luhya customs sometime between 1896 and 1901, he was excommunicated from the settler community.⁷³ He 'returned' the woman and her dowry to her father, who was outraged by such immoral behaviour, before rejoining his Punjabi kinsmen.⁷⁴ From the early days of colonial rule to the years following independence, stories emerge of Asian men who entered long-standing relationships with African women and were shamed for 'Going Native'. The Ismaili community of Uganda, in Alibhai-Brown's words, 'went into denial about these mavericks who couldn't resist interracial copulation'.⁷⁵ In Abdulrazak Gurnah's novel *Desertion* (2005), the first part of which is set in early twentieth-century Mombasa, the character Zakariya is labelled as a 'renegade' by the Gujarati Muslim community because he married Zubeyda, a Swahili woman.⁷⁶ Similarly, in M. G. Vassanji's novel *The Magic of Saida* (2012), when an Indian doctor has a child with an African woman, his 'having gone local, fathered a half-breed' is perceived by the wider community as 'evidence of his fall from Indian respectability'.⁷⁷ The stigma attached to mixed marriages is further reflected in the self-censorship exercised by one of Cynthia Salvadori's interviewees. The mixed-race child of a Punjabi Muslim man, who had immigrated to Kenya in the early 1900s, where he married a Kipsigis woman, insisted on retaining anonymity because he feared that the 'stain' on his heritage could ruin the reputation of a famous relative.⁷⁸ Although Asian men entered and maintained relationships with African women, these unions, when they became public, were often denied cultural legitimacy.

In Siddiqi's novel *The Feast of the Nine Virgins* (2001), set in 1960s–1970s Uganda (fictional 'Pearl'), the son of the local *dukawallah* is said to have 'disappointed everyone by falling in love with a Black girl'. His community rejoices when she dies by suicide on the grounds that she was considered an unsuitable partner because of her 'jet-black skin and frizzy hair and flat nose'. The lack of sensitivity towards her death exposes an uncomfortable truth about the perceived disposability of Black women's lives. In the diasporic imaginary, descriptors of the perfect bride were built upon explicitly racialised ideals: in order to be desirable, it was believed one had to be 'a really nice, tall, fair-skinned, long-straight-haired virgin Indian girl'.⁷⁹ Echoing this, in an episode of *Who Do You Think You Are?* (2017), British actor Adil Ray recalled

that his grandmother, Aisha Din, a mixed-race Ugandan/Turkish woman who married an Indian man in Kisumu with whom she had seven children, '[suffered] a lot of prejudice from the Indian community, [from] some people quite close to the family as well'. He added, 'she had a huge complex about her African hair, her complexion. She didn't want photos taken of her. She tried to hide her hair, tried to straighten her hair. Any of her children that had African hair, she would try and straighten'.⁸⁰ Mobeen Hussain's foundational study historicising South Asian women's use of skin-lightening commodities asserts that 'colourism and preferences for fairer skin were commodified in colonial India via a racialised imperial-capitalist economy and were discursively adapted by Indian producers and consumers'.⁸¹ Romantic relations with an African woman were branded 'illegitimate' not simply because they were exogamous, therefore, but because the intersectional forces of sexism, colourism and racism stigmatised her for being Black, casting her as unbeautiful. Interviewed in the 1990s, a British Jamaican woman shared that after she married a Kenyan Indian Sikh man in the United Kingdom in 1968, she faced abuse from her in-laws 'because they were used to having Africans as servants in Kenya'.⁸² Hierarchies of gender and race were both performed in public and reproduced within intimate household settings, and it was Black women who bore the brunt of the Asian community's colourism.

In many cases, nevertheless, the diaspora turned a blind eye to men's ongoing sexual engagements with Black women if they were made virtually invisible. As revealed by Nazareth, the interracial couple in his novel *In a Brown Mantle* (1972) had real-life counterparts: he knew a Goan man in Entebbe who had made disparaging remarks about Black people in his past, yet later married a Rwandese woman. He hid his wife from other Goans for decades.⁸³ Siddiqi also observed that the interracial liaisons of 'highly respected' Punjabi Muslim men were shrouded in secrecy, noting many of these men were married but maintained African 'mistresses' in the countryside. In the three cases she recalled from her childhood in Kenya and Uganda, the African women were second wives who were 'kept under cover along with any offspring of that marriage'. The first wives were South Asian women who served as 'public' partners at social events.⁸⁴ Interracial relationships may never have been acknowledged in writing or the public-political sphere, then, but it appears that community members, including children, could be privy to them. They are best understood as open secrets, preserved through intimate networks of gossip from which 'outsiders' were excluded. Women's talk, in particular, consistently brought illicit conduct to the surface; gossip itself was a dynamic means through which shared community values were constructed and enforced and those perceived as rebels were chastised. Men, however, were more likely than women to have the social capital that allowed them to quell or deflect judgement and scorn. Such openly secret arrangements between brown men and Black women reveal the hypocrisy of heteropatriarchy: men, positioned as guardians of *izzat*, could engage in sexual transgressions with minimal repercussions.

