Artistically Unfolding: The role of ‘the maternal’ in the construction of British-Indian female identity amongst women in the author’s matrilineal line 1914 - 2023



By

Remi Rana-Allen

Thesis submitted in partial fulfilment of the requirements for the Degree of

Doctor of Philosophy (PhD)

University of the Arts London

Chelsea College of Arts

2023

Abstract

This art practice-based thesis investigates the construction of British-Indian identity among women in my matrilineal line between 1914 – 2023, mapping this development across India, Kenya and Britain. It is informed by my experiences, as a British-born Indian woman whose body maps her dual identity, its perception and reception. I draw on diverse artistic productions, including paintings, digital prints, film, and object-based installations. I employ Clark's (1999) method of autodriving, a technique of eliciting responses from photographs. I utilise post-colonial feminist theory and sociological analysis to make sense of key narratives of my history.

This research examines contemporary representations of British-Indian women, grounded in colonial ideas about inherent differences between (backwards, traditional) eastern and (progressive, civilised) western societies. These understandings construct British-Indian women as lacking agency, subservient family caretakers, and keepers of family honour.

Through an intersectional analysis incorporating theories of religion, caste, race, class and gender, and a critique of patriarchy, my thesis challenges these limited representations about British-Indian women, specifically in their maternal roles.

My experiences as a mother, daughter, wife, and artist inform my PhD, revealing a trajectory of unlearning what I thought was my identity, to reflecting and reevaluating, and rebuilding by learning from my past and future.

Acknowledgements

During my ten-year journey, I have often been asked, *“Why are you doing a PhD?”* Over time, I have come to understand that my answer lies in something deeply personal: to affirm that my contribution to the art world is valid, and to finally lay to rest the persistent ghost of imposter syndrome.

This journey has not been solitary. Many individuals have played a part along the way, and I am profoundly grateful for their presence, guidance, and belief in me. I would like to thank Professor Paul Springer, Dr. John Phillips, and Stella Whalley for recognising the potential in my work. My sincere thanks also go to my supervisors, Dr. Lois Drawmer and Dr. Maria Walsh, for their consistent support throughout this process.

A very special thanks to Professor Faisal Abdu’Allah, not only a supervisor but also a mentor and friend, whose belief in me over the past fourteen years has been both gentle and unwavering.

I am also grateful to the Research Degrees Team, the Postgraduate Community, and Professor Malcolm Quinn for their support during my time at Chelsea College of Arts. My examiners for their conversations: Dr. Alison Green, Dr. Anjalie Dalal-Clayton and Sutapa Biswas.

Most of all, I would like to thank my Director of Studies, Dr. Kimathi Donkor. His steady encouragement and conviction that I would complete this work have been instrumental. It has been an honour to be his first PhD candidate.

Finally, to Chris Allen, thank you for your selfless support and belief in me. And to my three sons, Joseph James, Sonny Sohan, and Roca Raj, you have grown alongside this PhD. You are my proudest moments and my greatest achievements.

Remi Rana-Allen
London, 2025

To all the women in my family over the last century,
for your strength, resilience, and untold stories.

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Note to reader: The red bindi appears at the end of each section heading or chapter. The main body of the writing is interspersed with memories. Where I include a memory or personal anecdote, the red bindi will appear, and the text converts to red American Typewriter. Example below:



Motherhood made me an artist.

Introduction

Background to my thesis

This thesis draws on artistic practice-based work to investigate the British Indian woman through a black and brown feminist lens. It seeks to explore and develop a critical framework through which to offer a reassessment of the role, representation and image of the Indian women in my family. as daughter, wife and mother. This reassessment is attempted from my positionality - that of a British Indian woman, mother, daughter and artist.

This thesis aims to produce discourses that dichotomise and make problematic the stereotyping and homogenising of the British Indian female identity. My reassessment of the British Indian female identity amongst the women in my family will reveal that there is a very distinct identity.

My history has been dictated by the globalised experience of my parents' diasporic journeys across Asia, Africa and Europe. Their migrations have demanded that my family mould itself to 'fit' within the host land, through adopting new languages, clothing, appearance and culture. These assimilationist efforts have occurred to a lesser or greater degree, perhaps most keenly in the UK. Each move required further distancing from their cultural heritage, a distancing that was passed onto children. The journeys of my parents from India to Kenya, to the UK or from India to the UK have given me, as a second-generation British Indian woman, a "truly global home" in theory, but the sense of belonging still eludes me (Meskimmon, 2011, p.15). In my case, it was only after becoming a mother and an artist that I realised a sense of separation from my culture and heritage. I felt an urgency to maintain both and to pass this knowledge on to my children.

My practice mirrors the slow dilution of my cultural heritage as it seeps further from my grasp. As one writer has written,

> Losing our histories can only be a delegitimisation and disempowering of ourselves (Rai (2012), cited in Roy, 2012, p. ix).

This is why I believe it is necessary to document my history through my artistic practice to make sense of my identity.

'I think in English, I appear Indian' becomes a mantra as I practice my artmaking. My self-representation is based on the context of geography, environment and society. It is self-representation that I question through my research. Caught in the Western gaze, I am considered an outsider and othered. Ironically, the Eastern and African gaze has also othered me, as my Indian identity is also questioned by Indians from the sub-continent and Kenya, because I appear too western, or I speak with an English accent, I am asked if I am Indian. Living in Britain, I am variously considered "British Indian", "British Asian", or "British South Asian", terms that further unsettle. and reinforce my sense of unbelonging due to my image and representation, which I explore throughout my thesis.

Exploring Identity Through Art

My art practice allows me to reflect on the multiple facets of my Indian heritage, as perceived by myself and wider UK society. I have often felt a sense of unbelonging within both Indian and white societies. It is this feeling of unbelonging that I attempt to reconcile as an artist. Can the

separate yet interwoven parts of my identity ever find a ‘home’ and have a sense of belonging? My art making has been instrumental in coming to the realisation that I no longer need to live two separate lives. The tensions between these two identities have at times been uncomfortable,

> …frequently referred to as 'English' and 'Indian' […], the latter being associated with 'traditional' and things 'English' with being 'modern’ (Hall, 2002, p.16).

My identity and that of my husband and sons have evolved into a hybrid of Indian/Asian/British identity. Lived experience of British Indian Sikh culture enables me to interpret coded behaviours relatable to both the East and West.

My art making empowers me to question restrictive societal expectations that constrain women’s behaviour, to ask why we should, do, or do not conform to social controls over our agency. By rejecting the shackles of Izzat, sharam and basti,[1] I am freed to create work that brings an understanding of ‘otherness’ and the restraints put upon Indian women in Asian patriarchal society. This is important, for many British Indian women live sheltered lives, their worlds tend to be covert, not to be discussed with ‘outsiders’.

> The identity of a South Asian woman is never hers to explore and create for herself. When she is young, her identity is constructed by her parents, to whom she belongs. This identity construction unfolds through the training she receives on how

[1] In Hindi, Izzat means respect. Sharam means shame. Basti means embarrassment.

> to be the perfect Indian wife. Then, when she is married and thus becomes an adult, her identity is remoulded by her husband, his family, and their expectations of how she should live and conduct herself in their family unit (Sohal, 2009, p.19).

Born in the United Kingdom as a British Indian, I was expected to adhere to the rules, codes and practices of what was acceptable or unacceptable to my Sikh family. To depart from these behaviours was to risk bringing shame and dishonour on my parents and myself. As I matured and became an artist, my developing practice and my artistic creations gave me the confidence and the courage to begin to question my own identity. I could explore questions about my self-identity through my creations - a British Indian mother of three Anglo-Indian sons (who have only a limited understanding of izzat, sharam and basti). As my role as a mother evolved, it became clear to me that they should be educated in the cultural differences of their parents' upbringing.

As a British Indian woman who may or may not be received and perceived as entirely Indian by British society, but of a 'foreign' heritage, it is important to understand that stereotypical assumptions are constantly made about my identity, based on my image as a brown woman. I am often asked, "Where do you come from?" My first response is always "London". I have now come to realise that by answering in this way, it will lead to further questioning. I am then asked, "but originally?", which leads to further explanations that I am of Indian heritage. This conversation takes place in spoken English, and my response carries the unmistakable timbre of my London accent. This exchange still surprises me at times, as I tend to forget that I am British, born and bred in this country. But to white Britons, I am still seen as 'different', 'foreigner' or an 'outsider', to use Edward Said's interpretation of his diasporic identity, in Culture and Imperialism (1994):

> I grew up as an Arab with a Western education. Ever since I can remember, I have felt that I belonged to both worlds, without being completely of either one or the other […] belonging, as it were, to both sides of the imperial divide enables you to understand them more easily (Said, 1994, p. xxx).

My experience of dual identity as Indian and British is investigated in the following chapters, where I explore what it means to exist in an Indian body yet exist in a world conditioned by Western culture. This allows me to view the world through both Western and Eastern lenses.

> …These circumstances certainly made it possible for me to feel as
>
> if I belonged to more than one history and more than one group
>
> (Said, 1994, p. xxx).

My maternal narratives of migration dictate my belonging and unbelonging to histories and groups that span three continents: India, Africa and Europe.

Literature Review/Theories/Theoretical framework

This literature review examines some scholarship on British South Asian identity, migration of South Asian peoples from different global backgrounds, nationality and citizenship, their relationship with and to Britishness and Englishness and the relevance of being defined as British Indian. My research is situated within the larger historical context of capitalism and Empire, which was catalytic to my family's migration from India to Kenya, in East Africa. I

explore how colonial-derived systemic power structures continue to shape the lives of Indian women in Britain.

Social reproduction theory offers a valuable framework for understanding how maternal roles and family structures are central to both the continuation of cultural identity and the resistance to the broader capitalist system. By grounding my research in these theoretical and historical frameworks, it is possible to gain an understanding of how these dynamics play out within the context of British Indian women's identity in the post-colonial era. I will address further literature in chapter two.

i. Terminology

Different terminologies are used to describe the ethnic group of South Asian diasporic people in the UK. I will outline these, and I will explain my preferred use of the term 'British Indian' throughout my thesis. I rely on the Oxford English Dictionary for these definitions, as there is limited knowledge in this field of study.[2]

There is a descending order of identity descriptors that British South Asians apply to describe themselves. They predominantly self-define as British, rather than English, even for those born

[2] This section of the thesis was written in 2018. Updated studies have since appeared which are useful in problematising the term British Asian.

Suggested further reading:
The_Brown_Identity_The_waning_relevance_of_the_term_British_Asian_in_London
Ratna, A. (2014). 'Who are ya?' The national identities and belongings of British Asian football fans. Patterns of Prejudice, 48(3), 286–308. https://doi.org/10.1080/0031322X.2014.927603
https://www.shoutoutuk.org/2020/07/22/grandchildren-of-the-empire-iii-the-british-asian-situation

in or naturalised in England. Nationality or heritage, such as Indian/Pakistani/Bangladeshi/Persian, is prevalent; identity markers by religion, caste, class, etc. are secondary. Research from The London School of Economic and Political Science report from 2012, supports the weaknesses of these self-descriptors.

> Choosing between the terms ‘Asian’, ‘Bengali’, ‘British’, ‘Hindu’, and ‘Indian’ for self-identification, respondents felt least affinity for the term ‘Asian’, since they found it to have negative connotations – particularly in mass media (Sircar, 2012, p.3).

And crucially, to most British South Asians,

> A second reason for avoiding the term ‘Asian’ is perhaps to distinguish themselves from other British Asians (Sircar, 2012, p.3).

In general, there are three main ways in which South Asian identity is defined. Individuals may be:

Of mixed British and Indian parentage

Of Indian descent but born or living in Britain

Of British descent or birth, but living or having lived for a long period in India

People in the middle group are more commonly known as British Asian, British South Asian, or British Indian. As Macswaggins (2020, n.p) acknowledges,

> …the term 'British-Asian' refers more distinctly to South Asians within the UK (2020).

This is another reason for my use of the term British Indian in my research, as I investigate the global identities of the women in my family.

Anglicised Indians refers to individuals who may have emigrated from the sub-continent or Africa in the early 20th Century.[3] Interestingly, Indians in the subcontinent define the second generation in the UK as Anglo Indian, pointing to their being more anglicised than Indian. However, they still refer to the parents of this generation as Indian, an insight I gained from my cousin, who visited Britain in 2012.[4]

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[3] The 2011 National Census states that, "Migration patterns differ across ethnic groups and religions. It is important to note that there could be numerous reasons for this, such as historic, commonwealth ties, legislative changes, personal, economic and cultural events. It could also be related to international politics, events and conflicts." (2011 Census Analysis: Ethnicity and Religion of the Non-UK Born Population in England and Wales 2015).

The 2011 Census also highlighted:

Over half of Sikhs (52%) arrived before 1981 and the numbers have continued to fall over more recent periods of arrival. Over a third (38%) of people who identified with an Indian ethnicity arrived before 1981. Previously published data has shown that over 7 in 10 of all usual residents in England and Wales who identified with the Indian ethnic group identified with Sikh religion (74%) (Census 2011 Official Statistics).

[4] When second generation Indians travel back to the sub-continent they are referred to as NRIs Non-Resident Indians or OCI Overseas Citizen of India. Miller. L. (2014) NRI PIO OCI – What's the difference? Available at https://learningindia.in/nri-pio-oci/ (Accessed 2 November 2017).

British South Asian also refers to descendants of immigrants, alternatively known as second-generation British Indians. British South Asian means British Asians who originated from the sub-continent of India.

British Asians/British Indians who identify with the term ‘British’ also feel that Asian is an all too encompassing and monolithic identifier of individual Asian identities in the UK today. An identity cannot be homogenised due to its geography, various cultures exist within Asia (Sircar and Saraswati, 2012, n.p).

Another term, Desi, has become popular within Asian youth culture:

> The term ‘Desi’ exists as a term that literally means ‘of the homeland’, originally from the Sanskrit word desh. In this instance, anyone who can claim Asian ancestry can be a ‘desi’…the colloquial term for someone native to South Asia, this definition has taken hold among many second-generation youths, in the diaspora of Indian, Pakistani, Bangladeshi, Sri Lankan and even Indo-Caribbean descent (Maira (2002), cited in Kim, 2015, p.34)

Desi Rascals, a popular TV show, embodies the term (Wood & Chadha, 2015, n.p); all the characters have some Indian connection, whether it is through parentage or marriage to an Asian.

> I love the word ‘Desi. It is so beautiful. I’m of the view that it is the best word to describe ourselves…we who use it do not hearken back to the ‘homeland’ of the

> subcontinent, because we are generally not nationalistic in that sense. Our homeland is an imaginary one…and the term is under construction. (Prashad (2000), cited in Kim, 2015, p.32)

British South Asians tend to fall into the age range of 30s to 50s. It might be thought that as they are born in Britain, that they are naturally of British nationality, but this is a reductive concept as nationalities are not obtained by place of birth, but are determined according to political and social discourses about who has a legitimate claim to citizenship.

ii. Nationality, citizenship and South Asian Identity

One of the main issues for Asians in the UK is that of nationality. Their nationality status in the UK is not based on automatic birthright citizenship. Even if born in the UK, certain criteria still have to be met in order to gain British nationality, such as where the parents were born.

To understand the use of the term British Indian for my research, it is necessary to consult immigration laws. In her book *Lives in Translation: Sikh Youth as British Citizens*, Hall (2002) writes that,

> The successive nationality and immigration laws enacted in Britain since World War II chronicle a progressive narrowing of notions of British belonging from the expansionist view of Empire to the exclusionary practices of the postcolonial nation (Hall, 2002, p.45).

In the context of my maternal migration from Kenya to the UK, and paternal migration directly from Indian Punjab, the changing laws on immigration have not held to the notion of 'Civis Britannicus sum'.[5] The immigration Act of 1968,

> … was passed at a moment of heightened racial hysteria, prompted by the threat of a mass immigration of Asian British citizens in Kenya who were being forced to leave in the face of new nationality legislation associated with the "Africanization" of the recently independent Kenyan nation […] it racialized the boundaries of national belonging by restricting the entry of British citizens who were not connected to the nation through ties of blood or descent. The law created first and second-class citizens among Citizens of the United Kingdom and Colonies (Hall, 2002, p.48).

This disjuncture between English nationality and heritage is reiterated in *Who do 'they' cheer for?" Cricket, diaspora, hybridity and divided loyalties amongst British South Asians*, a study conducted in 2012. The researchers interviewed several members of two cricket teams from the North, one predominantly white and the other Asian. The quote below highlights the attitudes of the whites towards their Asian counterparts,

> If you're coming into this country, you've got to be seen as an English person by everyone else … Regardless of how long they've [South Asians] been living in

[5] Various immigration acts have been updated from 1948, 1962 and 1981. When the Labour government came to power in 1964 it investigated policies on "integration and immigration control." (Hall. 2002, p.47) Immigration controls were further tightened to allow, "breathing space needed for assimilation." (Hansen cited in Hall. 2002, p.47) "This policy closed the door to British immigration for most Commonwealth members outside the Old (and white) Dominions." (Hayter cited in Hall. 2002, p.48).

> England [,] they haven't changed. They [the men] still wear their dresses [sic] and have big beards and veils and whatever else, and I just feel erm … I know it's their tradition and whatever, but they could make themselves a bit more English. And I think the English would appreciate that as well. There's nothing stopping them sticking on a pair of jeans and just, fitting in. But they don't want to, do they? They don't even support our teams do they? (Fletcher, 2012, p.6)

A BBC poll from 2007 posed the question "Do Asian people need to act and think white, in order to fit in or get on?" (BBC, *Over a third British Asians don't feel British suggests Asian Network poll.* 2007) The results from the BBC Asian Network's Asian Nation poll commissioned by revealed that:

> …among the under-34s, the Asian Network found that 38% of the UK residents of South Asian origin felt only slightly or not at all British (BBC, 2007).

But perhaps surprisingly

> More than a third agreed [that] to get on in the UK they needed to be a 'coconut', a term for somebody who is 'brown on the outside but white on the inside' (BBC, 2007).

Moreover,

> Three-quarters of the British Asians felt their culture was being diluted by living in the UK and nearly half believed white people did not treat them as British (BBC, 2007).

This suggests some degree of ambivalence among British Asians in identifying as British, British Asian, British South Asian, or indeed just Asian.

The opinions of white UK males interviewed for the cricket research are revealing of the persistence of racist thinking rooted in colonialism and empire, and through which borders were erected around Englishness. Belonging to the English nation and of Englishness is generally conflated with whiteness. How English can a South Asian be? This is where my sense of being British, but never English, is founded. British Asians view themselves to be British, but not necessarily English.

It is important to explain here that I do not, and cannot, identify as English, a nationality that is generally equated with being white. The conflation of Englishness and whiteness arises out of immigration debates during the 1970s and 1980s about who could or could not legitimately claim Englishness. Like most black and brown descendants of immigrants, prevalent race discourses and racist practices of that period conditioned me to perceive Englishness as inherently white, a dominant belief still evident among right-wing nationalist groups in the UK.

