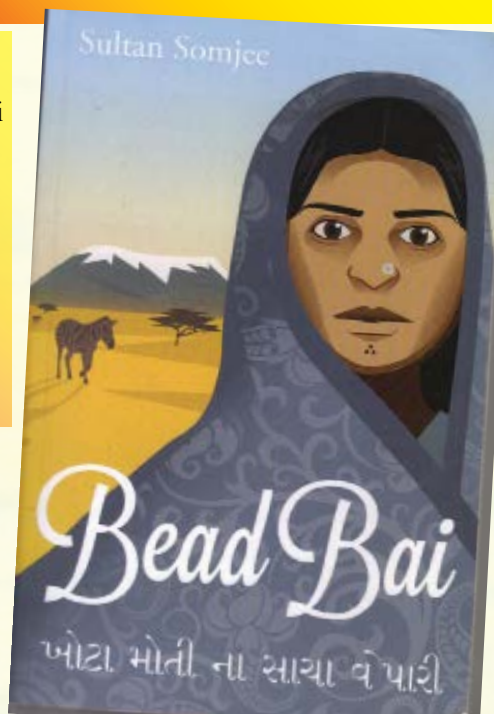


Leaving India/crossing the Black Waters

Excerpts from Sultan Somjee's novel *Bead Bai*, published by CreateSpace, Charleston, USA, 2012

>>It's the story of a bead-embroidery artist (bead bai) Sakina growing up in the Indian bazaar of Nairobi in the early 1920s, interspersed with stories she hears from her grandfather, uncle stepmother - and even Mithi Bai, the comfort lady who comes along on the dhow voyage described below. In her tormented married life, Sakina finds comfort in the art of the beadwork of the Maasais nearer her marital home.

>>Sultan gave me a signed copy at Granville Market in Vancouver in June 2013. The book is partly based on his research as an ethnographer and partly on stories he heard in his childhood in Kenya. In 2001 the UN listed Sultan Somjee as one of twelve "Unsung Heroes of Dialogue Among Civilizations." He now writes from British Columbia, Canada, where he lives with his wife Zera and three children.



The Gujarati subtitle says: *Khota moti na sacha wepari* - Of imitation pearls we are genuine merchants - a shop sign in Nairobi bazaar.



In the below excerpts it is the Dadabapa (grandfather to Bead Bai) talking to Bead Bai, then a teenager. Some abridgement has been done. Although fictional, the excerpts show in the first part how it was for one person to leave his ancestral village - "and break the promise of my birth, not because I want to but because I have to." It must have been the same for thousands of our ancestors but they did not keep records and we should be grateful to Sultan Somjee for this composite piece. Killing a 2nd bird with the same stone, the excerpts in the first part make us think back to our forced departure from Uganda - how we kept gazing at trees and playgrounds. I kept notes and have reproduced some later. In the second part of excerpts here Sultan Somjee evokes the perilous dhow voyage. A 4th fallen bird is we see Sultan's style of writing. As he says you don't read the stories, you hear them (waisikia baridi - do you hear the cold).

Loving and leaving the land. In the drought of *Chapanyo*, the earth turned hot everywhere in our village, so hot that it hardened into a rock and cracked in sharp-edged pieces like a clay water pot. My father's last two cows died of thirst. Peanut plants turned brittle, nuts shrivelled and withered before the locusts came. Pests – I see black locust clouds over my head. I cry out Ma! Ma! She doesn't hear me. My father and I and all my brothers and sisters we tried to salvage the frugal crop and put it into sacks. But the colonial agents carried them away in payment of taxes as my father could not pay in rupees. We are forced to sell our wooden plough and tools to buy food and water. Khojas, Jains, Patels, Bohras and Lohanas from our

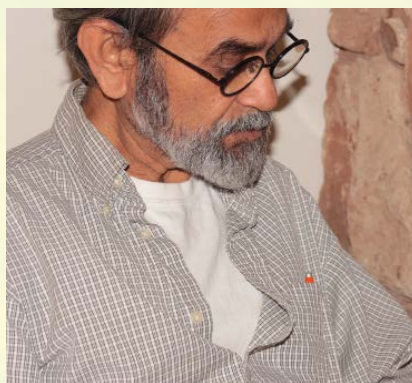
village are leaving for Africa. Even the lowcaste cleaners are leaving. Family members returning from Africa said sweet water, milk and honey flowed in Africa like rivers from the Himalayas, and that one could eat one good meal a day. My father, once the *Mukhi* of our village reminded the Khoja *panchayat* council members how much *Saheb* desired for us to leave Kutch and Gujarat for Africa. A multitude of questions assail him: How can we abandon the land of our ancestors? How can we break the bond with the earth that is sacred?