Whilst public marriage to African women was never explicitly encouraged, it was sometimes tolerated. Another influential Hindi concept of masculinity – *mardāngī* (मर्दाङ्गी) – refers to virility and sexual prowess. According to this North Indian concept, one could only achieve 'manhood' if he produced

children with his wife.⁸⁵ In this respect, it was preferable that a man marry a woman outside of his caste than remain childless. Hence, although intermarriages were never normalised, they could be justified in special circumstances. Govind Sutaria, a Bhatia Hindu settler in Lamu Island, told Salvadori that a few Bhatia men married local women there in the early twentieth century. Some remained Hindu, whereas others converted to Islam.⁸⁶ It has also been recorded that on the rare occasion interracial relationships involved Goan men, they were generally accepted.⁸⁷ In Murumbi's memoirs, his parents' intermarriage is not framed as being socially disruptive since his Goan father apparently maintained good relations with other South Asian traders.⁸⁸ On the grounds that Islam preaches racial equality, some Muslims were also accepting of African wives, or second wives in cases where polygamy was the norm. This is supported by Michel Adam's statistical observation that interracial unions mostly occurred between Asian and Black Muslims along the Swahili Coast.⁸⁹ Regarding the early years of settlement, another informant told Salvadori, '80% of mixed marriages involved Muslim Punjabis'.⁹⁰

Rehmat Khan Kherdin, a Punjabi Muslim migrant in Kenya who married a Kipsigis woman called Tabsabei in 1951, reflected:

No, there was no difficulty about marriage to Tabsabei. You know, Muslims don't object to intermarriage [...] It's not like Hindus, I know of only one Hindu with an African wife, Mankilal, from a very old family, who was staying in Bomet. [...] Sikhs? I can only think of one Sikh here in Kisumu, Jowallah Singh, who had an African wife, long ago.⁹¹

In his travel memoir of 1981, moreover, Tom Heaton noted that Hakim Khan, a Pathan man from East Pokot, was not the only one in his family 'married to a half-Pathan half-Maasai'.⁹² Recognising the prevalence of interracial unions among Punjabi Sunni migrants in Kenya in the period 1895–1923, Budasz concluded, 'religion was in fact the first determinant of social acceptability'.⁹³ However, the smaller number of instances where Sikhism accommodated African wives has been overlooked, despite the presence of notable mixed-race Sikh populations in regions such as Meru and Mbarara. Another account, from 1955 by Mehar Singh Dhillon, described a Punjabi Sikh merchant who lived happily with his Maasai wife in Maasailand.⁹⁴ Although local marriage rites were viewed with disdain, it was generally less objectionable if an African woman were to convert to her husband's religion. That said, in Uganda, several African women who married Sikh men remained Muslim or Christian whilst raising their children as Sikhs. The degree of acceptance these wives experienced is another question, however. When Ngiboto, a Maasai woman from Ololong Village, married Juma Khan in 1935, a Punjabi Muslim man from Peshawar, she converted to Islam and changed her name to Halima.⁹⁵ Many years later, a family friend reflected on Khan's marriage, stating that 'He may have been oblivious to the outrage of others with racial attitudes, or perhaps he simply did not care what other Asians thought of him; nevertheless he broke the rules by marrying a young beautiful Maasai girl. This effectively lowered his stature in the eyes of his compatriots'.⁹⁶ Framing Khan as a rule-breaker, this account suggests Halima was not regarded as an equal by the

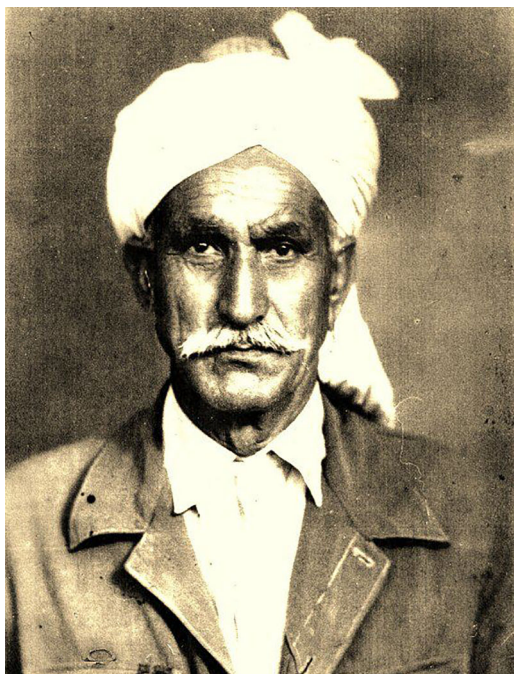


FIGURE 1 | Fazal Din, a Muslim migrant from Hassan Abdal (modern-day Pakistan). He married a Maasai woman, who took the Muslim name Fatma, in Kenya in the 1910s. They had four daughters, including Fazal Noor. Photo courtesy of his great-grandchildren. [Colour figure can be viewed at [wileyonlinelibrary.com](https://onlinelibrary.wiley.com/doi/10.1111/1469-0424.7005)]