At the start of a period of mass migration to Britain by people of the then British colonies, in his speech to parliament in 1954, the Minister for Colonial Affairs Henry Hopkins implicitly highlighted

how colonial powers still viewed colonised subjects as the 'other'. In Henry's view, a 'coloured' person should be proud to be 'allowed' to be British and therefore 'allowed' the privilege of entry to the Motherland.

> We still take pride in the fact that a man can say *Civis Britannicus sum* whatever his colour may be, and we take pride in the fact that he wants and can come to the Mother country Henry Hopkins, speech during a parliamentary debate in 1954 (Bevan (1986), cited in Hall, 2002, p.46).

iii. British South Asians and the meanings of diaspora

Here I will be referring to Indian migrants who arrived in Britain in the 20th century.[6] This is the timeframe in which my parents arrived, in the mid-1960s. They are differentiated specifically as twice migrant Kenyan Indians, East African Indians, or direct migrants as Indian or Punjabi Indian. These geographic diasporic anchors are used to fix heritage and origin. As stated earlier, other markers such as religion, caste, class and education are secondary to their heritage and origin stories.

[6] Indians arrived in the UK much earlier than the early part of the twentieth century. The British upper class brought back Indian cooks and ayahs, while the Royalty indulged by adopting "poor little Indian princesses and princes." (Shyllon, 1977, p.122). Having been exiled by the British to England, Maharaja Duleep Singh at the age of ten travelled to London in 1854. Arriving in England he gained a royal audience and was invited to stay with Queen Victoria and her family. (Rana-Allen, 2012, p.19).

As with many other post-WW2 migratory movements of British colonial subjects, South Asian migrants to the UK formed part of a larger ‘desi’ diasporic movement of peoples who left their homelands, in search of better lives around the globe. Many came to the UK intending to return home at some future time, after having improved their economic fortunes. This was the premise of many South Asian, African and African Caribbean migrants to Britain - to gain an education, a job, save sufficient money to secure a good quality of life ‘back home’. The dream did not materialise for many, as Fletcher (2012) states:

> …many of these immigrants never made the mythical return ‘home’ and remained as residents of this country (Fletcher, 2012, p.7).

This is the context in which my father travelled to the UK, for what he envisaged would be a temporary stay, believing that he would one day return ‘home’. Understanding the current situation of South Asian communities has to be understood in the context of diasporic movements. As Fletcher states,

> Understanding diaspora necessitates we understand ‘migrant’ communities as existentially connected to a specific place of origin or an imagined body of people, which extend beyond the current dwelling place (Fletcher, 2012, p.7)

Members of the South Asian diaspora originate from different backgrounds, and,

> … have migrated at different points in time and for different reasons and therefore, how they experience belonging to the diaspora, will also vary (Fletcher, 2012, p.7).

My father's journey to the UK was driven by economic and educational factors alongside family ties; leaving India was the only way he could advance in the world. Had he remained in the Punjab, his dream of higher education would probably not have become a reality. Instead, most likely, he would have accepted his dutiful responsibility for farming his father's land.

In contrast, my mother's diasporic experience was necessitated by fear[7], education and marriage outside of Kenya.

I find the use of the term British Indian more appropriate than British South Asian, which can be limiting, as the following highlights:

> Throughout times of uncertainty and ethnic struggle, one element of their identities galvanises the diaspora: their identification with 'home': In the same way diasporic subjects move beyond national boundaries, the identity 'Indian' has moved beyond national ideologies, thereby challenging the modern linear link between race, nation and culture. For diasporic Indians to keep their place in the world, across time, space, and different experiences of nationality, ethnicity, and 'diasprocity', one variable

[7]Africanisation of Kenya, which led to an exodus.

> remains constant … the use of the word Indian (Madan (2000), cited in Fletcher, 2012, p.8)

Thinking about the identities of diasporic South Asians in Britain invokes Bhabha's (1994) notion of an imaginary third space where hybrid identities exist, with no nationalist ties and non-existent national borders. In this space, identity is under constant construction and reconstruction. This concept is critical to the title of my thesis - "The role of 'the maternal' in the construction of British-Indian female identities amongst women in my matrilineal line" and why the identifiers of British South Asian and British Asian are too broad. Viewed in the contemporary context, the women of my family are not tied to the geographic borders of familial migration, such as India or Kenya or Britain. These countries inform their heritage, but the construction of their hybrid identity is occurring in the third space.

I can relate to belonging to more than one history and one group. My heritage is a blend of direct migrant and twice migrant Sikhs, though their histories and experiences are varied and differ substantively. In addition, I experience the colonial and imperial legacies that have impacted my life: not only as a British woman, but as an Indian woman who carries the trauma within, of the effects of Partition, as experienced by my paternal family.

Research Questions

The aim of this art-based research, through my art practice is to deconstruct the historical stereotyping of the British Indian woman's identity. I will do so through an exploration of the history of the women in my matrilineal lineage and their maternal roles. My enquiry will reassess that

identity, and it is through making artworks in response to the historical narratives of the women in my family, that I aim to answer the following questions:

1. How have different geographic and historical contexts contributed to the development of a distinctly British Indian female identity amongst women in my family?

2. How have maternal roles impacted the formation of that identity in my family?

3. How can my multi-media art practice unearth and piece together the constituting factors in the development of that identity within my family?

As I explore through my artistic practice, the objectives of my research will ascertain the answers to my research questions.

Research Aims

The following chapters that together constitute this thesis draw on my multi-media art practice to investigate the construction of the British Indian female amongst my matrilineal lineage, from an artistic perspective through a black and brown feminist lens.

Research Objectives

The main objectives of my research are to:

1. Document through my artworks how the identities among the women in my family have been

forged by the traumas of empire, migration and patriarchal family hierarchies.

2. Evidence through my personal family history, the lived experiences of Indian diasporic histories, from indentured labour from India to Kenya during the period of the British Raj, and the historical migration to Britain from East Africa.

It is with these questions, aims and objectives in mind that I will draw on my artistic practices and my personal experiences of negotiating the terrains of sexuality, femininity, womanhood, motherhood, artist and researcher, as a woman who embodies Indian heritage, but is culturally British.

The overall objective of this research is to capture the zeitgeist of my life in the UK over the past fifty years. Through my artistic practice, I will investigate the geographical and historical contexts that have contributed to the distinct British Indian female identity amongst women in my family, and the impact of our maternal roles on the formation of that identity.

My experience of dual identity as Indian and British is investigated in the following chapters, where I explore what it means to have an Indian body, yet the cultural conditioning of the West. This allows me to view the world through both a Western and Eastern lens. As Said wrote:

> These circumstances certainly made it possible for me to feel as if I belonged to more than one history and more than one group (Said, 1994, p. xxx).

My maternal history dictates my belonging to histories and groups that span three continents: India, Africa and Europe.

Identifying The Gaps In The Research

This thesis and my accompanying arts practice contribute to the relatively underexplored body of literature concerning the lived experiences of Indian migrants to Britain from East Africa. Specifically, there is a lack of documentation and investigation of these experiences through art practice. There is also limited academic literature on the role of the maternal in shaping British Indian female identity. By analysing existing literature and conducting original research into the construction of identity among women in my matrilineal lineage, I aim to address these gaps. My work offers an original contribution to knowledge by preserving the personal and familial histories of British Asian migrants and situating them within the broader context of global imperial histories, through first-person, lived experiences.

Importance Of The Research

This research contributes to the advancement of knowledge by documenting and critically engaging with my own family's history. This work will form part of the broader literature of Indian diasporic histories, particularly those that have been underrepresented or overlooked in academic and artistic discourses.

Specifically, the research addresses:

1. The complex narratives arising from the history of indentured labour from India to Africa, specifically Kenya during the British Raj.

2. A history of migration from East Africa to Britain.

The importance of my research lies not only in its historical and cultural insights but also in its methodology: using visual artistic practice to explore and represent these narratives. Through the creation of artworks which include filmed home footage, personal letters, unrecorded interviews, and archival materials, my research makes visible the layered impacts of empire, migration, and patriarchal family structures on identity formation, particularly among the women in my family.

By focusing on these personal and familial experiences, my research resonates with other British Indian migrants whose narratives remain under-represented in both historical literature and visual arts. My research expands the field of diasporic studies and visual practice, offering new forms of representation and an understanding of these complex lived histories.

Structure Of Thesis

Chapter 1 outlines my research methodology, studio methods, and my artistic practice, which uses diverse found home footage, photographs, Super 8 footage, and other published and archival materials to create object-based installations, film work, digital prints and paintings. This artistic process parallels my research methodologies, which are based on family history; they are self-reflexive and autoethnographic.

Chapter 2 contextualises my arts-based practice amongst British South Asian female artists working within the contemporary art scene. It is by acknowledging and recognising the various visual practices of these artists that I will reassess the stereotyping of the British Indian female identity. This will enable me to obtain answers to my research questions, particularly how different

geographic and historical contexts contributed to the development of a distinctly British Indian female identity amongst women in my family. I also explore how maternal roles have impacted the formation of that identity in my family. It considers how my multi-media art practice can unearth and piece together the constitutive factors in the development of that identity within my family. I also draw from some theories and concepts from cultural studies and sociology to explain the family histories within my artworks and the intrinsic meanings of these artworks. In particular, I draw on the framework of social reproduction theory to explore how women in my family have constructed identities as British Indian women, and the lasting legacies and impact of capitalism and Empire.

The thesis is chronologically structured by artworks. Chapter 3 presents *Khoon* (2012-20)*,* produced in 2020, a multi-layered film work that explores the histories of women of my maternal family. The film sets the scene for my research into the role of 'the maternal' in the construction of British-Indian identities amongst women in my matrilineal line from 1914 – 2023. *Khoon* interprets the lives of five generations of my matrilineal heritage. It follows their journeys from India in the 1900s to new lives in East Africa between 1914-1962, and finally settling in the UK in the early 1960s. *Khoon* centres the lives of British Indian women subjected to male control by a patriarchal and hierarchical family structure.

Chapter 4 is framed by two artworks – *1947* (2017) and *The Golden Temple* (2017-19) - to reflect on critical historical moments and events in India over three eras: colonial rule, Independence, and Partition. This chapter relates directly to the construction of my British Indian identity, as my paternal family was witness to these events. *1947* focuses on sectarian war and the resultant genocide and sexual atrocities committed on Indian women in the aftermath of the 'messy, hasty,

and clumsily improvised'[8] British departure from India, after inciting tensions between the different religious groups. In the vacuum left by the British, Muslims, Hindus, and Sikhs violently turned against each other as each religious sect sought to gain dominant power over the newly independent state of Pakistan.

The Golden Temple discusses themes of the Indian female body in relation to religion, specifically Sikhism. The overarching objective of this chapter is to scrutinise the colonial and patriarchal control, violation and forced religious divisions between Indian women. There are continuities between the two artworks. *1947* contextualises the horrific sexual violence against women as the warring factions also sought to control women's bodies, while *The Golden Temple* expands upon the ongoing impact of religious male dominance over women's lives.

Chapter 5 discusses the sculptural textile installation *10cm Holes* (2017-18) and the body of work *Seven Years of This* (2015-18)*,* artworks I created to examine the impact of the maternal on the construction of the identity of the women in my family. Through my visceral and physical experiences. These artworks situate motherhood as their focus. The first artwork, *10cm Holes,* highlights discourses about the maternal, more specifically as they have informed my maternal heritage. This artwork illuminates how these discourses shaped the respective histories of my Great Grandmother, Grandmother and Mother. Here, I analyse and account for variations in their mothering, the familial domestic roles, against a backdrop of social rules and restrictions enforced upon them by a religious patriarchal society.

[8] https://www.newyorker.com/magazine/2015/06/29/the-great-divide-books-dalrymple

The second artwork, *Seven Years of This,* represents my journey as a British Indian mother in contemporary society. This artwork is a reflective piece, looking back at a time when my son's ill health led me to think deeply about my role as a mother, and the effect on my psyche and sense of self of mothering a chronically ill child. I question decisions that I, as his mother, subsequently made during that period. *Seven Years of This* assesses the evolution of my experience of Indian motherhood in Britain.

Chapter 6, *Ika Kilo (One Kilo)* (2019) and *Killer Queen* (2019) are the last artworks I produced during my residency in Rome in 2019. I wanted to explore mythology and the categorisation of women in society according to their prescribed roles by patriarchy. Together, they explore female sexuality through song, dance and myth. Indian women are stereotyped by society as a virginal daughter, nurturing mother or ageing matriarch. She is either orientalised by the coloniser or demonised by Indian patriarchal males if she reveals herself as an autonomous sexual being. The two artworks disrupt this perception, and instead reveal Indian women's sexuality.

Killer Queen was inspired by the true-life story of my Great Aunt, which I read through the prism of the mythology of Medusa. It discusses a particular global societal perception of the dark-haired brown skinned woman as the evil other who asserts autonomy, challenges and rejects stereotypical conventions of her dictated identity. She faces being othered and or ostracised from her community. I explore the similarities between Medusa and my Great Aunt who both break the normative conventions of womanhood in the face of sexual violence.

In this introduction, I have outlined the aims of my research and the key questions it seeks to address through its objectives. One of these is to explore the construction of British Indian

women’s identity among the women in my family, and the impact of the maternal in the construction of that distinct identity, through my art practice. I have also provided a rationale for the term ‘British Indian’ and explained its contested use.

The following chapter will detail my research methodology and studio practices, illustrating how these approaches enable me to explore the central research questions. Specifically, my inquiry will focus on whether my art practice can uncover and piece together the various factors—historical, geographical, and social—that have shaped the development of a British Indian female identity within my family. I will also investigate how maternal roles have influenced the formation of this identity among the women in my family.

Chapter 1

Research Methodology and Studio Methods

This chapter will highlight the interplay between my research methodology and studio methods, illustrating how these approaches enable me to explore the central research questions. Specifically, focusing on whether my art practice can uncover and piece together the various factors—historical, geographical, and social—that have shaped the development of a British Indian female identity within my family. I will also investigate how maternal roles have influenced the formation of this identity among the women in my family. The chapter is in two sections. The first part addresses the methodologies I employ to investigate my family history such as self-reflexive and auto-ethnography. Some theories and concepts from cultural studies and sociology help to explain the histories being discussed. The second part of the chapter documents my artistic practice and the studio methods, which engages self autodriving, found home footage, photographs, super 8 footage and other published and archival material to create object-based installations, film work, digital prints and paintings.

Part 1 Research methodology

I begin by highlighting the difference between artistic practice methods and research methodology. This is important for understanding how my research methods are translated into practice.

> Creativity takes many forms and contributes to empirical studies in a multitude of ways. Gauntlett in his book ‘Creative Explorations’ outlines the nature of creativity and draws on the philosophy of science and what counts as evidence to

> substantiate applying creative methods within a social science framework to generate knowledge about people's identity and social experience (Prosser, 2008, p.33).

I have always had an interest in social science, part of me observes the social interactions in society and I am an avid people watcher. What tends to initiate my artistic response to an occurrence usually begins with a story, an experience, or a conversation. As an artist I initially respond to a narrative through experiencing the following: respond, discuss, react, experience, feel, create, critique, reflect, respond, articulate, discourse, disseminate, listen and recreate. These 'methods'[9] occur instinctively and subconsciously at first. As the work progresses and develops, a consciousness emerges that enables me to envisage the end piece. The area of visual art can be seen to parallel and complement the social sciences, "one text-based, the other visual, one data-based, and the other sense-based. The visual opens a window to the experience of the world using intuition, emotion, sensation and reason" (Copeland. 2013, p.4). My studio practice is the visual and sensory interpretation of the social data I collect. The research methodology in the studio involves combining the creative practice to form a "synthesis of the different strands of information gathered." (Taylor. 2016, n.p).

Other artists have also explored these parallel and complementary methods of the visual and the social sciences in their research, such as (Awan, 2008; Carr, 2015; Connelly, 2015; Copland, 2013; Hart, 2013; Buttigieg & Lawrence, 2014; Park, 2015; Photiou, 2013; Choy, 2016); and (Manchester, 2016). The data is usually presented through personal experience; this could be a

[9] I call them methods as they form my studio methods, they can also be referred to as experiences, responses, or contexts.

narrative, photograph, personal diary etc. Most of my practice and research is usually instigated by an archival family photograph or a 'story' that is relayed to me. As an artist this instigates a thought process of visual or mental interpretation of that photographic evidence or story. It may seem obvious, but as a starting point visual documentation can be one of the best triggers for responding to a narrative. After all, we are creating a visual piece.

Self autodriving

A noteworthy aspect of my research methodology is the use of archival material, photographic and journaled. It is these materials that have created my own version of autodriving.[10] Clark originally developed the photographic interviewing technique of Autodriving[11] where he involves participants and their responses by using photographs selected by the interviewees themselves,

> These visual representations become part of the interview itself and allow respondents to self-select relevant events from their own lives and illustrate these events with photographs. Through this process, autodriving helps ensure that the interview includes topics relevant to the child (Clark, cited in Prosser. 2008, p.22)

[10] My method of autodriving is a process I have developed, a different use of photographs to that of Clark.

[11] By using autodriving Clark in his work in 1999, ensures that the participants do not feel inhibited. They have a visual focus that helps them to relate their experiences, narratives and anecdotes with ease. The discussions are 'driven' by the participants, and this helps them to feel that they are in control of what is being discussed. Prosser goes on to suggest that by, "Using respondent's images can arguably empower respondents in interviews since the interviewees own the data in multiple ways which encourages shared recall and promotes a shared and possibly egalitarian activity". (Prosser. 2008, p.22).

Through my adaptation of the technique, I elicit thoughts, conversations and creativity from the materials. I have managed to appropriate this specific research method for my artistic practice. I call this 'self' autodriving, this triggers my own responses to the archival material.

Methodological synergy: autoethnography and self autodriving

This research adopts an autoethnographic approach, using lived experience as a form of cultural inquiry to examine how identity, memory and place intersect within diasporic narratives.[12] As the self autodriving technique shifts the focus inward, using archival material to trigger my own reflexive responses. Utilising an autoethnographic lens ensures these personal reflections are not merely anecdotal but serve as primary data for cultural analysis. As Adams et al. (2021) observe, autoethnography is a method that "uses a researcher's personal experience to describe and critique cultural beliefs, practices, and experiences," (Adams et al, 2021, p. 1) thereby providing the necessary framework to transform my self-driven insights into a broader socio-cultural evaluation.

Processes and methods

Borgdoff (2012) is useful to explain my processes and methods. As Borgdorff explains,

> Artistic research does not have any one distinct, exclusive methodology. But there is one qualifying condition: artistic research centres on the practice of making and playing. Practising the arts (creating, designing, performing) is intrinsic to the

[12] "Autoethnography is an approach to research and writing that seeks to describe and systematically analyze personal experience in order to understand cultural experience." (Ellis, Adams and Bochner, 2011).

> research process. And artworks and art practices are partly the material outcomes of the research. That is what 'material thinking' means. (Borgdorff, 2012, p.123).