One evening my mother removes her gold *siri* and two silver anklets and hands them over to me to pay my passage to Africa. My father gives me some loose King Emperor coins and Kutch *coris* in a cloth pouch. I clutch my parents' feet and make them a promise that I shall return with riches. I take a fistful of earth at the base of the neem tree where my ancestors had toiled with their bare hands and earned a living that sustained both lineage and honour. I hold the soil in my fist and press it to my eyes and then to my forehead, asking its forgiveness for leaving the land and its blessings, for the unknown journey over the *Black Waters*. My parents and siblings weep as they see me mount the bullock cart. My family cling to it up to the stone that marks the end of our field. My mother wails. I sob and bury my face in the bundle of clothes my mother has packed. I do not want to see the withered peanut bushes I had planted with my father; the mango tree I loved to climb; the rocks on which I had lain and watched the sky for the monsoon clouds to sail in. Here is where I played *gilidanda*, jumped the river stones and bruised my knees. My mother scolded me. Will I ever hear her caring reproaches again? I think of my brothers lying on the ground, their ears pressed to the ground, listening to the turn of the wheels, as the clinks of the bells of the bullocks fade into the sounds of twilight towards the railway station.

Boarding passes. When I arrive at the quay in Bombay, I am holding the paper bag with the seedling of the neem tree close to my heart. Sailors are loading the dhow with textiles, grain, spices, rice, flour, metal containers

and cement. There are jute sacks filled with onions, rice, cabbage and potatoes. Bird catchers are haggling with the pilot over the price of crows, considered sacred to ward off death on a voyage. It is time to set sail. I look north to the land through the haze. It is evening. My friends would be arguing at the mango tree how to continue the game of hide and seek now they were short of one runner, in fact the best runner of the team. I turn around and fix my eyes southwards towards Africa and see a crewman cover the crows' cage for the night.

The voyage. Typhoid and then dysentery broke out on that craft in the middle of the Indian Ocean. No wonder they called it the *Kala Pani* (Black Waters). At first babies died and then adults. Aval Bai wakes up one morning to find her baby daughter was not moving. She wants to jump over into the ocean. It takes three Bais to pull her away and tear the dead infant from her grip. Captain Ahmed orders an



Sultan Somjee, photo by Tariq Malik

empty gunnysack from the ration store. The Bais lift the gunnysack coffin on the deck twice as if reluctant to let it go. The third time they offer the unnamed baby to the sea. Aval Bai spends the day with other women at *Ambe Ma's* shrine. Ambe clad in a red sari sits on a tiger. She is *Mamta Mata*, *Shanti Mata* and *Santosh Mata* (Mother of Motherhood; Peace and Contentment). Aval Bai rocks to and fro to the rhythm of the chanting, the flutter end of her *pachedi* held between her teeth like a tethered cockerel fighting to break loose.

On the tenth day out, of a sudden the craft is heaved from below by a monster wave and thrust up into the void of pitch darkness, so black you cannot see your hand held before you. Every movable thing is knocked down. I see men, women and children rolling about the lower deck like empty bottles. The wind rushes in like a bull run amuck and doing all it can to break free. Suddenly a desperate, sharp short shriek for help cuts through the sluicing deck waters at the lintel. I hear a deckhand's shout cracking through the black silence between the gales and the floods, "Kala Pani has taken Paan Bai." It was the lady with the limp. When calm returns Paan Bai's *pachedi*, knotted between the planks above the toilet seat, lifts and falls in the air, limp and forlorn.

The following days and nights, we wait anxiously to sight land. I think of my mother. She would be taking a food prayer plate to the jamatkhana for my protection. Winds, favourable to sailing south, fill the sail. Light showers pass over us. We are able to collect water from the tarpaulins and to bathe and even wash clothes. I sleep and sit in the same corner of the deck, full of hope that I will live to see Africa. Paan Bai's husband sits at the prow, day after day, staring at the waters like he is waiting for his wife to resurface. We hear the captain's shout, "Release a crow!" The black bird makes one circle above us, its voice dry and crusty, but soon he caws in delight and flies away free and straight in one direction. Our craft follows. The craft cruises closer to the coast.

The sight of land and the green brings joy to my heart. But some passengers weep aloud, calling out the names of their dead, pointing their fingers to the shore and telling all to see Africa over there. Mothers smack their heads with open palms, grieving the children they have buried at sea, between the old country and the unknown one, in unfathomable depth, so dark, so wet, a nameless place where they could not leave a mark to say who lies here.

Glossary: *Chapanyo* – 56 (the drought of 1856); *panchayat* – village council; *Saheb* – reference to the Ismaili Imam of the age, in this case Hassan Ali Shah, Aga Khan I; *siri* – diamond nose ring; *coris* – seashells in lieu of currency; *neem* – a lemonlike tree; *gilidanda* - covered later.
pachedi – Shia Muslim women's head covering.

In a Muslim funeral (as for Awal Bai's babe) ritual requires that the body be lifted twice before being carried away to the grave.

What happens in *Bead Bai* to Dadabapa and Bead Bai? Of course you'd like to know and of course I ain't telling! I can quote the very last paragraph from the book to give a hint but more important to show the quality of the writing. Bead Bai is travelling on a bus with her infant son, bound for Nairobi from her broken marital home in Nairoiwua. She is thinking of how it will soon be.

When it's evening, I shall watch the orange halo of the setting sun over the distant shadow of Ngong Hills of Nairobi. I shall watch the five blue humps descend like a passing camel caravan into the womb of the night where a new day will be conceived and born again over Kenya.

Keep tissues handy.

Thank you Sultan Somjee for your wonderfilled novel.



Drawing of Ma Jethi Bai the bead bai of Arusha, by her grandson Maqsood. Sultan credits her as one bead bai that influenced him.



Maasai beads (eman-keeki) that figure a lot in Sultan Somjee's book