wider diaspora. Practising polygamy, Khan also married a mixed-race woman called Fazal Noor (b. 1923). As their son, Muzzafar, explained in his memoir, Fazal Noor was considered a suitable bride because, although her mother, who took the Muslim name Fatma, was Maasai, she was raised with the Punjabi traditions of her father, Fazal Din (Figure 1).⁹⁷ Language, upbringing and religion were all crucial factors in how an interracial union was perceived. That said, Asian men's intermarriages were openly acknowledged in spite of wider community prejudices. Some South Asian men defied social expectations and ignored external judgement, demonstrating a willingness to form intimate and enduring relationships with their African spouses.

In the case of Zanzibar, which has received the greatest scholarly attention, we can begin to piece together a chronological narrative showing how the acceptability of these kinds of interracial liaisons changed over time for different communities. Regarding the exogamy practices of the Zanzibari Khoja community in the period 1878–1899, Iqbal Akhtar found that the Sunni and Ithnā'asheri Khoja were generally open to racial intermixture. Before the 1870s, there was a period of relaxed caste boundaries when most Khoja men cohabited with local *suria* (concubines). By 1870, however, when emigration had evened out the gender imbalance among Khojas, interracial relationships were renegotiated as 'culturally unacceptable'.⁹⁸ In 1899, the Aga Khan III commanded the Agakhani Khoja to reinstate traditional caste endogamy and to end interracial marriage practices, stating 'Do not marry (*nikā*) a *gōlī* [enslaved woman]', with '*gōlī*' functioning as a derogatory term for African women.⁹⁹ Turning our attention to the post-revolutionary period, Keshodkar's scholarship revealed that Asian men in Zanzibar were more likely to marry

outside of one's *jat* (caste) or racial group around the time of the 1964 Revolution because the Asian population was greatly diminished; in the revolutionary violence, some South Asians were murdered and those who could fled the islands. Men who chose to marry outside of their racial group, however, have faced ostracisation in the post-revolutionary period, especially within the conservative Bohra community. If a Bohra dared to marry an African, they would be excommunicated from their *jat* along with their wider family. The Shia Ithnā'asheri of Zanzibar were somewhat more accepting of intermarriage with Swahili women, with many of them having secret Swahili wives whom they had married through *muta* (a temporary contract).¹⁰⁰ The fact that these relationships were not publicly acknowledged, however, was a testament to the continued controversy that surrounded Black/brown intermixture in Zanzibar.

5 | South Asian women and the 'Black peril'

When brown men pursued Black women, it was frowned upon. At worst, the South Asian community was 'disappointed' by their behaviour. But when a brown woman had relations with a Black man, or merely entertained the idea, it was 'social death [...] feared more than real death at times'.¹⁰¹ In Ngũgĩ wa Thiong'o's 1962 play *The Black Hermit*, the character Omange remarks that the 'Asian girl [...] ostracized by her community because she was seen going around with an African is not an isolated case'.¹⁰² In her memoir *The Settler's Cookbook*, Alibhai-Brown recalled playing Shakespeare's Juliet in a production at her school in Kampala in the 1960s, in which an African boy was cast as Romeo. This was a cultural taboo for her Ismaili family: as she reiterated, 'you did not reach across to touch black skin or kiss black lips or give your heart to a black man. Even in a school play'. When she returned home, her family beat her, calling her a '*vaisha*' ('slut').¹⁰³ Similar themes were echoed in an interview later collected by Alibhai-Brown in Britain, in which a Punjabi Kenyan man confessed to beating his 19-year-old daughter with a belt and sending her to India because he was outraged that she was dating a Black British boy, whom he described as 'like an animal'. His wife concurred, 'Black men [...] that is worse than death for us to accept for our daughters'.¹⁰⁴ Driven by fears of judgement and social isolation, mothers and aunties played a dominant role in safeguarding patriarchal and anti-Black values too.