It could be argued that the 'practising' allows for failure in the process; failure at certain moments in the practising can initiate new branches of trying, and can lead to new thinking regarding the practice. It allows the artist time to reflect and reassess what the practice means. This can have positive effects on the final artefacts. In terms of these skills, it is the intrinsic 'knowing' of the practice in the studio that will in turn inform the 'knowledge' of the theory. They are interlinked and overlap. Prosser (2008) calls this art *"Praxis".* He goes further to explain that the practice-based PhD thesis as: "PaR[13] are as richly labyrinthine as many accounts suggest, 'clew' is subtly distinct from 'clue' in specifically drawing attention to the thread of the researcher's doing - thinking articulated in complementary documentation and writings." (Prosser (2008), cited in Nelson, 2013, p.11).

The theory is not there as a substitute for the practice, neither is it an explanation of the studio practice or artefact produced. It is there to shine a light on the artist's 'knowing'.

The nature of a PaR PhD lends itself to a "' praxis' intended to denote the possibility of thought within both 'theory' and 'practice' in an iterative process of 'doing - reflecting-reading-articulating-doing" (Nelson, 2013, p.32). These are the processes I utilise in my art making and research.

[13] PaR: Practice as Research.

Upon reflection, I find I need validation as an artist. Constant evaluation of my making methods and research methodologies originates from my becoming an artist after being a graphic designer - perhaps the effects of imposter syndrome. As a designer, I constantly justify the creativity to 'sell' it to the client, and my process and thinking have been conditioned to this model. In my mind, therefore, my practice needs justification and validation as there is self-doubt in the 'knowing', if the practice is worthy and legitimate to be rewarded with the title of 'artwork'. I will now move on to my studio methods.

Part 2 Studio methods

The following section will discuss the typography and materials that I incorporate into my practice. The first part concentrates on the text and how it is translated, adding another dimension to my artworks. The text has the quality of the seen yet unseen, as at times the text is only just legible and visible. It does not shout but has an illustrative silence that weaves a narrative by synthesising the materials in the artworks.

This section will give an insight into some of the materials I use, which range from bindis[14], red tape, faux leather, greaseproof paper, lining paper, thread, prandis[15], steel rings and wooden frames, to name a few. I will discuss the interpretation and re-presentation of some of these materials within my practice. I have selected artworks purely to illustrate their relevance to my studio methods. These artworks also highlight the discourses relevant to my research around

[14] Bindi is the term for the self-adhesive dot worn by Indian women, denoting marriage. Worn on the forehead the bindi also wards of evil spirits as it is recognised as the third eye.

[15] Prandi is the hair extension India women wear, they are woven into the real hair and come in various colours. Often worn for the woman's marriage ceremony.

sexuality, oppression, violence and racism faced by the brown female. These conversations constitute the basis of my inquiry into how British Indian women's identity is constructed specific to the matrilineal women in my family, and the relevance of the maternal.

Text and self-briefing

I begin by exploring the text in my practice, because it plays a significant role in initiating the conceptualisation and inspiration for many of my artworks.

I graduated from Norwich School of Art with a BA Hons in Graphic Design in 1992. I spent many years in the design industry examining text, through font, size, colour, legibility, shape, form, spacing, handwriting, metal type, print and digital text.

My fascination with text originates from my training as a designer. Figs.1, 2 and 3 are examples of how my typographic design and layout skills have interplayed with my artistic making. All design projects start with a brief, sent from the client to an account executive to the design team. I have, as an artist, formulated a practice I call ‘self-briefing’ which has become an innate part of my art practice. The brief is usually words, randomly written on a large scroll of paper, arrows and lines connecting words, ideas and contexts (Fig.4). The word diagram formulates a beginning to all my art. This allows my mind to have an outpouring of thoughts that would otherwise be confined within my head. I feel an anxiety that I may forget or omit an important detail, therefore seeing them written in large handwriting, hung from the studio wall, the words are a constant reminder of what I want to make, how I will make it and how it interplays with my visual piece. My anxiety stems from the ‘answering of a brief’, making sure I have covered all the bases, so that I

can reflectively contextualise the art verbally later. At this stage of the artistic process, all is consciously in order.

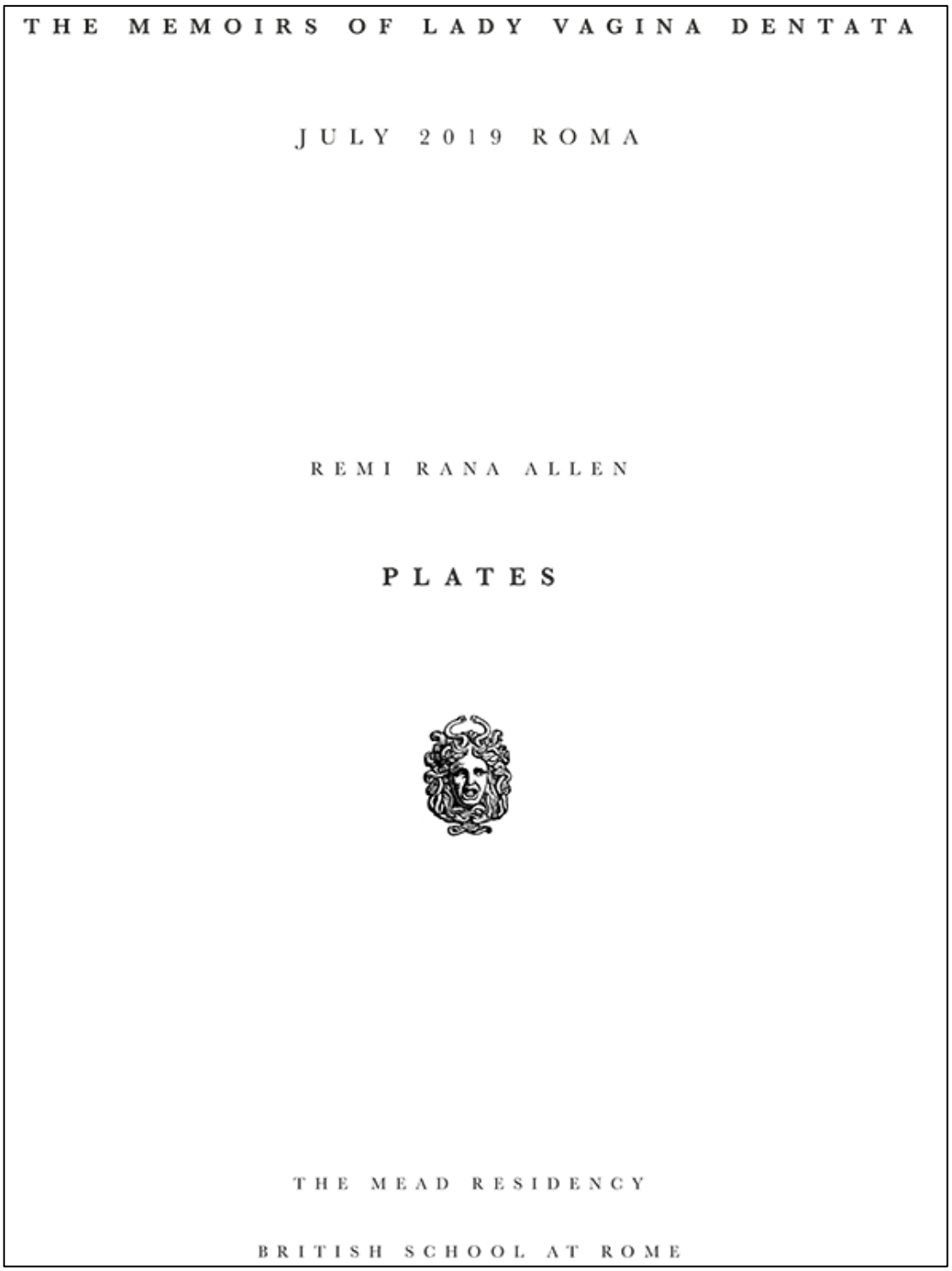


Fig.1 Remi Rana Allen. *The Memoirs of Lady Vagina Dentata* (2019). Paper and ink. Installation.

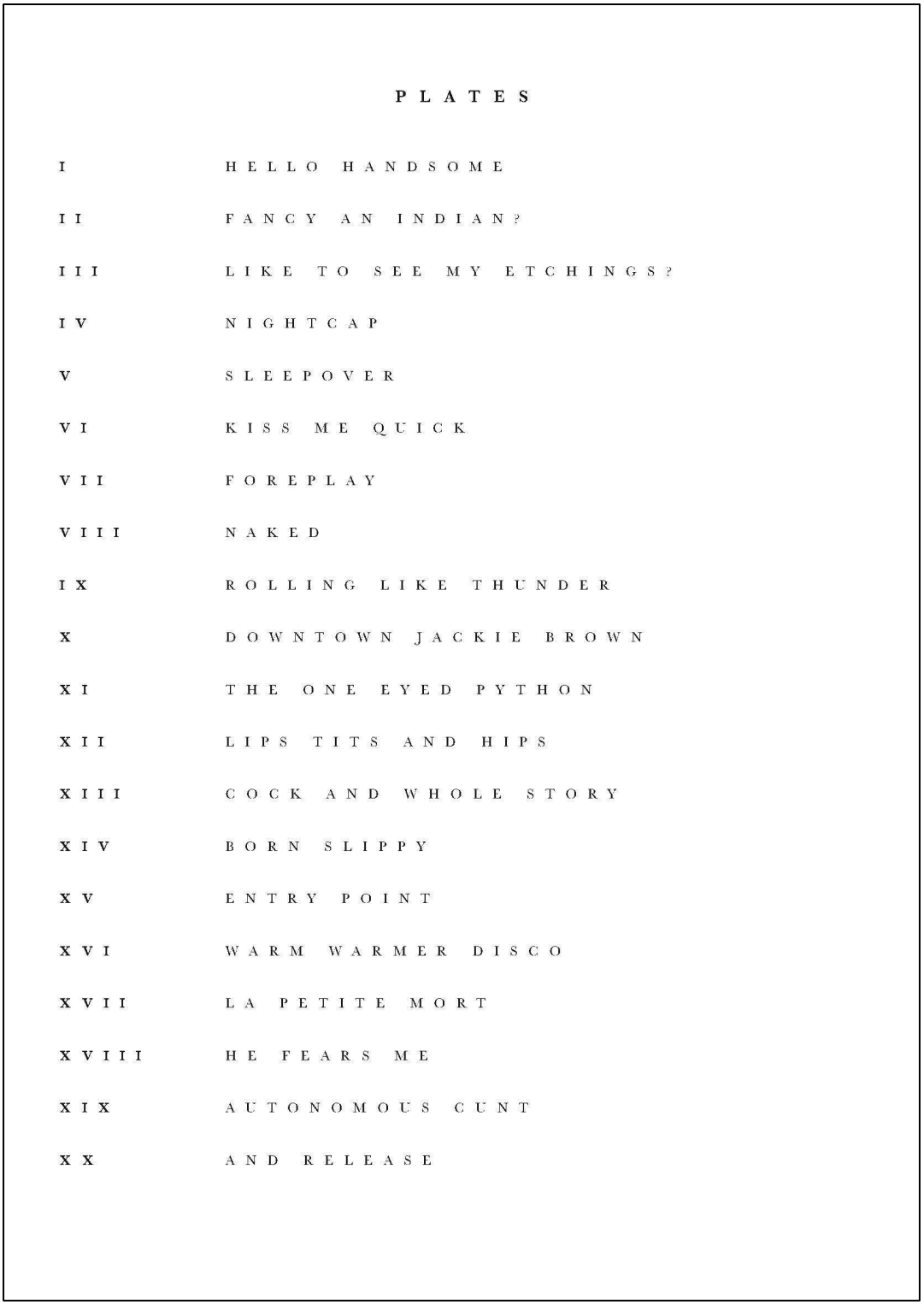


Fig.2 Remi Rana Allen. *The Memoirs of Lady Vagina Dentata* (2019). Installation.

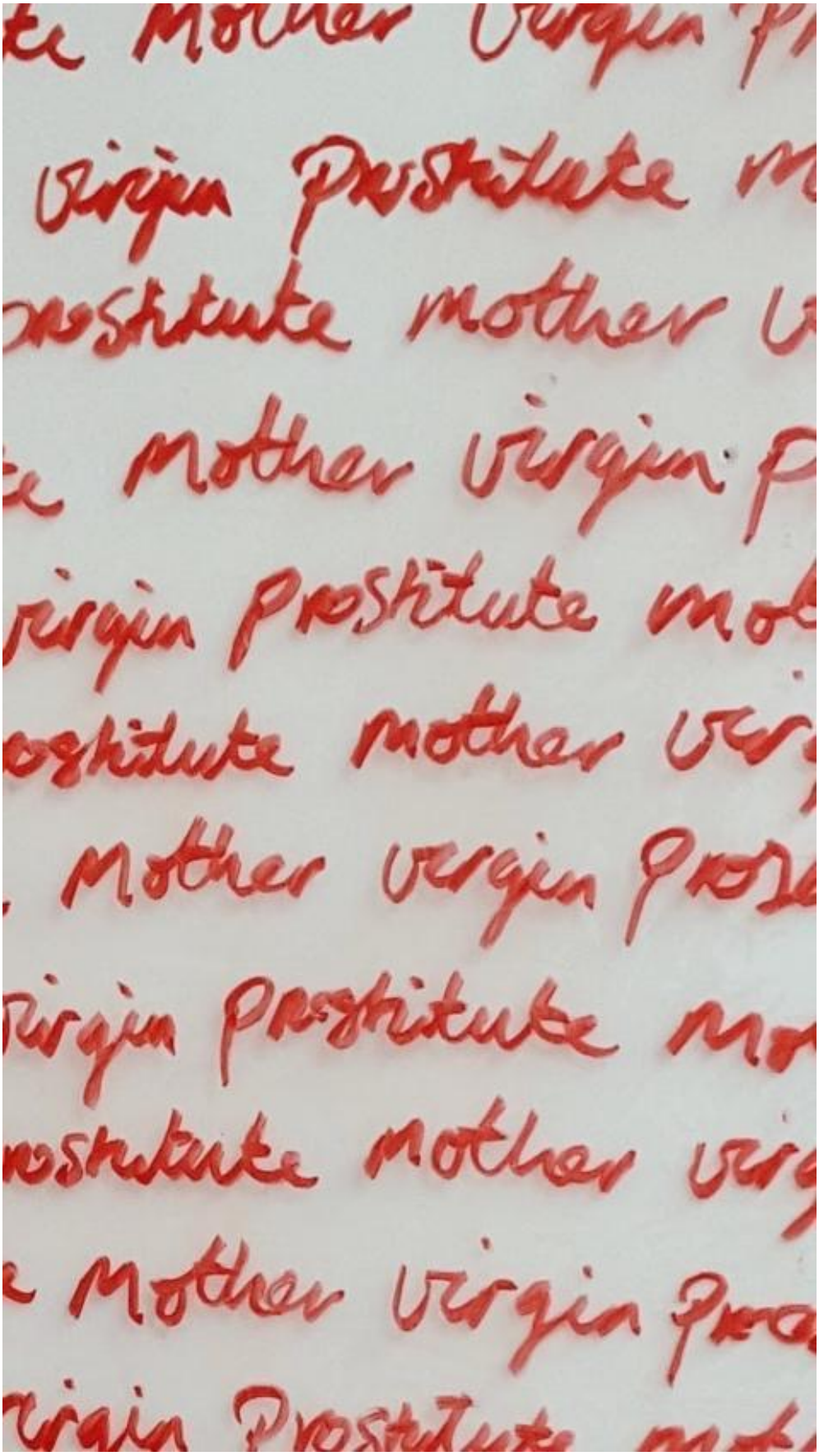


Fig.3 Example of text in artwork. Detail from *The HoleE Trinity* (2019). Acetate and marker.

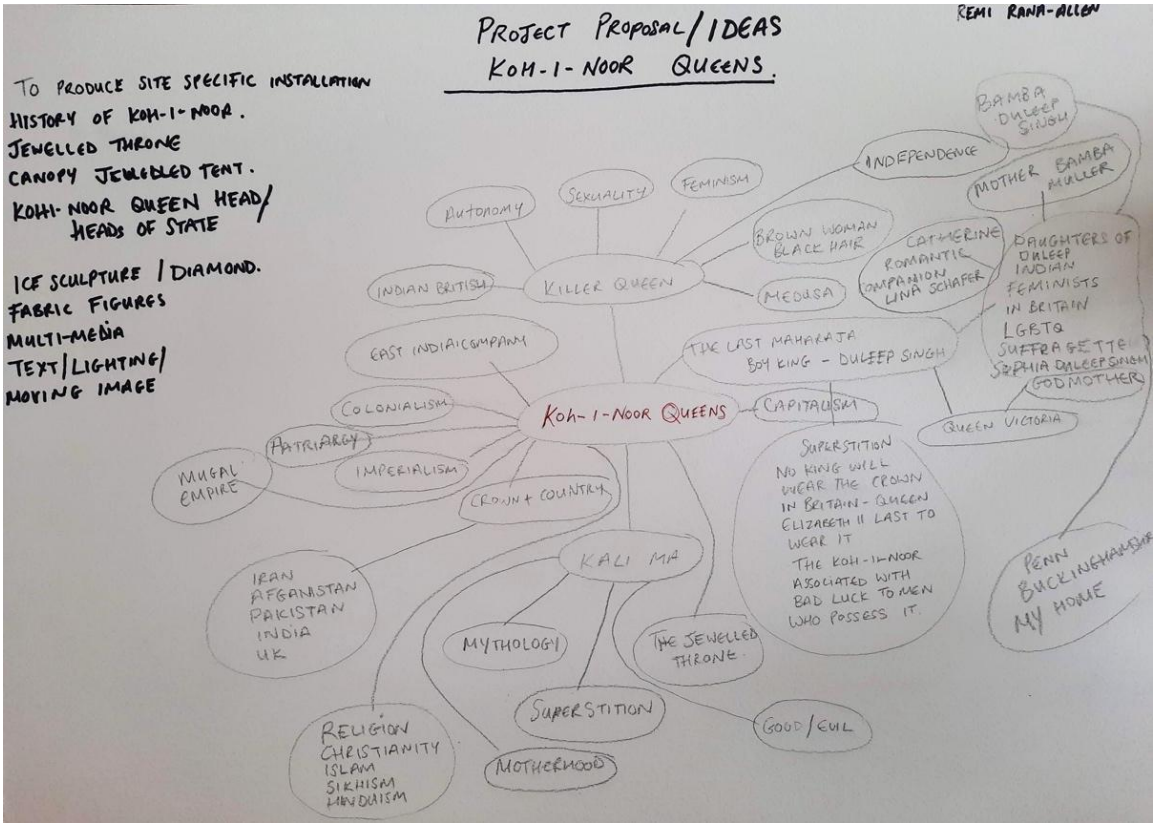


Fig.4 Example of Mind map – creating a self-brief (2022).