Across time and territorial boundaries, relationships between Desi women and Black men were strictly forbidden, and the consequences could be fatal. Rumours claim that some brown women and their African lovers were murdered for daring to cross these socio-racial borders. Chowdhry articulated in her commentary on how North Indian women are killed or coerced into suicide to preserve family honour,

the sexual agency of a woman brings both desire and violence to the forefront. Her pursuing her desire outside the confines of caste/community moral norms and family and kinship codes makes for a broader protest than that of a man. [...] A woman's revolt [...] is taken as a direct attack on patriarchal power and must be crushed, controlled, and channelled.¹⁰⁵

Whilst figures on honour killings in East Africa are impossible to attain, we know that some South Asian men threatened to murder their daughters and sisters if they ran off with African men. In the early 2000s, Keshodkar recorded that when he asked Raju, a Zanzibari Bohra, if his younger sister would be allowed to marry a Swahili man, he 'responded in a serious tone, saying that he would kill her rather than have the family shamed in such a manner'.¹⁰⁶ Singh's play tells the tale of an Asian butcher who threatened to murder his daughter for eloping with a Black lawyer. He then ships his other daughters to India for marriage so they cannot follow the same path. In Singh's words, 'Wahindi fathers will kill their girls if they even speak with boys'.¹⁰⁷ In these literary imaginings, women are portrayed as property to be controlled. Such abusive behaviour drove women to suppress their desires and sexual identities, as they could be severely punished if they did not perform a strict version of Desi womanhood that positioned them as subservient to men in their community. Indeed, the lingering archival silences surrounding Asian women continue to reflect their fears of speaking openly about the subject. Whereas 'secret' liaisons between Asian men with African women were often exposed, informally leaked through the rumour mill, South Asian women's interracial engagements were never publicly disclosed – and likely never will be.

Siddiqi recalled that some Asian women in Kenya and Uganda 'disappeared'. Allegedly, they had been sent to India to be married, but suspicions of foul play remain. Recalling her childhood in Mombasa and Kampala, she stated:

I remember two distinct cases of suicide, resulting from inter-racial relationships. The daughter of a Hindu-Gujarati shopkeeper killed herself because her parents had hastily arranged her marriage in the hope of ending her relationship with a Black man. She took an overdose the night before the wedding [c. 1963]. Afterwards, there was a great deal of gossip and speculation over whether or not she had been pregnant.¹⁰⁸

Such anecdotes indicate why brown women's suffering is a focal point in the region's postcolonial literature, particularly in women-authored critiques of male chauvinism. Desi codes of morality – embedded in pollution complexes based on gender, caste, sect, ethnicity, religion, age and race – evidently applied more stringently to women than to men. South Asian identity was rooted in the 'twin consciousness of racial superiority [...] and its correlative, sexual purity'.¹⁰⁹ The prospect of 'good Indian girls [...] running off with Black men' was inextricably tied to the concept of 'shamelessness', being 'every Indian father's worst nightmare'.¹¹⁰ Contact between Asian women and African men was restricted by South Asian patriarchs as far as possible.¹¹¹ In 'Sweet Scum of Freedom', the father forbids his daughters from becoming typists because this line of occupation would bring them into contact with Black men.¹¹² This theme is similarly explored in *The In-Between World of Vikram Lall*, when Deepa confronts her parents about her wish to marry her childhood sweetheart Njoroge, a Kikuyu man. Her father exclaims: 'What do you mean you will marry anyone whom you want? [...] we are desis, Indians. Proud Indians, we have our customs [...]. Not in your wildest dreams can you marry an African'. Bringing to light

the gendered double standard, it is later revealed that Deepa's father is dating an African woman.¹¹³ Within the Northern Indian and Punjabi discourse on *izzat*, women's behaviour was the measure of morality. Women were the designated markers of ethnic, racial and civilisational boundaries. As Harjant Gill summarised, 'immigrant women frequently bear the burden of upholding patriarchal traditions and values of the homeland'. Whilst migration created opportunities for South Asians to resist the heteropatriarchal homeland, pressures to maintain familial customs abroad were intensified by anxieties over being perceived as 'un-Indian'.¹¹⁴ Moreover, as articulated within the struggle for Muslim women's rights under the British Raj, the granting of new liberties to women in the colonial context was conflated with the destruction of culture and the imposition of Western values.¹¹⁵