The self-brief is inspired by researching the themes I am interested in, about what I will make. I undertake a period of reading and visual investigation of the subject matter before making. I collect visual material online through screenshots or photography in person via gallery, museum and site visits (Fig.5). Together they are combined with written texts, documents, articles, journals, poems, memories, etc, acting as a sketchbook for inspiration. The next stage of my process is to formulate a shorthand version of the material that I can refer to instantly. This is where the material is presented through a word or phrase, and it appears on my mind map. Once the mind-map is hung in the studio, I begin to experiment with materials and various processes (Fig.6).

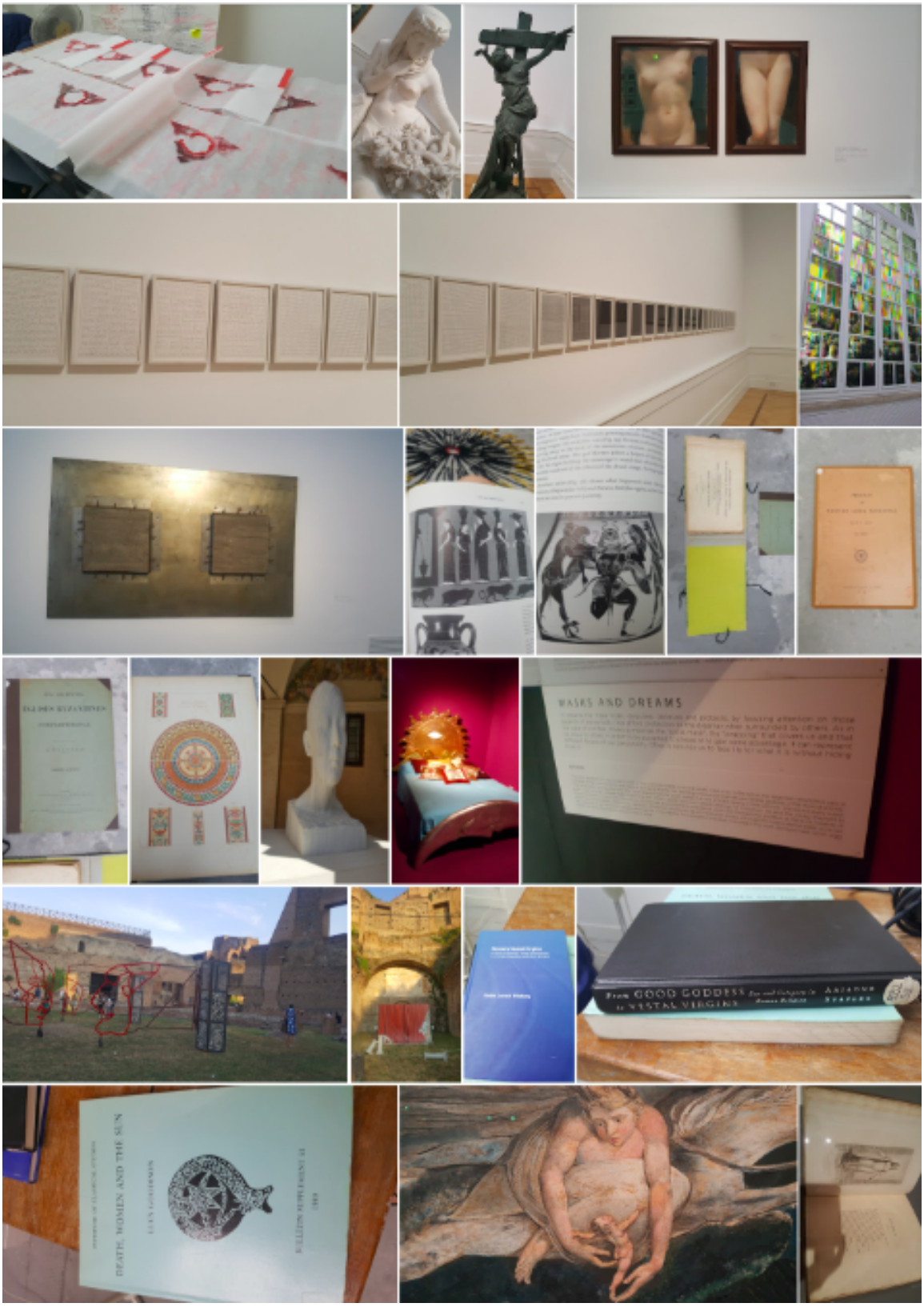


Fig.5 Example of collecting research material for creating a self-brief (2019).



Fig.6 Example of experimenting and testing materials and processes (2019).

Language matters

The words that create the self-brief and the words that follow on the actual artworks are always in English. I think in English, and English is my first language; therefore, using English words in my practice is a straightforward process. I can speak Punjabi, I can understand Punjabi, Hindi and Urdu, but I cannot read or write in any of these – they are to me foreign languages. These languages are not my mother tongue.

The English language in this process becomes ‘self’, and the three languages most widely spoken by Indians become the ‘other’. This creates a tension within me. I have become a product of the remains of British rule and colonialism in India. The English in my mind, my thoughts, identifies me as British, because of my birthplace and my accent, Occident. But my brown skin identifies me as the ‘other’, an Oriental. This hybrid of linguistic and visual is what my artistic practice constantly explores, English by word, Indian by sight.

“We have to educate a people who cannot at present be educated by means of their mother-tongue. We must teach them some foreign language” (Macaulay, 1835, n.p). Macaulay’s infamous paper ‘Minute on Education’ released on 2nd February 1835, changed a nation. His speech was delivered in the British Parliament and written for Lord William Bentinck, the governor general of British India. It influenced generations to come. Hindi is the mother tongue that Macaulay referred to. He acknowledged that English is a foreign language to Hindi speakers, so therefore ‘they’ - the colonisers -must be foreigners in a foreign country. Colonial thinking straddles ‘their’ reality and ‘the’ reality. By this I mean that when it suits the colonialist’s reality, he is the ruler, the educator, the economist, the politician. The colonialist is aware that he is the invader; he is the silencer, the pillager, the oppressor. Macaulay further states, “A class of persons Indian in blood and colour, but English in tastes, in opinions, in morals and in intellect,” are to be chosen to teach English. “…of all foreign tongues, the English tongue is that which would be the most useful to our native subjects.” (Macaulay, 1835, n.p).

How uncanny that Macaulay could so presciently be talking about future generations – not those in India, but second and third generation British Indians in the UK.[16] These generations are of Indian blood and colour, but British, in opinions, intellect and morals. Not only do they have a mother tongue that *was* once foreign to Indians, but they also find that their original mother tongues are *now* foreign.

[16] This section of the was written in 2019, with hindsight my research has highlighted through a ‘knowing’ that the British Indian identity would demand to be seen and heard in the future. The selection by the Conservative government in 2022 of Rishi Sunak as Prime Minister, is an example of the Indian, who has quite literally taken on the words of Macaulay, at the expense of rejecting his Brownness. The coloniser and imperialist emerge in a neo guise.

A prevalent belief would be that as I was born in England, I would automatically speak English. I argue that had it not been for the introduction of laws in India that dictated that English alone should be the language of instruction in schools and universities, that there could have been a stronger will among diasporic Indians to maintain their mother tongues, for future generations of Indians, across national borders. This is one of the impacts of colonialism, by enforcing a language on a nation, it subsequently removes one significant element of its cultural identity.

I use words in my art practice to make a political statement, or to narrate a story about the past. The words I select are either hand-written or digitally set, depending on the nature of the piece. The politicisation of the brown woman is my intention, to give her a contemporary visibility that breaks the stereotypical image that has been previously constructed through orientalist discourse. The journey consists of conceptualisation, creation, and exhibition – as the artist, the installation of the artwork is where the translation or mistranslation of the text by the viewer is determined. What do they see in the text? What do they read in the text? What is their interpretation of the text? What translation have they made of the words?

The translation is an important aspect for me. This is the point where the words can be read or misread, leading to an entirely different interpretation of the art piece than perhaps my intention as the artist. Translation is also converting something from one medium into another. My practice and research are based on identities in translation – I understand this to be an organic growth of an identity as it transmutes from one state into another in relation to its environment. Identities in translation can also be regarded as another person's translation of self.

The Hindu tradition of Sati[17] also known as widow burning, is a good example of how the British outlawed a religious practice in 1829, which they deemed an integral part of Hindu society and identity.

> …redefining ritual not merely as superstition, but as crime. It is chiefly for this reason that the widows in the Sati texts, all of which are written from a Western perspective, are portrayed as victims of an inhumane, religious, offence […] within the discourse of the Sati, women are represented in two mutually exclusive ways: as heroines able to withstand the raging blaze of the funeral pyre or else as pathetic victims coerced against their will into the flames (Ross. 2009-10, p.386).

The practice of Sati in traditional Hinduism referred to a voluntary practice of suicide where a widow would join the funeral pyre of her deceased husband. As an example of identities in translation, I draw on Spivak's (1985) essay *Can the Subaltern Speak?.* Writing about the deliberate mistranslation of the Sati names into English by Charles Hervey, the British General, and the praise he received from Edward Thompson (1928), author of the book 'Suttee'[18] , Spivak comments on how

> …Hervey has a passage which brings out the pity of a system which only looked for prettiness and constancy in a woman (Spivak, 1985, p.36).

[17] Sati, meaning 'good wife' or 'fidelity'.

[18] Suttee the British translation of the Sanskrit Sati.

This engineered a lie that misrepresented the meaning and practice of a Sati. It effectively created the grounds white colonial males justified their ‘mission’ to rescue brown women from brown men, thus claiming to have dealt with the ‘problem’ of the Sati. Not only do I take issue with the British colonial lies that allow them to subjugate a race, culture and belief system, but what is also problematic is the orientalising of the Indian woman. Mirza (1997) highlights Spivak’s (1985) critique of the language used by Hervey, for example “prettiness and constancy in a woman” (Mirza, 1997, p.6), and states this objectifies, sexualises, racialises and oppresses Indian women. She becomes

> …the sexually available exotic other […] She is without agency, without self-determination, a passive victim, waiting to be inscribed with meaning from those who wish to gaze upon her and name her. She is an object, not the subject of her story. (Mirza, 1997, p.6).

The names given to the Sati by the British are translated into nouns that portray an image of the Sati as the soft, gentle, fragile female who knows not what she does, but must accede to a patriarchal system that has been forced upon her. Names such as, “Ray Queen, Sun-ray, Love’s Delight, Garland, Virtue Found, Echo, Soft Eye, Comfort, Moonbeam, Love-lorn, Dear Heart, Eye-play, Arbour-born, Smile, Love-bud, Glad Omen, Mist-clad or Cloud-sprung” (Spivak, 1985, p.36). I have attempted to translate some of these nouns back into what could have been names for the Sati. Unfortunately, it is virtually impossible to do, as language does not exist in Hindi for some of the words.

To test my research, I produced *God Bless Apna Ghar*.[19] (2011) Fig.7, which is an example of how my art is inspired by writing. Here I used Spivak's attempts at the translation of the Sati names and her translation of the Swastika – which I find interesting because she has suddenly introduced a visual symbol into her argument of mistranslation. Spivak takes the word 'Comfort' – perhaps translatable as 'Shanti' or "…was it 'Swasti'? The Brahmanic ritual mark of domestic comfort stereotyped into a criminal parody of Aryan hegemony." (Spivak. 1985, p.37) How interesting that a word and a symbol can be mistranslated into a word and a symbol bringing such a tremendous and a detrimental twist to its true meaning of comfort and domesticity. Thus, the innocent 'name/symbol' has deceitfully been translated to appeal to the western public. Referring to the mistranslation of the names for a Sati, as Said (1978) writes, these names "construct a certain picture of the Oriental woman through the supposed 'objectivity' of translation, then to sociological exactitude" (Said (1978), cited in Spivak, 1985, p.37).

Fig.8 is a detail from *1947* (2017), a piece I created protesting against the violent acts perpetrated on women during the partition of India in 1947. I cite this artwork here as another example of text within my art. *1947* will be discussed fully in chapter four.

The Cunt word as text in artworks

The word Cunt appears in three of my artworks: *1947* (2017)*, Kum Kum Lotus* and *Black Lotus* (2017-18). I wanted to investigate the taboos linked to the word. Although Cunt Art dates to the 1970s, this is an under explored area by British South Asian women artists. This area of art is relevant to my practice in relation to the maternal – specifically childbirth which is explored

[19] Apna Ghar translation Our Home.

through my artwork *10cm Holes* (2017-18) in chapter five. The word itself is associated with the goddess Kunthi. This was my opportunity as an artist to break taboos and the stereotype of the 'good' Indian woman by applying the word cunt to my artworks.

One way in which I felt that I could apply the word was through my artwork *1947.* Rather than be obvious in the application of the word, I decided to explore the theme of "Covert Visibility" (Rees, 2013, p.31). The seen yet unseen, the read yet unread, the interpretation and misinterpretation. The concept for *1947* was to collate all the derogatory descriptors for the word Cunt, a word used to refer to female genitals, "referring to the vulva, labia, vagina and clitoris" (Rees, 2013, p.7). In contrast, the term vagina is commonly misused as encompassing the whole of the female genitals. The word does not appear on the artwork (the unseen), instead the synonyms collated from the Urban Dictionary are printed (the seen).

The history and etymology of the word cunt has been contested due to the word being so old. "…there's evidence it was used throughout the ancient East and West—and not as a pejorative […] *kunthi* referred to female genitalia in sanskrit. A Hindu nature goddess bore the name Kunti[20] as well." (Livni, 2017, n.p). I think this is a viable assumption of one of the origins of the word, in Dalrymple and Anand's (2017) book which offers a historical account of the *Koh-I-Noor*, a text from 6 April 1739,

[20] The Hindu Goddess Kunti, or great "Yoni of the Universe," represented the beauty and power of the female body in Mahabharata a major Sanskrit epic of ancient India [...] Not only did Yoni lead a powerful matriarchy that rivals the discourse of contemporary gender politics, but she encompassed life *itself;* she was worshiped at hundreds of shrines across the ancient Eastern world. (Moriarty. 2018, n.p).

…she is alleged to have replied that if she had slept with Nadar, or gone off with him to Persia, 'I should feel as if the flower of my cunt had been complicit with his massacres.' (Pritchard (n.d), cited in Dalrymple and Anand, 2017, p.80).[21]

The word cunt is of Germanic origin, from the Norwegian and Swedish dialect Kunta, and Danish dialect Kunte.[22] In terms of,

> …medieval England, the word cunt wasn't totally taboo. It first appeared in the Oxford English Dictionary in 1230. As recently as the 1400s, there were even about 20 "Gropecunt Lanes" in the country; that was a practical description of what might be obtained in these red-light districts. (Livni, 2017, n.p).

The word also has associations with Christianity and the demonising of female sexuality;

> In the Middle Ages, Christian clergymen preached the idea of a woman's genitals as a potent source of evil, referring to the "Cunnus Diaboli," meaning "Devilish Cunt." […] Shrines across South Asia depicting any reference to the Goddess Kunti were also destroyed; they were deemed grotesque and blasphemous. (Moriarty, 2018, n.p).

[21] Translated by H.G. Pritchard from Abd ol-Karim, Kashmiri, *Bayan-e-Waqe*. (Dalrymple and Anand. 2017, p.291).

[22] The word has since evolved from the Old Norse "kunta" referring to vulvas, with many variations existing in other Germanic and Scandinavian languages, including the Danish "kunte" and the modern use of "kont" in Dutch, meaning "buttocks." (Moriarty. 2018, n.p).

The word cunt as Greer in the 1970s “set about rehabilitating” (Rees, 2013, p.7) suggests

> …there’s something inherent in the sound of the word ‘cunt’ that conveys most forcibly the power of women’s genitals in a way that ‘vagina’ simply cannot […]’cunt’ Greer argues “demands to be taken seriously.” (Rees, 2013, p.7).

These derogatory phrases used “commonly mostly by men” (Rees,2013, p.21) are reminiscent of the misinterpretation of the Sati names in Spivak’s (1985) essay *Can the Subaltern Speak?*. I wanted to set the words digitally, beautifully, unpunctuated so they read as, names, old verse or even poetry. I decided to use the Baskerville Old Face Regular set in 40pt, leaded over 57pt.

The first column was ranged right, and the second column ranged left, forming a narrow slit between the two. The font was designed by John Baskerville (1706–75), a Japanner, letter cutter and printmaker. (Figs.9 and 9a). From 1758-1763 he worked on his most renowned printed books, the Bible and the Book of Common Prayer (Cambridge Library Collection. 2014). The juxtaposition of the sacred (Baskerville) and the blasphemous language I felt gave *1947* a covert visibility that represented the war between three religious groups using rape and female mutilation as weapons.

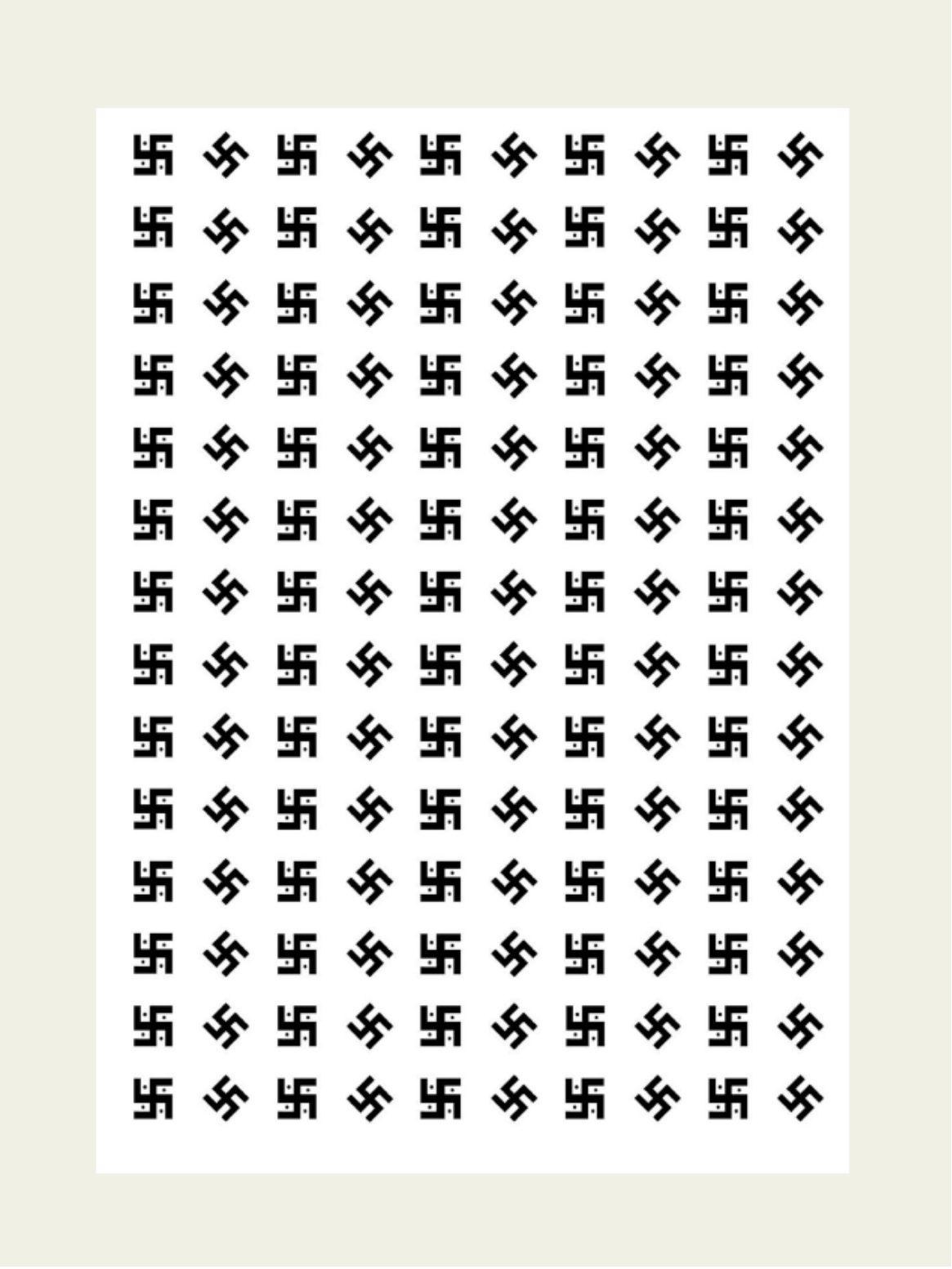


Fig.7 Remi Rana Allen. *God Bless Apna Ghar*. Screen print (2011).