In collective memory, the older generation of *dukawallah* classes was obsessed with the preservation of 'Female Chastity' and lived 'in the grip of an anxious ethos about women's sexual honor'.¹¹⁶ Echoing Nazareth's description of Goan women as 'very Victorian', Alibhai-Brown remarked that Asian women were transformed into 'symbols of purity and wealth, exactly like middle-class Victorian women'.¹¹⁷ In Mira Nair's film *Mississippi Masala* (1991), set in the late twentieth-century United States, a scandal breaks out when a Ugandan Indian woman dates an African American man, who her family derogatorily refers to as *kallu* (Black person).¹¹⁸ Having a daughter run off with a Black man was deemed a terrible fate, something you would only wish upon your worst enemies. When the daughter of a detested Goan Brahmin in Uganda eloped with a Black man, the community rejoiced that he had 'got what he deserved'.¹¹⁹ In Lino Leitao's short story 'The Son', 'tongues [are set] wagging' when a Goan wife has an affair with her African servant and gives birth to a mixed-race child. The Goan community branded her as a 'bad woman', 'cheap', 'a whore and a bitch'. As her husband reflects, it would not have been so bad if she had cheated with another Goan man.¹²⁰ In *The Feast of the Nine Virgins* too, a scandal occurs when the *dukawallah's* daughter-in-law has a '*chotara*' baby. In this instance, the neighbours believe God is punishing her for her sins.¹²¹ Mixed-race children born to South Asian mothers were loathed as the living, breathing consequences of brazen female sexual independence.¹²² They were, for some families, perceived as painful symbols of their daughter's or sister's improper, disgraceful self-conduct.

Siddiqi adds that the 'dukavallas always imagined that their daughters would be dragged away by force and married off to Black men'.¹²³ Embedded within these violent semantics was the colonial myth of the 'Black peril', the stereotyping of Black men as sexually voracious predators who could not control their lust towards lighter-skinned women.¹²⁴ The diaspora became obsessed with protecting women from this perceived threat, as reflected in newspaper reports about Asian women being attacked by African men.¹²⁵ In Nairobi in 1964, stories circulated about two Sikh girls who died in hospital from wounds inflicted by an African man.¹²⁶ These reports of sexual violence are of historical interest not only for whether they occurred, but for the discomforts and anxieties they illuminate during a time of particular political and economic insecurity for South Asian men. It was as if African male sexuality, imagined as aggressive

carnal desire, was the ultimate assault on brown women's honour and, therefore, brown men's *izzat*. Siddiqi recalled that 'When the British formally left in 1962 and the Blacks took over [...]. A few sent their wives and daughters to India, (fearing as ever, forced marriages or Black gang rapes) but soon the women were back as no such ludicrous thing had happened'.¹²⁷ The rape of Asian women by African men was a defining feature in narratives about both the 1964 Zanzibar Revolution and the 1972 expulsion in Uganda.¹²⁸ Nagar found that few of the Zanzibari Asians she interviewed left the island because of political or economic insecurity, 'rather, they stated that they could not remain on the island because Zanzibar was no longer a safe place for Asian women'. One Ithnā'asheri woman recounted, 'There are many horrifying stories of young Asian women and girls being kidnapped, raped, or forcefully married off to Karume's men. [...] My neighbour, a Sunni girl, was kidnapped from school and gang raped. She committed suicide...'.¹²⁹ Similarly, in the Ugandan context, Alibhai-Brown heard stories about gangs of African men who roamed the streets of Kampala looking for Asian girls and recalled that one of her schoolfriends was sexually assaulted by an African guard.¹³⁰ In 1960s–1970s Uganda, the Asian community responded to these reports by restricting women's mobility and visibility.¹³¹ Through extensive rumour networks, the image of Black men forcing themselves upon brown women became a focal point in the diaspora's shared memory of expulsion. In line with tokenistic, racist thought, a Black rapist was wrongly assumed to represent his entire community. Although sexual assaults did happen and women's fears were real, resulting in trauma and even loss of life, these incidents were not as widespread as popular narratives suggested.

There was also a lurking suspicion among the diaspora that they might be forced to marry Africans under postcolonial rule. These fears became a reality in post-revolutionary Zanzibar, where the new African government, lashing back against years of oppression by ethnic minorities, passed legislation that 'forced single Asian and Arab women to marry members of the Revolutionary Council and other Africans'.¹³² In 1966, President Abeid Karume made it a crime – punishable by caning, six years imprisonment and a fine – for an Arab or Asian woman to refuse a marriage proposal from a Black man. In light of this, many South Asian men risked conviction in order to sneak their womenfolk off the island.¹³³ Despite the 'Forced Marriage Act', Asian women were expected to retain their cultural honour by remaining single or, at a minimum, divorcing their African husbands once the law was abolished.¹³⁴ Salim, an Ismaili woman who opted to stay married to her Swahili husband from the Revolutionary Council, for example, continued to be bad-mouthed by Ismaili women four decades later. Her mixed-race sons were also forbidden from marrying within the *jat*. Intermarriage with Africans greatly damaged a family's reputation and made them the centre of gossip. In this instance, some parents went so far as to disown their daughters to avoid ostracisation.¹³⁵ Given the dishonour still attached to such relationships today across and beyond East Africa, few South Asian women have been vocal about the harsh realities of the sexual double standard in their communities. The enduring taboo surrounding brown women's desires reiterates the historiographical challenge of recovering them. The voices that come through in this article, we are reminded, are those of a privileged, liberal-minded minority who will not face repercussions for sharing these tales.