Fig.8 Remi Rana Allen. *1947* artwork for digital print (2018).

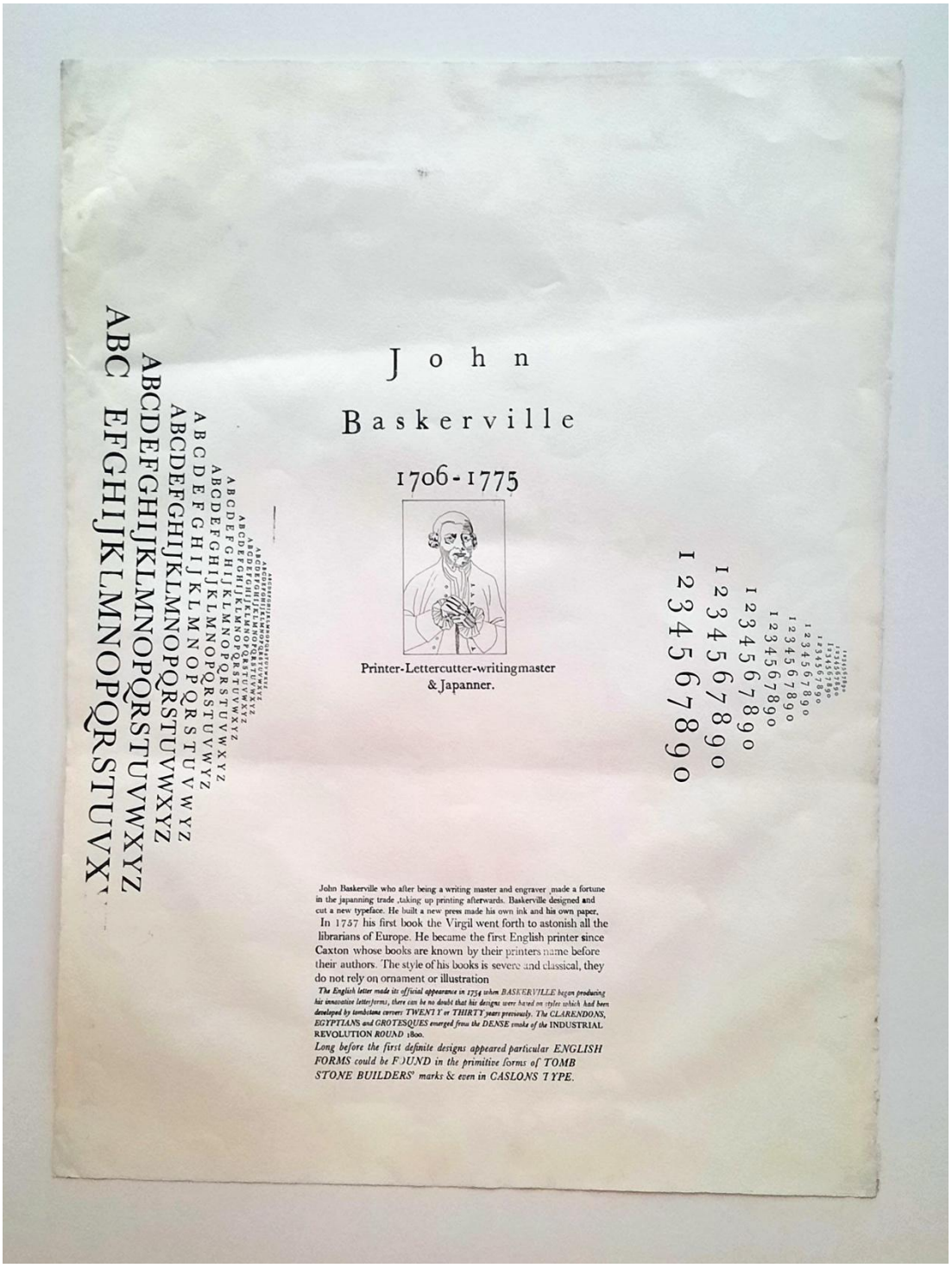


Fig.9 Remi Rana Allen. Example of Baskerville typeface. Screen print. (1990).



Fig.9a Remi Rana Allen. *1947*. Detail of artwork for digital print (2018).

My plan was to take a powerful taboo word and its various expletives and make them visible. In plain sight, open, legible and unapologetic. “Taboo words can trigger a physical response in us” (Allan and Burridge (2006), cited in Rees, 2013, p.8). Even when the word is not actually used “the ‘torpedo’ effect can still be manifest” (Rees, 2013, p.8). I wanted to create a physical response in the viewer that perhaps evoked embarrassment, shame, a feeling of uncomfortableness as they read the monologue of phrases.

The disrespectful words juxtaposed with the narrative of the violence inflicted upon the South Asian woman in 1947 were intended to provide a voice, agency and visibility to the Indian female identity. The Indian woman’s identity occupies a space intersecting,

> the margins of race, gender and class discourse and occupies the empty spaces in between, exists in a vacuum of erasure and contradiction. It is a space maintained by polarization of the world into blacks on one side and women on the other (Mirza. 1997, p.4).

As a brown woman I relate to,

> Black British feminists reveal(ing) other ways of knowing that challenge the normative discourse. In our particular world shaped by processes of migration, nationalism, racism, popular culture and the media […] reveal the distorted ways in which the dominant groups construct their assumptions […] from our space of unlocation” (Mirza,1997, p.5).

By embodying the Indian female identity, I create political pieces using generational experienced narratives, to relay my inherited knowledge of diaspora, through being British, brown, female and Indian. This is with the aim of comprehending how the British Indian female identity is constructed.

Another two artworks that are text based, aligning with the theme of covert visibility, utilising the word cunt[23] are *Kum Kum Lotus*[24] and *Black Lotus* (2017-18). Here the word has been handwritten repetitively. Cunt art (1968-1974) has been explored by artists in the past, but where I place this within my practice, is by connecting the profanity with taboos within South Asian culture relating to the discussion of the female genitals. I, as a British Indian woman artist, want to break these taboos through my art practice. The phrases “You Cunt”, “Cunt” and “My Cunt” form the backdrop to the bindis and jewels that create the image of a lotus flower. These six canvases attempt an ownership and reclamation of the word, a word that would not normally be associated with Indian women.

It is precisely in this context that I used this word, to break away from the stereotype and the perception of the image of the Indian woman. In essence, I see this as a form of liberating my contemporary British Indian female identity. The repetitive writing of the taboo word ultimately led to cunt(s) invisibility. It became a scrawl, a pattern, an image, a re-presentation.

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[23] The concept of Cunt Art has been explored by artists previously, they have included: Judy Chicago, *The Dinner Party* (1979). Morag Myerscough, *Has anyone seen Mike Hunt?* (2004). Georgia O’ Keefe’s Flower paintings. Hannah Wilke, *S.O.S Stratification Object Series* (1974-1982). Marlene McCarty, *CUNT* (1990). Harmony Hammond, *Empress* (1979). Julia Kunin, *Crimson Blossom* (1999). Carolee Schneemann *Interior Scroll* (1975) Georgina Johnson founder of Laundry Service curated the exhibition *Cunt* (2017) which included artists from the Global Ethnic Majority.

[24] Kum Kum is an alternative name for a bindi, consisting of powder or liquid instead of a self-adhesive Bindi.

I use the ‘C’ word in *Kum Kum Lotus* and *Black Lotus* because for me its power serves as autonomy and a wholeness of the female body. It is not just about a sexual identity, but rather a feminist all-encompassing politicisation of the female body.

> What does it mean that in many cultures, the most terrible insult is the word for a woman’s sexual organs? … A word that describes the “female sexual organs anatomically correctly, though not used in that sphere, because instead used for its obscenity” (Rees, 2013, p.11).

The three interpretations of cunt follow the pathways of reclamation and reconciliation, “One definition of reconciliation is the re-establishment of a close relationship that has experienced estrangement somewhere along the line. My cunt is mine.” (Muscio. 2002, p.XXViii). ‘You Cunt’ the obscenity (Fig.10), ‘Cunt’ the anatomical (Fig.11), and ‘My Cunt’ the feminist (Fig.12), in this configuration of the word I have established a narrative of covert visibility. As Rees states, “Cultures decide what the word should be – it’s not fixed” (Rees, 2012, p.21). If that is so, then through an artistic feminist lens, the profanity in this artwork is my word, that I have a ‘right’ to, as a brown feminist cultural educator.

There are arguments against the reclamation of the word as “it would diminish cunt’s ‘visceral power’” (Rees, 2012, p.23). Journalist Victoria Coren comments that she is,

> …rather proud that its potency lies in a fear that female sexuality was a dangerous force. It reminds us where we have come from, in at least two ways at once (Coren (2012) cited in Rees, 2012, p.23).

Rees states,

> While I can see a rationale for Coren's argument, it does miss the point that 'dangerous forces' (not 'powerful forces', note) inexorably attract ruthless suppression, and so misogyny finds a rationale (Rees, 2012, p.23).

This is interesting when applied to the othering of the South Asian woman, her sexuality suppressed by patriarchy and exoticised by the west.

Kum Kum Lotus and *Black Lotus* have been discussed in this chapter for their inclusion of text.

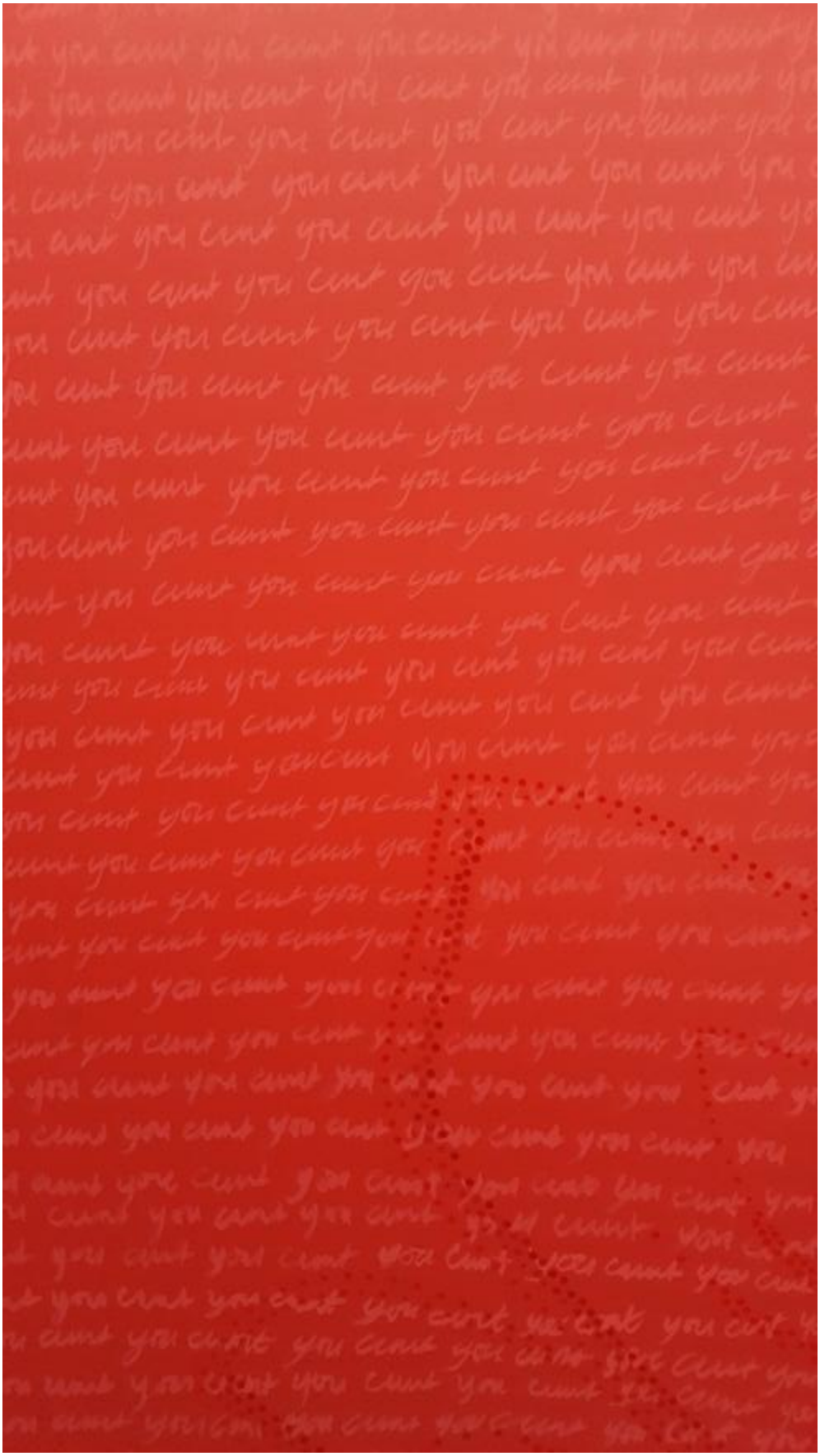


Fig.10 Remi Rana Allen. *Kum Kum Lotus*. Canvas 1 ‘you cunt’ Installation (2017-18).

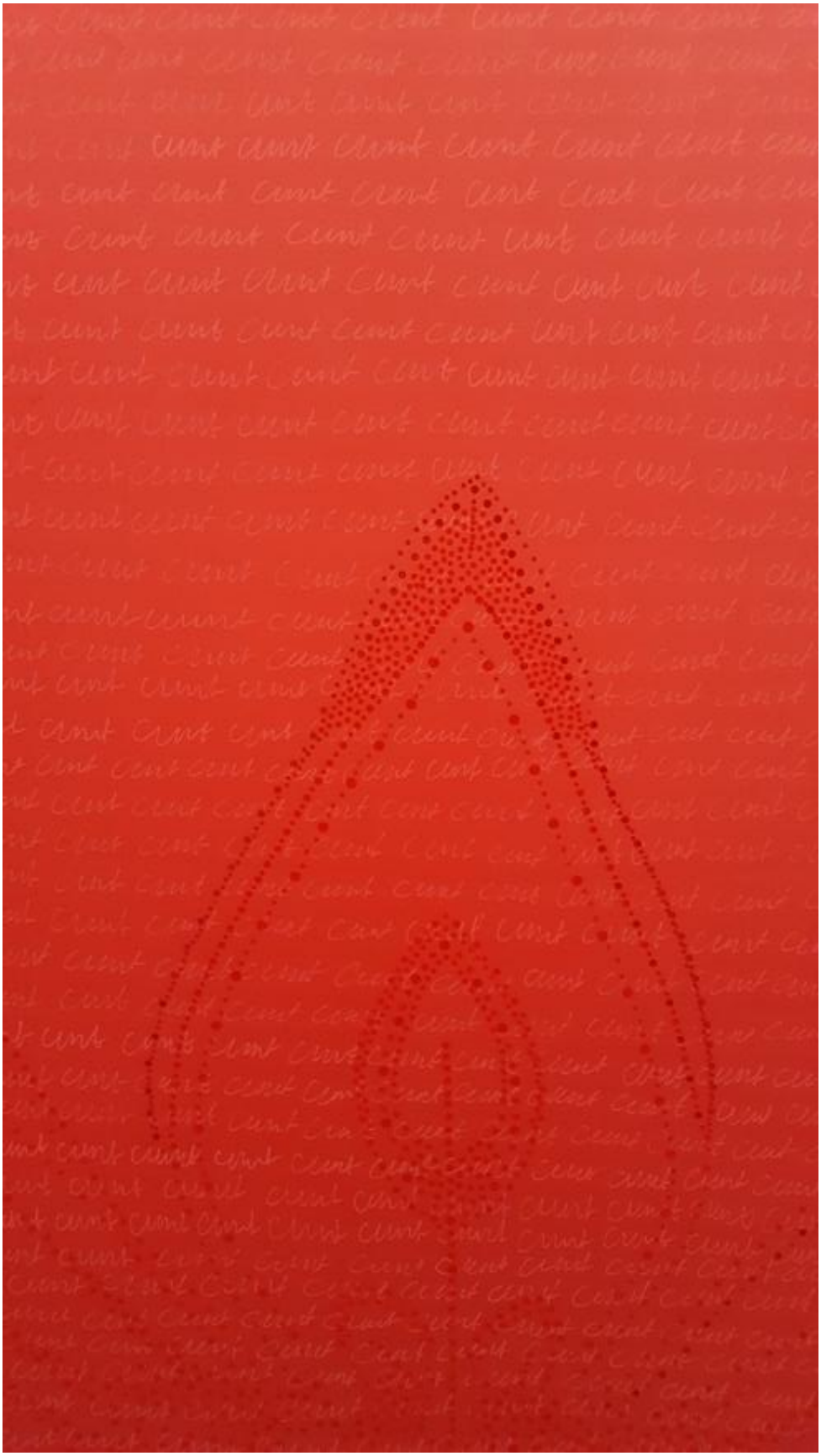


Fig.11 Remi Rana Allen. *Kum Kum Lotus*. Canvas 2 ‘cunt’ Installation (2017-18).

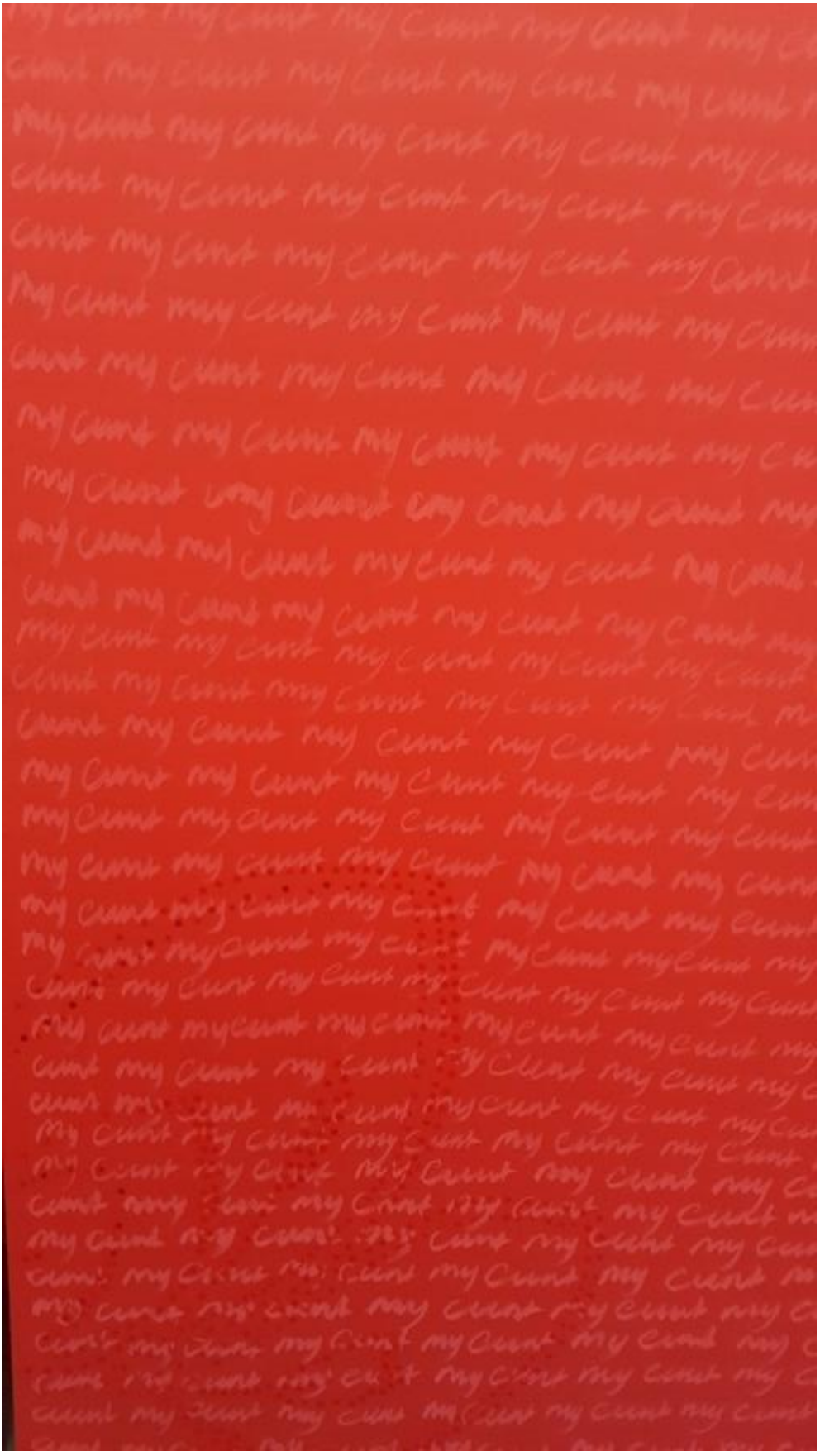


Fig.12 Remi Rana Allen. *Kum Kum Lotus*. Canvas 3 ‘my cunt’ Installation (2017-18).

Materials for artworks

I now move onto the materials that I incorporate into my artworks. These are varied and range from red tape, faux leather, prandhi hair extensions, Chunni[25] soft fabrics, steel rings, bindis, pen, paper, canvas, wooden frames, silks, plaster/concrete, greaseproof paper, gold thread, pen, Indian ink, buffalo milk, gold and silver pigment, blood, alcohol, tears, calcium, urine, saline, turbans. Found objects include IV drips, ceramic tiles, stone, lingams, candle, curtain rail, ileostomy pouches. As with many artists, hoarding materials is a way of life.[26] Perhaps it is the fact that I find it difficult to let objects go, or I fear that a discarded material may one day be useful. The materials have value to me and are precious. This was my thinking in relation to *Killer Queen* (2019) and the stone head. The head belonged to the director of the British School at Rome and as I had no desire to leave the head behind, the only alternative was to make a cast of the head which I would use to create a reproduction of the original stone head.

Some specific materials are digitally ordered via WhatsApp from my aunt in India. She travels to the markets, hand-selects the items I have requested. The items are wrapped in newspaper and packaged into plastic bags. The bags are placed within brown paper and taped securely. The scrawled writing on the package is addressed to my mother, for a reason unknown to me. This is the way it has always been. Whenever we have dealt with family in India, the information is sent through my parents. I haven't questioned that before, but now, relaying this information in a written context and having thought through the journey of 'my' materials, makes me feel like a

[25] Chunni is also called Dupatta: head covering worn by Indian women.

[26] I suggest hoarding – and the cultural construction of disorder - as a collagist and create works, which reflect on the borders of psychopathological attachments to 'stuff'; psychologies inherent to accumulation; and conscious and unconscious spaces occupied by both object and analysis. Creating new collagist and fictive methodologies out of the construction of case histories, and through the co-option of diagnostic tools and narratology used in psychoanalysis, I write about the work and within the work. (Mendelson. 2014, n.p).

child again, as if the requests must be 'approved' by my mother, the hierarchical status quo is not questioned.

As they cross the seas leaving an Indian homeland and enter new borders my 'Indian materials' are questioned by white governmental rules. They are female, they are foreign – not white. Sexism and racism, the two main oppressors of brown and black women. I am reminded of Kimberle Crenshaw's [27] (1989) term 'intersectionality' which describes how different social categories, like race, gender, and class, intersect to create layered forms of discrimination. I question that, if there are no recognisable frameworks for being female and black (or brown), then how can there be representation or rather a voice that can be heard?

My materials represent the coded visual identifiers of the women in my family. The 'bindi'[28] or 'Kum Kum', are indicators of marriage, of warding off evil spirits and of protection through the third eye chakra.[29] There is no questioning or judgement, just an acceptance of these cultural signifiers. These codes of dress are ingrained within the sartorial existence of Indian society. However, if you remove that one red dot from its original habitat and place it upon the face of the west, what does that symbolism start to represent? This is one thought that instigated the making of works for the Vagina Dentata project and *Kum Kum Lotus / Black Lotus* (2017-18) where I explore the mixology of my Indo-European materials. (Fig.13).

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[27] https://www.ted.com/talks/kimberle_crenshaw_the_urgency_of_intersectionality?language=en (Accessed: 30.08.2023).

[28] The Bindi has been incorporated in the works of Bharti Kher, *Untitled* (2008) and Chila Kumari Burman, *Bottled Water Bindi Girl* (2019).

[29] Chakra a meditation aid in the form of a psychic or psychospiritual energy centre in the subtle body, as visualized in a variety of Hindu and Buddhist tantric yoga and meditation practices.

I view myself as a western brown face. When the bindi is placed upon my forehead, it doesn't appear alien to an Indian. My face is accepted as Indian, married, and protected. Whereas, to my white peers, the bindi worn on my forehead presents as alien, because we are "submerged in whiteness" (Mirza, 1997, p.3). Perhaps it alienates them from my western self. Or is it, that I now re-present as alien because I no longer represent my western 'self', the self I present to them daily? Instead, they now view the representation of another self that appears Eastern, Indian and more 'obviously' not white. Through dislocating the location of a cultural visual symbol, I try a re-presentation of these materials as objects of art with the aim to make visible the covert factors of my British Indian female identity.



Fig.13 Remi Rana Allen. *Killer Queen*. Installation (2019).

Izzat, sharam and basti

Originally when the proposal for the thesis was formulated the aspects of ‘Izzat’ (respect), ‘sharam’ (shame) and ‘basti’ (embarrassment) were not a central focus. Through a conversation

with Professor Anita Taylor, I began to appreciate the ethical issues behind the main strands of my research. I came to realize that it is the “shame and pollution” (Taylor, 2016, n.p)[30] of British South Asian society that will be revealed through some of my artefacts.

Izzat is an “underpinning force” used to “regulate life in all Asian communities” (Soni, 2012, p.11). This feeling, spirituality, superstition, karma, fate, guide, respect or whatever that is izzat is highly regarded in Asian culture. This word is synonymous with respect and the loss of face. The constant threat of embarrassing or shaming the family through a personal decision, even as a grown up, is deeply rooted within every South Asian child.

Sharam is also ingrained from an early age in households. Decisions concerning ““going out', having girlfriends or boyfriends, the choice of clothes and friends, “curfews” – coming home by a set time, helping parents in the home and business and a range of other matters relating to personal autonomy versus family traditions and solidarity” (Ghuman, 1994, p.23). These are some examples of the choices a South Asian child, more specifically a daughter, makes to avoid bringing sharam on their family and thus losing izzat. From my personal experience it appears that these codes of conduct are more heavily enforced upon the women in the family. The following chapters reveal the nature of how sharam, basti and izzat are used as social constructs to control Indian women and the burden they carry in maintaining South Asian culture and heritage.

[30] Discussion on Ethics conducted with Professor Anita Taylor at Bath Spa University 17 of November 2016.

10cm Holes (2017-18) Fig. 14, makes use of chunni fabrics, considered “the most obviously symbolic part of a woman’s clothes” (Wilson, 2018, p.48). The chunni worn by South Asian women is used as a head cover or cover for the breasts. It can be worn over the head and shoulders, across the chest and over the shoulders, draped over one shoulder or folded loosely around the neck. As Wilson states, “The way she wears it shows to the righteous and inquisitive observers always present in Asian communities just how modest she is” (Wilson, 2018, p.48). For Sikhs, wearing the chunni on the head when entering the Gurdwara[31] is a mark of respect for “elders and for God” (Wilson, 2018, p.48). These are some of the topics I explore through my making. My research aim is to unfold and deconstruct the layers that make up the British Indian female identity amongst women in my family. I seek to uncover how their identity has evolved in its presentation as my contemporary British Indian identity.

Clothing and women’s oppression

Specific to my research, I address Indian women’s clothing in Britain, India and Kenya. For *10cm Holes* (2017-18) my intention was to sexualise the chunni, allow it exposure through an alternative function. In South Asian society, the semi opaque fabrics used as marks of respect under the guise of religion, or as a cover for breasts and hiding the Indian female form suppresses the brown woman’s individuality and self-expression through clothing. I will be discussing *10cm Holes* (2017-18) in more detail in chapter five. The aim of this section is to address subjugation through dress, and how that appears in my practice through the materials.

[31] Sikh temple.

Clothes are used by many South Asian families to prevent individualistic self-expression through dress. Prohibitions on clothes have the function of suppressing an identity, and in South Asian society, clothes are imbued with oppressive self-righteous codes of “modesty, maternal, self-effacing” (Wilson, 2018, p.49). Through their clothing, South Asian women are ‘guided’ to uphold and preserve “our culture” (Wilson, 2018, p.48). Any form of individuality through dress is immediately suppressed, therefore stunting the development of the emerging individual identity.

I remember at the age of fourteen I wanted to purchase a sleeveless denim jacket. I begged my parents, as all my peers at school were wearing them and they were the height of fashion. My father refused to let me buy the jacket. In-fact he silenced me through his anger and made me feel an outsider, both at home and at school.

Sexualising the chunni

Through the sexualisation of the chunni, I created an artwork that re-presented the headcover’s usage from covering the head to birthing the head. I think that irony plays a strong part in my thinking, because it functions as a device to narrate topics and themes that are considered taboo in South Asian society. In this instance the ‘innocent’ chunni has allowed me to visualise the vagina in a non-figurative abstract way, with my intention to initiate significant discussions. This was an important thought process whilst making *10cm Holes* (2017-18), the reclaiming of a material that functioned to express Indian women’s identity through discourses on female

genitals, sex, birth and life. These are taboo subjects that Asian families refuse to discuss for the sake of Izzat. As Wilson explains,

> Religion and superstition centre their attention on the womb in an effort to explain away in terms of 'morality' what remains unexplained and unacceptable in terms of fact. Morality and religion open the door to oppression but in focusing so sharply on the woman's role they make her the central symbol of the culture (Wilson, 2018, p.8).

The chunni, the religious mark of respect, becomes my central symbol of culture in *10cm Holes* (2017-18).



Fig.14 Remi Rana Allen. Detail from *10cm Holes*. Installation (2017-2019).

Whilst writing this chapter I ordered a book online for my research. The book was titled "Black British Feminism" (Mirza 1997). I bought the book second hand. This was to be a material I wanted to engage in my research. The book arrived – it had had a previous life. It had belonged to the Leeds Rape Crisis centre. If this is not an omen or a signifier of the reality of the oppression of brown/black women, and what I interrogate through my research as a brown feminist, then how can there be reality within my embodiment of the

Indian female and the experiences of our shared visceral ontological knowledge. This leads me further into the sexualisation of my materials.

Sexual representation of materials and religion

The representation of sexuality embedded within some of my materials - red tape, faux leather, silks, steel rings - are intended as connotations of the sexual power of the Indian woman's identity. But they also indicate the subjugation of the brown women by patriarchal males, the threat of her sexuality reducing him to a state of emasculation. For example, the 'modern' Indian woman – the word modern has an alternative meaning to the English meaning when used in Hindi or Punjabi, it does not mean progression or liberation. Instead,

> Among Punjabis in Delhi who are often from the same peasant background as Punjabi immigrants to Britain, a 'modern lady' is a 'respectable' urban middle-class woman […] in Britain this Indian urban middle-class smartness, not Westernisation, is something to aim for (Wilson, 2018, p.51).

Indian women are expected to uphold the Izzat (respect) of the family through her invisibility, silence, servitude and respectability. As Mirza (1997) describes her,

> She appears and disappears as she is needed, as the dutiful wife and daughter, the hard (but happy and grateful!) worker, the sexually available exotic other, the controlling asexual mother, or simply homogenized as the 'third world' woman (Mirza,1997, p.6).

It is with these stereotypes of the Indian woman in mind that I investigate the construction of the British Indian female identity amongst the women in my family and the role of the maternal.

In the 1990s in India the focus shifted from a "new Indian woman" (Sunder-Rajan (1993), cited in Roy, 2012, p.112) to being the "Modern and Indian woman" (Munshi (2004), cited in Roy, 2012, p.112), educated and employed but whose main role revolves around the domestic sphere, performing the nurturing role of wife, mother, sister. As some Indian women embraced western feminist thinking as a form of liberation during the 1990s[32] "…right-wing discourses invoked the power of various Hindu goddesses" (Roy, 2012, p.112). Indian women were called upon to "embody the Hindu ideal of the chaste, devoted, perfect wife" (Roy, 2012, p.112) in resistance to Western modernity. This is reminiscent of the 19th century Victorian white woman of whom the African American scholar hooks writes:

> By raising the white female to goddess-like status, white men effectively removed the stigma Christianity had placed on them […] Once the white female was mythologised as pure and virtuous, a symbolic Virgin Mary, white men could see her as exempt from negative sexist stereotypes of the female. The price she had to pay was suppression of natural sexual impulses (hooks, 1982, p.31).

[32] The 'watershed decade' of the 1990s, with the increased institutional visibility of feminist goals and politics beside rising right-wing Hindu religious fundamentalism, caste-based political assertions and the state's abrogated welfare responsibilities in its turn towards a free market economy, proved to be a locus of many feminist anxieties and dilemmas. […] Propelled by the idea of gender chaos, dystopic visions on what would happen to Indian culture and Indian women as India 'opened up' to the West promoted a further normative discourse on womanhood. (Roy. 2012, p.112).

Religion is used as an oppressor of women's sexual needs by both East and West. The white or brown male utilises the same methods to subjugate and dominate women. In right wing fundamentalist Christian or Hindu teaching,

> …woman was portrayed as the evil sexual temptress, the bringer of sin into the world. Sexual lust originated with her and men were merely the victims of her wanton power…These male religious teachers appoint "themselves as the personal agents of God, they become the judges and overseers of woman's virtue" (hooks 1982, p.29).

Vestal (2019) was created in Rome to capture the themes of religion, female sexual suppression, domesticity, hope, colonial and post-colonial patriarchal domination. (Figs.15, 16 and 17). I selected paper for its versatility, in terms of scale, light weight and transportability. The greaseproof paper is a semiotic re-presentation of domesticity, homeliness (the good Indian wife always has a meal prepared for her husband, in-laws and children), and virginal. Functioning as a blank canvas in preparation for a mark or imprint. The red bindis are my drawing tool, they formed a diagrammatical Yantra.[33] The bindi, the third eye chakra, wards off evil spirits. The candle is a symbol of peace, religion, a single flame burning at the centre, quiet, meditative. In this instance, the flame is also a reminder of the symbolism of fire in India and the Sati.

It is through the practice of repetition in my making process I find myself in a meditative state, simultaneously tantric, reciting mantras through ritualistically performing the repetition.

[33] A geometrical diagram aiding meditation in tantric worship see Figs 15 and 16.

Repeatedly placing the bindis on the paper or the canvas or creating with materials that allow for a multiple of the same is an important part of my process. Doing the process over and over, until I can perfect it, the practicing gains significance. Whether I am content with the result is unimportant at this point in the making process, see Fig.18 and 18a.