6 | Conclusion

Race proved to be 'both a fragile and a durable concept' for the South Asians of East Africa.¹³⁶ Asians sought to maintain divisions between themselves. They also sought to guard the racial boundaries of their communities. Love marriages remained contentious, but there were South Asians of various ethnicities and religions who chose to disobey cultural protocols, including interracial couples who defied the colonial order of racial separation. To marry outside of one's caste or religion was socially unacceptable, but to marry an African was usually considered worse. The only exception to the rule was if an African woman converted to her husband's religion, in which case her skin colour might be overlooked. Whether she was truly treated as an equal, however, remains contested. Where gender and race intersect, there are discernible patterns in the kinds of interracial relationships that could survive as 'open secrets' and those that had to be taken to the grave. Certainly, the control of women's sexuality was part and parcel of race-making 'South Asian' identity overseas. Casual intimacy between South Asian men and African women sex workers was the most acceptable form of Black/brown liaison, at least from the male perspective. At the other end of the spectrum, love marriages between South Asian women and African men were strictly forbidden, whilst the exaggerated prospect of brown women being raped by Black men was constructed as the ultimate threat. The psychosexual slant and anti-Black sentiments embedded in South Asian discourses on racial intermixture reveal the asymmetries of power at play in the colonial East African setting. The concept of *izzat* was a shifting one, and it was selectively applied, sometimes used to legitimise violence towards Black and brown women. Yet, despite the apparent strictness of endogamous practices, not everyone subscribed to them. As much as some families tried to cover up interracial relationships, the birth of mixed-race children is an undeniable indication that these taboos were constantly being broken. Where this study ends, it paves the way for future enquiry into African perspectives on interracial sex and romance, as well as the role of misogyny, racism and colourism in shaping the stigmatisation of mixed-race Black/brown children, and how these individuals negotiated their place within East Africa's monoracial social and legal hierarchies.

Independence marked the end of strict race-based segregation and, as racial tensions have de-escalated since the 1970s, Black/brown intermixture has become less politicised. Akhtar recorded his amazement regarding the degree of interracial integration that has occurred in Zanzibar since the late nineteenth century, just as Vassanji noted his surprise about the level of racial intermixture he observed in twenty-first-century Dar es Salaam.¹³⁷ When it comes to contemporary marriage practices, nevertheless, gender, religion, caste and socio-economic status remain decisive factors in this respect. Moreover, anti-Blackness continues to drive the rumour mill. One Goan informant of mixed heritage remarked, 'By the 80s, inter-race marriages were only important for the gossipers. No one else cared'.¹³⁸ Another young Indian man interviewed in Kisumu in 2015 insisted his generation did not have a stigma about marrying Africans, 'It's our parents who have issues'.¹³⁹ Although there was a shift in generational attitudes, Black/brown relationships were still 'big talk'. Indeed, they remained unusual enough to feature as stories in national newspapers.¹⁴⁰ The continued prevalence of such cultural taboos

is further illuminated in a genealogy documentary series aired on the BBC in 2006, in which Gurinder Chadha, a twice-migrant British film director who was born in Kenya and is of Punjabi Sikh heritage, discovered her great uncle had a son with his 'secret' Kipsigis girlfriend called Taplele in Kapsoi. Chadha failed to track down her long-lost relative, hindered by her family's disinterest in staying in touch with him and overall reluctance to discuss the relationship. In fact, her story illuminates how the historic alienation and concealment of such mixed-race children has an intergenerational legacy, one that disconnected or estranged cross-racial families continue to navigate in the present.¹⁴¹ As Vassanji aptly stated, South Asians 'did and [...] didn't' marry Africans, and still today, the answer depends on who you ask. Whilst memory sources pose challenges in many respects, particularly in terms of piecing together chronology, they are valuable precisely because they are deeply personal and reflective, revealing the dynamism and intricacy of human experience and, as this study attests, keeping alive the narratives of Black/brown couples that have been formally excluded from East Africa's history.

Endnotes

¹ Clarence Reynolds, 'M. G. Vassanji: Interview', *Mosaic*, 9 April, 2013.

² Where this article addresses the fluidity and fallacy of racial identities, inherited colonial vocabularies often prove inadequate for nuance. Although the majority of the East African population are historically identified by *kabila* (ethnic group), language or *taifa* (community/nation), such distinctions are often blurred within the historical record. I therefore use the terms 'Black' and 'African' for the sake of clarity and to facilitate commentary on the systemic nature of racism towards people of African heritage that transcends borders, nations and oceans. Likewise, I use the terms 'South Asian', 'brown' or 'Desi' as inclusive phrases that refer to people with ancestral roots in modern-day India, Pakistan, Bangladesh and Myanmar, who have at other times been referred to as 'Asiatics', 'Asians', 'Indians' or *mhindi*.

³ Willy Mukasa, 'Some Will Stay, Some Will Go', *Uganda Argus*, 10 August, 1972, 1; Anonymous, 'A Uganda Diary', *Transition* 42 (1973): 14.

⁴ 'Chotara' in Kiswahili translates into English as 'half-caste'; it has historically derogatory connotations but is sometimes claimed as a self-descriptor. Its plural form in Kiswahili is *machotara*. Alternative spellings include *kyotara/kyotare/kyotala* in Uganda and *joṭāwā/jōṭāvā* in Zanzibar.

⁵ Yasmin Alibhai-Brown, *No Place Like Home* (Virago, 1995), 57.

⁶ Queer interracial relationships in East Africa are largely absent from the historical record, as British colonial laws criminalising homosexuality forced them underground.

⁷ Jennifer Cole and Lynn Thomas, *Love in Africa* (University of Chicago Press, 2009).

⁸ Saroj Kanta Bhuyan and Mukesh Tiwari, 'Unravelling Personal Journeys', *The Literary Herald* 9, no. 2 (2023): 20–27; Esther Pujolràs-Noguer, 'Desiring/Desired Bodies', *Critique* 59, no. 5 (2018): 596–608; Stephanie Jones, 'The Politics of Love and History', *Research in African Literatures* 42, no. 3 (2011): 166–186; Tina Steiner, 'Writing "Wider Worlds"', *Research in African Literatures* 41, no. 3 (2010): 124–135; Stephanie Jones, 'The First South Asian East African Novel', *Contemporary South Asia* 17, no. 1 (2009): 33–46; Dan Ojwang, 'The Half-caste and the Dream of Secularism and Freedom', *Scrutiny* 2 13, no. 2 (2008): 16–35.

⁹ Lawrence Mbogoni, *Miscegenation, Identity and Status in Colonial Africa* (Routledge, 2019); Daphné Budasz, 'Brown Men, Black Women, White Anxiety', *Revue d'histoire Contemporaine de l'Afrique* (2022): 1–14.

¹⁰ Rachel Dwyer, *All You Want Is Money, All You Need Is Love* (Cassell, 2000), 81.

¹¹ Luise White, *The Comforts of Home* (University of Chicago Press, 2009), 70–74, 99, 164, 192, 201–204, 213.

¹² James Brennan, *Taifa* (Ohio University Press, 2012), 129.

¹³ Despite scholarship on desire in South Asian cinema, interracial Black/brown relationships remained too taboo for visual depiction. The first such film was *Razia Sultan* (1983), where the Indian empress's love interest, Jamal-ud-Din Yaqt – an enslaved Ethiopian – was played by Indian actor Dharmendra in blackface. Dwyer, *All You Want Is Money*, 5; Laura Fair, 'Making Love in the Indian Ocean', in *Love in Africa*, ed. Cole and Thomas, 58–82.

¹⁴ Though classified as 'Asians', many Goans distinguished themselves in colonial East Africa as *wagoa* (as opposed to *wahindi*), Catholics and Portuguese nationals.

¹⁵ Abdulrazak Gurnah, email to author, 16 April, 2020.

¹⁶ Censorship marked postcolonial East African politics, particularly in Uganda, where Nazareth used a pen name to avoid persecution. Anneeth Kaur Hundle, 'The Politics of (In)security' (PhD diss., University of Michigan, 2013), 174; Peter Nazareth, 'Waiting for Amin', in *The Writing of East and Central Africa*, ed. G. D. Killam (Heinemann, 1984), 8.

¹⁷ Isabel Hofmeyr and Preben Kaarsholm, eds., *Africa* (Special Issue: Print Cultures, Nationalisms, and Publics of the Indian Ocean) 81, no. 1 (2011): 1–172.

¹⁸ Tine Vekemans, 'Books of Becoming', *Religions* 16, no. 3 (2025): 352–368.

¹⁹ Astrid Erll, *Memory in Culture* (Palgrave Macmillan, 2011), 144–171.

²⁰ Luise White, *Speaking with Vampires* (University of California Press, 2000), 85–86.

²¹ Dan Ojwang, 'The Pleasures of Knowing', *English Studies in Africa* 43, no. 1 (2000): 43–64; James Wertsch and Henry Roediger III, 'Collective Memory', *MEMORY* 16, no. 3 (2008): 318–326.

²² Vijay Mishra, *The Literature of the Indian Diaspora* (Routledge, 2007), 1.