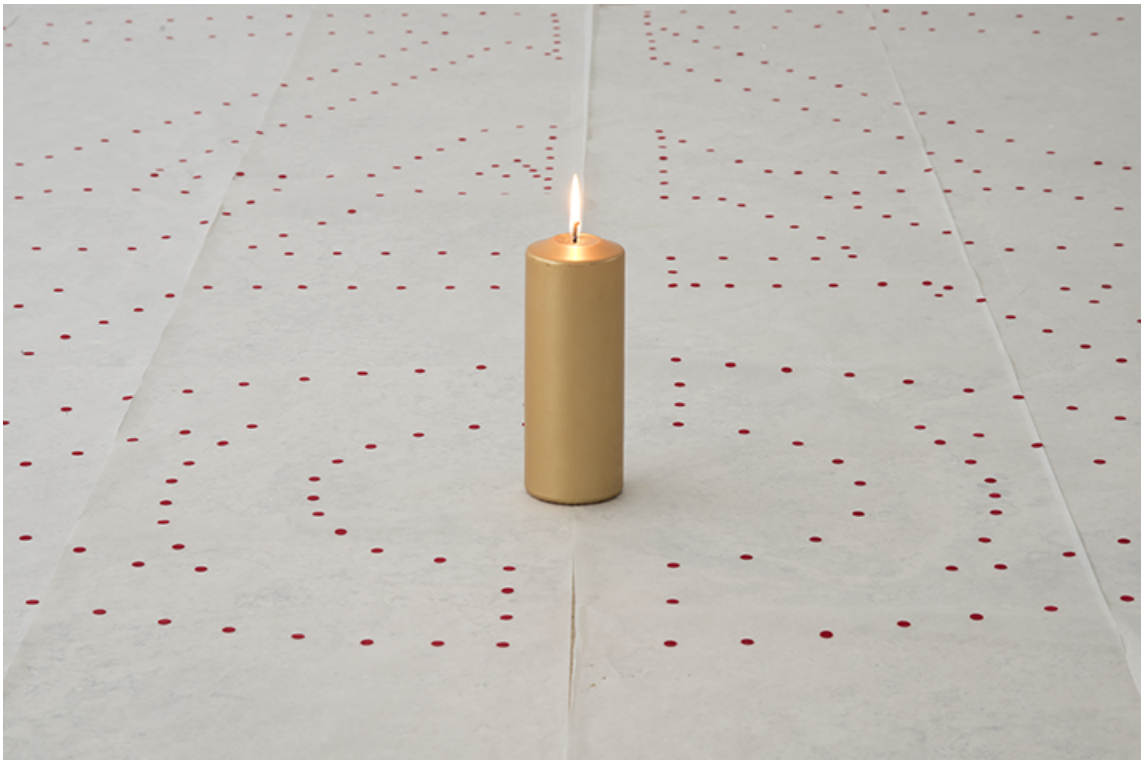


Fig.15 Remi Rana Allen. *Vestal*. Installation (2019).



Fig.16 Remi Rana Allen. *Vestal*. Installation (2019).



Fig.17 Remi Rana Allen. *Vestal*. Installation (2019).



Fig.18 Studio making of *Kum Kum Black Lotus*. Installation (2019).



Fig.18a Naples Residency, the making of *tette di Filatura (Spinning Tits)* (2016). Installation.

I use the following example to highlight the silencing of the brown woman, by focusing on how my research methodology interplayed with my artistic practice in creating a self-brief and inspiration for the artworks *The Golden Temple* (2017-19) and *1947* (2017). I conducted preliminary research on Southall Black Sisters (SBS), a feminist I believe was ahead of its time. SBS was set up to help vulnerable women from ethnic minority groups without income or access to financial support, typically asylum seekers or migrants, often having temporary spousal visas, and "who have been subject to horrific violence and domestic slavery" (Dhaliwal and Patel (2012), cited in Roy, 2012, p.176). SBS funds these victims of abuse through support from "churches, temples, mosques and gurdwaras." (Dhaliwal and Patel (2012), cited in Roy, 2012, p.177).

However, these religious organisations have "strong conservative values when it comes to women and the family" (Dhaliwal and Patel (2012), cited in Roy, 2012, p.177). In 2007, the west London borough of Ealing which provided local council financial support decided to withdraw funding for SBS on the grounds that "specialist services for black and minority women worked against the interests of 'equality', 'diversity' and 'cohesion'" (Dhaliwal and Patel (2012), cited in Roy, 2012, p.177). In fact, Ealing council decided the name Southall Black Sisters was

> …unlawful under the Race Relations Act 1976 because the council said it excluded white women, and the organisation was therefore seen as discriminatory and divisive" (Dhaliwal and Patel (2012), cited in Roy, 2012, p.177).

In court SBS argued "that the council's 'one size fits all' approach was misconstrued because it ignored unequal structural relations based on class, gender and race" (Dhaliwal and Patel (2012), cited in Roy, 2012, p.178). SBS argued that

> …specialist services for minority women are needed for reasons to do with language difficulties and cultural and religious pressures (Dhaliwal and Patel (2012), cited in Roy, 2012, p.178).

SBS stressed the need for guidance from a democratic non-religious “ethos in complex circumstances where racism and religious fundamentalism are on the rise in the UK and worldwide” (Dhaliwal and Patel (2012), cited in Roy, 2012, p178). SBS won their appeal in court and their funding was reinstated. Most women helped through the SBS group were local Muslim women who required a safe, secular space.

Unfortunately, the government’s agenda on faith and cohesion has allowed for so-called moderates from Hindu and Muslim communities to become the authentic voice for their communities – allowing them - mainly men - to make “demands which are primarily about controlling female sexuality through the maintenance of so-called family values” (Dhaliwal and Patel (2012), cited in Roy, 2012, p.179).

What this highlights is the entanglement of racism and sexism; brown Muslim women asylum seekers and migrants escaping from domestic violence were put at further risk because of a supposed DEI policy that ignored their specific needs, on the grounds that brown and black only women spaces were unfairly excluding white women. As well, the sexist white governmental patriarchy allowed a conservative brown male ‘community leader’ to criticise the provision of a space for women survivors of domestic abuse on the grounds that women belonged in their homes. The combined efforts of white and brown males, colluding to displace Muslim women from a place of safety reflects efforts to control brown women, to keep them in their ‘rightful’ place

- the domestic sphere - where they are subjugated to patriarchal authority. working to silence the voice of the subaltern, she can speak, but no one is listening.

Mother, virgin or prostitute

South Asian women are culturally oppressed; they must not look at a man, meet his eye, speak unless spoken to, and must never engage in sexual relations unless married. To be the 'good' Indian woman, her behaviour should be naïve, innocent, respectful and silent.[34] The materials I select imitate these controlling behaviours and submission of brown women to male dominance. By using materials such as the chunni (respect for patriarchy), red tape (aversion of female gaze), bindi (the good Indian wife) in my artworks, I struggle with learnt and culturally inherited experiences, which are handed down from mother to daughter.

There are three a/sexual spaces that Indian women inhabit, Mother, Virgin or Prostitute. The Indian woman is not 'allowed' to be sexual until married, she is not considered a sexual being when widowed. Only within the sanctity of marriage, and the 'forbidden' state of divorce can she appear as a sexual being. Even when married and pregnant she is expected to disguise the pregnancy, expected to remain as though she has no knowledge of sex and procreation. The following personal testimony was a memory that played an important role in the inception of several of my artworks, including *10cm Holes* (2017-18)*, The Golden Temple* (2017-19) and *Killer Queen* (2019).

[34] This has been explored by Spivak 1985, Wilson 2018, Roy 2012.

When I was pregnant with my first son, I returned from a holiday and visited my parents. They were having renovations on their home, the work carried out by Indian builders. My mother stated that I needed to cover my large stomach for it had protruded too much. She spoke as if ashamed; after all, I was carrying a white man's child, but to flaunt the evidence of having had sex – seems to be a more widespread Indian issue amongst the older generations. This was all because there were Indian men in her home. This shocked me. As a woman, I was celebrating the life within me, proud to show off the beauty of being Indian, female and pregnant. The looser the clothing and the covering of the whole body, under the chunni as a cover of the sexual areas is considered modest. The less pregnant you appear the better. I refer to the use of the chunni in *10cm Holes*.

The paradox of that moment, I felt, was that had my father said those words, I could have put it down to male dominance and a 'knowing' of how Indian men think. A brown woman who knows her sexuality is considered a prostitute. This is reinforced throughout her lifetime, not only by Indian men, but by Indian women. We hence have oppression by the white man, the brown man, the white woman and the brown woman. Layers of experienced and inherited oppression.[35]

It is the sexually available exotic other that is the focus for the artworks *Killer Queen* (2019) Fig.19 and *The Memoirs of Lady Vagina Dentata* (2019) Figs. 20, 21 and 22. I wanted to create artworks that turned the tables on the male. I wanted to promote and celebrate the Indian female

[35] This paragraph draws from Wilson. 2018, *Finding a Voice. Asian Women in Britain*.

sexual identity through my selection of materials. A brown woman in control of her sexuality, the feminist, confident and aware of her power, both through body and mind. *The Memoirs of Lady Vagina Dentata* is an example of how I juxtapose visual imagery, typography and symbolism with cultural materials, to explore my British Indian female identity.

All the artworks presented in this chapter on research methodology and studio methods have been selected to highlight the text and materials present within my practice. The artworks will be thoroughly investigated in the following chapters to answer my research question:

> How can my multi-media art practice unearth and piece together the constituting factors in the development of the British Indian female identity within my family?

Chapter 3 will conduct a literature and practice review contextualising my arts practice and research among theories and concepts from sociology and cultural studies and contemporary British South Asian women artists working within my field.



Fig.19 Remi Rana Allen. *Killer Queen* (2019). Installation.

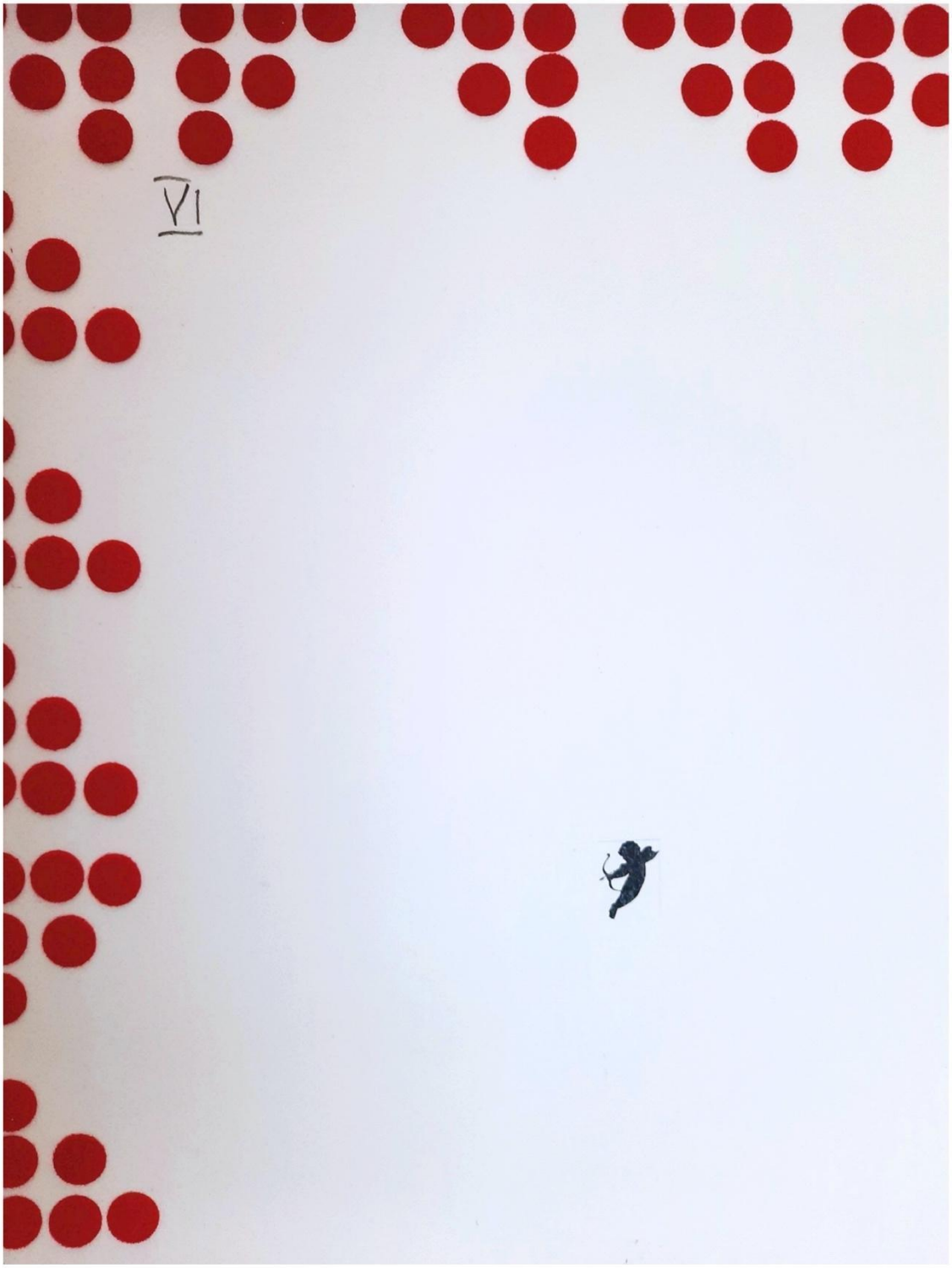


Fig.20 Remi Rana Allen. *The Memoirs of Lady Vagina Dentata* (2019). Detail. Installation.

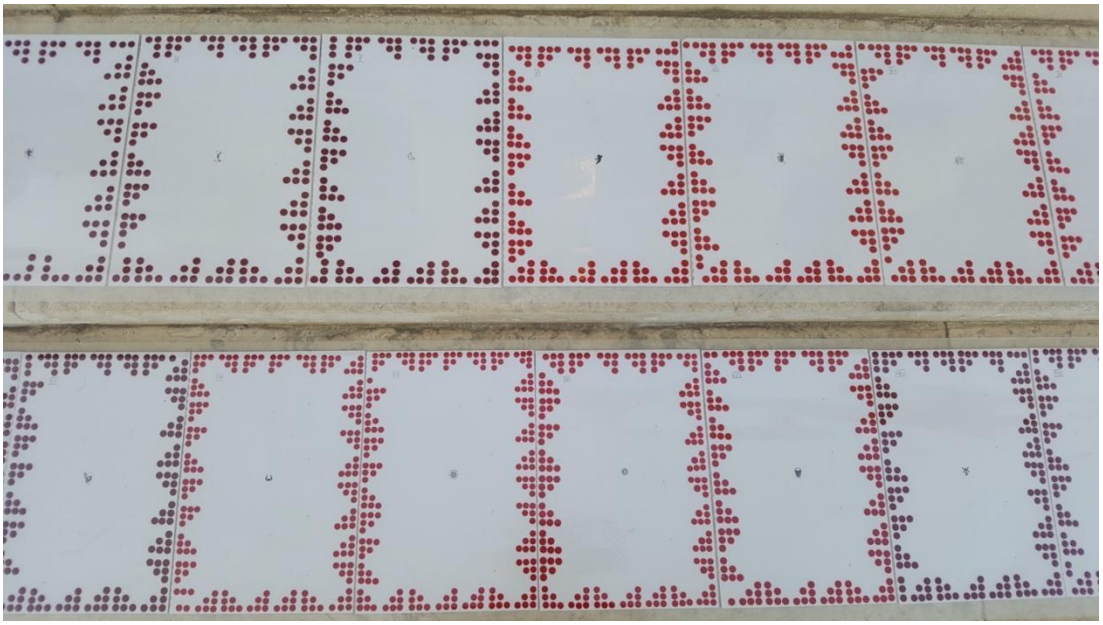


Fig.21 Remi Rana Allen. *The Memoirs of Lady Vagina Dentata* (2019). British School at Rome Installation.



Fig.22 Remi Rana Allen. *The Memoirs of Lady Vagina Dentata* (2019). British School at Rome. Installation.

Chapter 2

Literature and Practice Review

This chapter will review literature and the contemporary arts practice of British South Asian female artists working within my research enquiry. The relevance of this review is to assess the existing material within my field of enquiry and to ascertain the gaps in literature and the visual arts. My thesis and artistic practice will form part of the broader literature of British Indian women's diasporic histories, particularly those that have been underrepresented or overlooked in academic and artistic discourses. The chapter is in two sections. The first part outlines some theories and concepts from cultural studies and sociology to help explain the familial histories discussed within my artworks. The second part of the chapter will contextualise my artistic practice within the wider scope of visual arts practice.

Part 1 Literature concepts and theories

My practice addresses the entanglement of my Indian body and western mind. I make artworks to achieve my research objectives and to gain an understanding of what it means to be a British Indian woman. The artworks that I draw upon for this review are situated as interlocutors, bringing me into conversation with contemporary British South Asian female artists. We discuss our hybrid identities – the layers that construct our individual identities as South Asian women through a Brown or Black feminist lens. Some White feminist theories - for example gender and work equality - do align with our thinking to a certain point. Historically, white feminists have sustained a racial hierarchy, where they situate themselves above black and brown women, even speaking on behalf of us. I find that I must question how a white woman knows what it is to be an Indian woman? As Probyn (2005) writes,

> To know an Indigenous constructed social world you must experience it from within; to know about such a world means that you are imposing a conceptual framework from outside (Probyn, 2005, p.105).

White feminism must acknowledge that equality must be for ALL women, but this cannot be achieved until brown and black women are liberated from racism and white supremacy, from which white feminists benefit. As feminists, regardless of colour, our views against misogyny represent the basis of a shared sisterhood. But where we will part company is the embodiment of being Indian.

South Asian feminisms are an emerging field of enquiry, as Falcon and Nash (2015) point out;

> There has been this critical turn in women's studies that has shifted from the centrality of "white women" (post 1970s) to now a space in which women of colour become an important narrative, knowledge base, epistemology, and arc in which to engage in the study of women (Falcon and Nash, 2015, p.8).

Falcon's co-writer Nash declares,

> I think it's key that women of colour take on symbolic value in the field. I still don't think there is sufficient scholarly interest in the fleshy and embodied materiality of women of colour while there is plenty of interest in what intersectionality and transnationalism can do for women's studies (Falcon and Nash, 2015, p.8).

It is this ‘fleshy and embodied materiality’ that I explore through my making, alongside the existing material on intersectionality and transnationalism.

Falcon and Nash (2015) make the point that there is a need for further exploration of South Asian feminisms. I argue that only an Indian woman can explore and understand the embodiment of the Indian woman. I feel strongly as a British Indian woman that deep down there is something very fixed and buried about my identity that does not want to be exhumed and analysed for fear of dilution and extinction. Once it has been shared, it will be theorized and mis/understood by non-South Asian theorists. How can that happen when it is not yet understood by the ‘being’ (myself) embodying the secret of that identity? Asian feminists such as Nazneen, Mitra Khan and Sultan (2012) through their essays on new South Asian feminisms echo this belief:

> We acknowledge that indigenous feminisms inspire the construction of theories that attend to power’s myriad violent forms and expose ways in which domination and subordination should be imagined anew (Falcon and Nash, 2015, p.9).

Pratibha Parmar (1983) summarises South Asian feminism in *Gender, race and class: Asian women in resistance:*

> Asian women have not only been active at their workplaces but have also been involved in struggles and campaigns against other forms of oppression and repression. Asian women’s groups, with a strong and culturally specific form of

> feminism, have emerged and actively campaigned against virginity testing, the use of Depo-provera[36], immigration legislation, racist attacks in schools, for better housing, against the racist practices of DHSS[37] and NHS[38], and in every other area of their lives (Parmar, 1982, p.269).

Subaltern studies may have introduced Asian feminism, but these studies were from a Eurocentric lens, in that the term originated from the Italian Marxist Antonio Gramsci (1920) referring to peasants who had not been integrated into the industrial capitalist system.