²³ Sana Aiyar, 'Peter Kimani: Dance of the Jakaranda', *American Historical Review* 125, no. 3 (2019): 8.

²⁴ Robert Gregory, *India and East Africa* (Clarendon Press, 1971), 51–57; L. Hollingsworth, *The Asians of East Africa* (Macmillan & Co., 1960), 47–51; Gisbert Oonk, 'South Asians in East Africa (1880–1920) with a Particular Focus on Zanzibar', *African and Asian Studies* 5, no. 1 (2006): 57–89.

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²⁷ Prem Chowdhry, *Contentious Marriages, Eloping Couples* (Oxford University Press, 2009), 1.

²⁸ Francesca Orsini, 'Šrṅgāra, 'Ishq, Love', *Modern Asian Studies* 36 (2002): 101.

²⁹ Perveez Mody, 'Love and the Law', *Modern Asian Studies* 36, no. 1 (2002): 224–225.

³⁰ Chowdhry, *Contentious Marriages, Eloping Couples*, 1–2, 5.

- ³¹ Henry Korson, 'Endogamous Marriage in a Traditional Muslim Society', *Journal of Comparative Family Studies* 2, no. 2 (1971): 150–152.
- ³² Karen Dion and Kenneth Dion, 'Cultural Perspectives on Romantic Love', *Personal Relationships* 3, no. 1 (1996): 5–17.
- ³³ Mody, 'Love and the Law', 223.
- ³⁴ In Tanganyika, lower-class South Asians – Sunni and Baluchi labourers, Ramgharia Sikhs and some Ismailis and Ithnā'ashiris – often married local women due to the cost of returning to India. After the 1960s, middle- and upper-class men increasingly married South Asian partners from the United Kingdom or the United States. With a new generation of East African-born South Asian women, husbands were sourced from the subcontinent too. Richa Nagar, 'The South Asian Diaspora in Tanzania', *Comparative Studies of South Asia, Africa and the Middle East* 16, no. 2 (1996): 64.
- ³⁵ Parita Mukta, *Shards of Memory* (Weidenfield & Nicolson, 2002), 5.
- ³⁶ Jameela Siddiqi, email to author, 12 February, 2020.
- ³⁷ Yasmin Alibhai-Brown, *The Settler's Cookbook* (Portobello Books, 2008), 269.
- ³⁸ 'लड़की के साथ उसके कुटुंब की इज्जत जुड़ी हुई है'. Chowdhry, *Contentious Marriages, Eloping Couples*, 16.
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- ⁴¹ Dhruva Gupta, 'Indian Perceptions of Africa', *South Asia Research* 11, no. 2 (1991): 158.
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- ⁴³ Colonial literature about Africa was also translated into vernacular South Asian languages. Ojwang, 'The Pleasures of Knowing', 45; Shobhana Bhattacharji, 'Indian Travel Writing', in *The Routledge Companion to Travel Writing*, ed. Carl Thomson (Routledge, 2016), 133; Nile Green, 'Africa in Indian Ink', *Journal of African History* 53 (2012): 131–150; Anirudha Gupta, 'A Note on Indian Attitudes to Africa', *African Affairs* 69 (1970): 172.
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- ⁴⁶ A. Ramsay Mwamanda, 'Aibu Tunaiona Wanaume', *Mambo Leo*, September 1945, 106.
- ⁴⁷ 'Kwa nini Wahindi kuoa Waafrika, hali Waafrika hawaoi mabinti wa Kihindi?' Dvr. G. E. Naftal, 'Kwa Nini Waafrika Hawaoi Wahindi?' *Mambo Leo*, December 1945, 142.
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- ⁴⁹ Harjant Gill, 'India, Masculinity, Identity', Oxford Bibliographies (Oxford University Press, 2024).
- ⁵⁰ Bahadur Tejani, *Day After Tomorrow* (East African Literature Bureau, 1971), 6.
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- ⁵² Saada Wahab, *The History of Indians in Zanzibar from the 1870s to 1963* (Göttingen University Press, 2022), 26–27, 58.
- ⁵³ Ladis Da Silva, 'Zanzibar', *Journal of South Asian Literature* 18, no. 1 (1983): 262.
- ⁵⁴ 'Ivory', *Zanzibar Gazette*, 5 December, 1894, 4.
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- ¹³⁴ Keshodkar, 'Marriage as the Means to Preserve "Asian-ness"', 230–231.
- ¹³⁵ A rare on-screen Black/South Asian romance appears in *Vuta N'kuvute* (Tug of War), adapted from Shafi Adam Shafi's 1999 Kiswahili novel. Keshodkar, 'Marriage as the Means to Preserve "Asian-ness"', 235–236; Amil Shivji, dir., *Vuta N'kuvute* (Kijiwani Productions, 2021).
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