With the extensive body of work by black and brown feminists in mind, including Kimberle Crenshaw (1989) who coined the term intersectionality and Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak's (1988) work on representation and the experiences of those who are excluded, silenced or marginalised by dominant power structures, one of my main considerations is to take other points of intersectionality other than gender and race into account, including religion. I am of Indian Punjabi Sikh heritage, and caste and class both play a part in my identity as a British Indian woman. My research locates hybrid ambivalence of identity in a fresh context, featuring the multi layered nuances that construct my identity and the distinct identity of the women in my matrilineal lineage. I aim to pursue my research which broadly asks questions about Indian women as the conduits of Indian cultural heritage from my positionality as a brown woman.

[36] Depo-provera: contraceptive injection.

[37] DHSS: Department of Health and Social Security in the UK.

[38] NHS: National Health Service in the UK.

The more I learn about western feminism the more I feel Indian; on the one hand I have felt silenced, due to my Indian appearance among white feminists, and on the other my Indianness has made me a poster girl for diversity. This feeling of exclusion raises questions about my identity as a British Indian woman. I can only speak through my experiences and I appreciate that individual experiences are shaped by individual situations, though there are commonalities with other British Indian women. The objective is to produce answers to my research questions, by exploring my family's history through art making, reflecting, and writing.

Bhabha (1994) refers to hybridity as the creation of new cultural identities that emerge from the mixing and interaction between different cultures, particularly within the power dynamics of colonialism. In colonial spaces, the cultures of colonised and coloniser blend to form something new and unique, often challenging the dominant colonial narrative. Essentially, hybridity signifies a space where cultures are not simply combined but transformed through their encounter with one another. Bhabha (1994)

> …contends that all cultural statements and systems are constructed in a space that he calls the 'Third Space of enunciation'. This space allows for "cultural identity (to) emerge in this contradictory and ambivalent space, which makes a hierarchical 'purity' of cultures untenable (Mambrohl, 2016, n.p).

Moreover,

> …this ambivalent space of cultural identity (it) may help us to overcome the exoticism of cultural diversity in favour of the recognition of an empowering hybridity within which cultural difference may operate (Mambrohl, 2016, n.p).

Most importantly,

> …it is the 'in-between' space that carries the burden and meaning of culture, and this is what makes the notion of hybridity so important (Mambrohl, 2016, n.p).

It is this hybrid space of which Bhabha (1994) writes that I investigate. My research British Indian women's identity amongst women in my family is situated within this space, which was created out of geographic migrations that shaped the history of my maternal family from colonial India to East Africa, and onwards to the UK.

While I draw on my personal experiences of motherhood through the narrative of my son and his illness, my relationship to my mother and grandmother, and the impact of the maternal roles within the identity formation of the women in my family for my arts practice, I believe that my story is relatable to the experiences of other British Indian women of my generation. This belief is rooted in conversations shared with other British South Asian female artists who have also experienced motherhood. However, contemporary studies on British Indian mothers/motherhood are scarce, as Soni (2012) writes:

> The eighties saw a general decrease in research focused specifically on Asian communities (Soni, 2012, p.14).[39]

[39] Studies were conducted in the 1990s, but they mostly centred on the younger Asian population, "The 1990s focus on young Asians ascribes their experiences much less to the 'caught between two cultures' models of the 1970s, exploring instead the emergent culture of young British Asians, who definitely know that they are British, yet different from the 'host' society." (Soni. 2012, p.20).

It is this gap in the studies that I aim to enhance through my research on the maternal impact on the formation of British Indian women's identity, through the narratives of the East African women in my family. My research also correlates with the shift in research direction in the 1980s to the development of studies that focused on young British Asians, and how they navigated their integration into society in the UK.

Contextualizing the larger history: Capitalism, Empire, and Social Reproduction Theory

My research and arts practice through the film *Khoon* (2012-20) is situated within the larger historical and socio-economic landscape of capitalism and its relationship to Empire, focusing on the intersections of race, gender, and class in the context of British colonialism and post-colonial Britain. The lasting impacts of British colonialism have shaped the socio-economic conditions and ideological frameworks that exist to the present day. The legacies of empire have influenced the lives of migrant peoples, particularly those from former colonies such as India and Africa. These historical processes are inextricably linked to the capitalist structures of exploitation, as witnessed firsthand by my great grandfather, an indentured labourer 'sold' by the East India company to the East Africa company to build railroads. He is an example of how the British empire relied on the racialized and gendered division of labour, both within the colonies and in the UK.

Capitalism and Empire.

The relationship between capitalism and empire rested on the extraction and exploitation of labour and resources. The British empire not only considered itself the distributor of cultural and ideological power, but also a mechanism for capital accumulation. The exploitation of labour in the

colonies—through the systems of slavery, indenture, and colonial work regimes—was central to the development of global capitalism (Loomba 1998), this is evidenced through *Khoon* (2012-20), the artwork discussed in Chapter Three. These forms of exploitation were racialized, with colonial subjects treated as inferior to the colonial powers, the three tier system the whites introduced in East Africa and elsewhere throughout the empire is a prime example. This exploitation was also gendered, with the labour of colonised women undervalued and often seen as supplementary to that of men. I refer here to *Khoon* (2012-20) again as an example of the lived experiences of East African women in my family from 1914 to the 1960s. Mama and Manji are examples of how women's labour operated in two overlapping spheres: Manji within the home, through caregiving, cooking, cleaning, and the emotional maintenance of the family; and Mama, in the family's commercial activities, as unpaid co-worker, bookkeeper, shop assistant, or informal manager.

My mother and grandmother's experiences as immigrants to the UK testify to the enduring legacy of colonialism, which continued to shape the lived experiences of colonial subjects and their descendants. Particularly in the post-World War II migration waves, the experiences of South Asian communities in Britain, were shaped by their colonial histories. Immigrants had to navigate the racialised capitalist structures of the postcolonial British state. These structures continue to govern economic, cultural, and political life, impacting the lives of working-class migrants and their descendants.

Social Reproduction Theory and Capitalism

Social reproduction theory, which stems from Marxist feminist thought, focuses on the reproduction of labour and social relations within the family unit. It posits that, while capitalism

depends on the reproduction of the labour force, this reproduction is often invisibilised, especially when it occurs within the private, domestic sphere. As Bhattacharya explains,

> What binds the worker to capital?
> Under capitalism, since the means of production (to produce use values) are held by the capitalists, the worker only has access to the means of subsistence through the capitalist production process – selling her labor power to the capitalist in return for wages with which to purchase and access the means of her life, or subsistence. This schema of capital-labor relationship is heavily predicated upon two things: (a) that the worker is forced to enter this relationship because she has needs as a human being to reproduce her life, but cannot do so on her own because she has been separated from the means of production by capital; and (b) she enters the wage relation for her subsistence needs, which is to say that the needs of "life" (subsistence) have a deep integral connection to the realm of "work" (exploitation) (Bhattacharya, 2017, p. 77).

Bhattacharya's work emphasizes the need to view the global working class as a social force that encompasses the reproductive labour performed by women in both the formal and informal economy.

At the centre of social reproduction theory is the gendered division of labour, which relegates women's reproductive labour to childbearing, caregiving and domestic work to a space that is considered outside the formal economy. As Fraser argues,

> Capitalist societies separate social reproduction from economic production, associating the first with women and obscuring its importance and value. Paradoxically, however, they make their official economies dependent on the very same processes of social reproduction whose value they disavow […] Capitalist economic production is not self-sustaining, but relies on social reproduction. However, its drive to unlimited accumulation threatens to destablise the very reproductive processes and capacities that capital-and the rest of us need (Fraser, 2017, p.24).

Fraser's work on the crisis of care highlights the contradictions inherent in capitalist systems, where the labour of care is undervalued, and yet essential for the functioning of society. It appears that this relationship is circular and that one cannot exist without the other.

Social Reproduction Theory and British South Asian Communities

In the context of migrant communities, reproductive labour is further complicated by racialisation and colonial legacies. Women in South Asian communities, act as both caretakers and cultural custodians, managing the complex balancing act between maintaining traditional roles and adapting to the pressures of capitalist and colonial systems.

The maternal role becomes a key point particularly when considering how women in the family (mothers, grandmothers, aunts) uphold or challenge gendered and racialised practices within the home. The intergenerational transmission of cultural identity within South Asian families is shaped not only by the gendered expectations placed on women but also by the racialised dynamics that

continue to affect their lives in Britain. These perspectives are instrumental in exploring how South Asian women, in particular, have been historically marginalised in both the labour market and in the social reproduction of culture and family life (Wilson 2018).

Social reproduction theory can help in furthering understanding the role of South Asian women in Britain. The transnational migration of South Asian communities to Britain has often involved complex negotiations of family structures. For instance, many migrant South Asian families may have been shaped by patriarchal structures that emphasise the authority of men. Women are often expected to maintain traditional gender roles, which can sometimes conflict with their desire for economic independence or social mobility. Additionally, these women may face racialised discrimination in the workforce, further shaping their economic and social positions (Wilson 2006, 2018). But South Asian women have been at the forefront of resistance, as Parmar discusses in relation to their involvement in strike action at the Chix bubblegum factory in Slough. Parmar explains how,

> 96 Asian women went on strike on 10 October 1980.The conditions at Chix were bad when the strike began. The wages were 95p per hour for Asian women and £1.10 per hour for white women. One hundred and twenty workers had to share four toilets (Parmar, 1982, p.267).

As one Asian woman interviewee reported,

> The work is very dirty and heavy. I have been working on the belts for years. It is very hard […] There is a lot of discrimination […] We get different pay rates from the

> white women working with us and harassment from the supervisors, who have always been white since my days at the factory (Parmar, 1982, p.267).

The incident that precipitated the strike was a pregnant employee's request for a lighter work. Her request was denied and she subsequently miscarried.

> The majority of workers decided that they were no longer prepared to put up with the harsh conditions of their work and 107 workers out of a total of 129 joined the General and Municipal Workers Union […] Dennis Rose, the manager, refused to recognise their union. So they decided to go on strike action […] the fact that these were predominantly Asian women who were on strike was being ignored […] To make the class issue the only one is to ignore the racist and sexist situation which has given rise to the struggle of Asian women at Chix (Parmar, 1982, p.268).

The economic struggles faced by South Asian communities in Britain, particularly in the 1960s-80s, can be analysed through the lens of social reproduction theory. Many South Asian families worked in low-wage, insecure jobs and faced significant barriers to upward mobility. These families relied on informal networks, such as extended family or community solidarity to survive, thus reproducing their lower social and economic position and attesting to the structural inequalities in British society.

Social reproduction theory also examines how education systems contribute to the reproduction wider racial and class inequalities. For instance, many South Asian children face racialised

stereotyping in schools, which can limit their educational opportunities and social mobility. As Carby (1982) explained,

> Consistent with a colonialist and imperialist reasoning 'the natives' were being condemned as 'uncivilised' and, with a missionary zeal, the acquisition of the English language was seized upon as the key to successful assimilation […] A black child speaking a language from a black country was seen as backward not as actually or potentially bilingual […] In the words of NFER[40] *It appears, therefore that language is one major factor in this culturally induced backwardness of immigrant children and affects the assessment of ability and actual school performance.*[41] […] Black children were perceived and treated as retarded. However, around the language issue gravitated other common-sense, racist notions to reaffirm the inferiority of blacks in general, and the pathology of their family structures. (Carby, 1982, pp.187-8).

I can relate to this experience on a personal level. In 1974, at the age of five I was attending Junior School. I 'mispronounced' the word film as phonetically fil-amm, the pronunciation my parents had taught me. My white schoolteacher felt the need to bring this mispronunciation to the attention of the entire class, and then proceeded to make an example of me and my inability to speak English properly. This memory speaks to the ways in which existing social hierarchies based on race and class were reinforced.

[40] The National Foundation for Educational Research.

[41] Emphasis mine.

The sense of unbelonging

Edward Said's work *Orientalism* (1978) argued that Western perceptions of the "Orient" as foreign and backward were used as a device for colonial dominance. The binarism of these perceptions justified the legitimisation and expansion of control over the colonies. The post-colonialist theorist Homi Bhabha (1994) expanded on Said's work: 'The locality of national culture is neither unified nor unitary in relation to itself, nor must it be seen as 'other' in relation to what is outside or beyond […] The problem of outside/inside must always itself be a process of hybridity, incorporating new 'people'. (Bhabha, 1994, p.4).

This interpretation of hybridity and the 'other' is an important conceptual framework for my research as it encapsulates my experiences of existing within a space of many intersections: culture, heritage, religion, race, gender, class and caste. Through both my practice and this thesis, I attempt to unravel how the construction of my identity as a British Indian woman has been impacted by these intersectionalities.

In his book *Nation and Narration* (1994), Bhabha states that,

> You are part of a dialogue that may not, at first, be heard or heralded – you may be ignored – but your personhood, cannot be denied. In another's country that is also your own, your person divides, and in following the forked path you encounter yourself in a double movement…once as stranger, then as friend (Bhabha, 1994, p. XXV).

I interpret this text to mean that although you may be silenced, your existence cannot be denied. The experience of belonging to two places or cultures can create a sense of being caught between two identities. The notion of caught between two cultures may present as an internal struggle or duality that arises from constantly negotiating the two cultural or societal spaces.

This practice-based PhD has allowed me the time and space to reflect on my identity. I have had to unfold, unlearn and deconstruct who I thought I was, a British Asian woman. This has been my 'forked path' on which I found myself lost at times, unable to comprehend who or what I was. It is through the sense of unbelonging, discussed in Chapter Five, and the unlearning that followed, that I found myself as unfamiliar, a stranger. My intent is to reconcile these feelings, thoughts and experiences through my artworks and research, so that I may resolve the question of what constructs my identity as a British Indian woman, and how our maternal roles has defined my own identity and that of the generations of women in my family. My experience throughout life has constantly reminded me that I am not 'white' and not English, but on the other hand, too western – provoking that familiar sense of unbelonging.

For my research I have had to unlearn what I presumed was my identity to then relearn what or who is rooted in the construction of my British Indian identity. But I question if there can be a sense of belonging, especially in a society that regresses to colonial rhetoric. Thinking can only change if the political socio-climate is in conjunction with a movement. The moment a certain space can be inhabited, depends on the unity of the social, political and economic. Britain today disassociates from the Europe with which it shared a rich colonial history. Paradoxically, the land we call Great Britain has produced an inverted neo-colonialism within its own borders. It has imploded. It has spread economic, political and social fear amongst all who call England home. More importantly, it has divided a nation through ignorance. It has raised fear of the brown female

other,[42] inciting racist, sexist and religious bigotry.[43] I refer here to a commentary on the words of Boris Johnson in his column for *The Telegraph* in 2018,

> Mr Johnson - who last month quit the government in protest at Prime Minister Theresa May's Brexit policy - was commenting on the introduction of a burka ban in Denmark. He said he felt "fully entitled" to expect women to remove face coverings when talking to him at his MP surgery - and schools and universities should be able to take the same approach if a student "turns up... looking like a bank robber […] If you tell me that the burka is oppressive, then I am with you, […] If you say that it is weird and bullying to expect women to cover their faces, then I totally agree - and I would add that I can find no scriptural authority for the practice in the Koran. […] I would go further and say that it is absolutely ridiculous that people should choose to go around looking like letter boxes." He said businesses and government agencies should be able to "enforce a dress code that allowed them to see customers' faces." (BBC News. 2018, n.p).[44]

This mass hysteria towards the Asian female Other, her sex, her race and her religion confirms the deep-seated racist, white, colonial patriarchal hatred of the Other. The power of conservative

[42] "The monitoring organisation Tell Mama found that the number of incidents of anti-Muslim hate crime rose by 375% in the week after Johnson compared Muslim women who wear burqas to letterboxes." (The Guardian. 2018, https://www.theguardian.com/politics/2019/sep/04/boris-johnson-urged-to-apologise-for-muslim-women-letterboxes-article accessed 20.05.2023).

[43] Rehana Zaman's film *Tell me the story of all these things* deals with issues of fundamentalism.

[44] BBC News https://www.bbc.co.uk/news/uk-politics-45083275 accessed 20.05.2023

politicians' populist rhetoric that appeals to right wing bigots helps fuel this hatred among the far-right supporters – who after all, believe all brown females to be a 'Paki'.

Othering seen through the lens of a dominant 'civilised' western male versus that of the 'exotic oriental', is powerfully read and interpreted by Said in his book *Orientalism* (1978), where he writes how:

> Flaubert's encounter with an Egyptian courtesan produced a widely influential model of the Oriental woman; she never spoke of herself, she never represented her emotions, presence, or history. He spoke for and represented her (Said,1978, p.14).

This image of the Oriental woman was a product of the western coloniser's male gaze, and continues to inform how Asian women are perceived. This western gaze disregards the nuanced layers of her identity - how it is informed by religion, class and caste, and thus homogenises Indian women's identity. stereotypical mis/judgements about Indian women are evoked. I unpack this further in chapter four.

In his chapter *Cultural Identity and Diaspora* (1990), Stuart Hall writes:

> The diaspora experience … is defined, not by essence or purity, but by the recognition of a necessary heterogeneity and diversity; by a conception of 'identity' which lives with and through, not despite, difference; by hybridity. Diaspora

> identities are those which are constantly producing and reproducing themselves anew, through transformation and difference (Hall, 1990, p.235).

This is an important point if we are to understand the construction of my identity as a British Indian woman. As they have taken part in the diasporic migrations of South Asians, the women in my family have constantly produced and reproduced themselves. There is no start and no end, we are constantly adapting and evolving, recreating our hybrid identities through our parental heritage, and pass these down through our children.

As Fletcher (2012) states,

> Diaspora should, therefore, be conceptualised in terms of the *routes* by which a person has got somewhere, and the *roots* they have to a particular place (Fletcher, 2012, pp.7-8).

He goes on to argue,

> Belonging, then, 'is never a question of affiliation to a singular idea of ethnicity or nationalism, but rather about the multivocality of belongings (Fletcher, 2012, p.8).

According to Parekh (2000),

> …a multicultural society should not question the divided loyalties of people within the 'home' nation, as they should have the power and right to embrace dual and even multiple identifications (Parekh (2000), cited in in Fletcher, 2012, p.8).

British nationality is not automatically aligned to British heritage. A nationality is either constituted through place of birth or place of residence over a period offering citizenship of that land, as the 2011 Census results evidenced, as I discussed earlier in the Introduction. The point I make is that you can be British through birth right or citizenship of a British colony[45] - this gave many colonial subjects the right of British nationality, but it is cultural heritage that dictates ethnicity – my being Indian, and in my view, why I dispute being English.

The role of the maternal in constructing identity

In this section, I discuss how the maternal plays a part in the construction of my British Indian identity. I draw on Dosanjh and Ghuman's study (1997) on the childrearing practices of a selection of Asian mothers in Britain. As the authors state,

> The transformation of migrants into settled citizens has important implications for the transmission of cultural values and religious sensibilities to the next generation (Dosanjh and Ghuman, 1997, p.286).

[45] "Until 1949, nearly everyone with a close connection to the United Kingdom was called a 'British subject'. All citizens of Commonwealth countries were collectively referred to as 'British subjects' until January 1983. However, this was not an official status for most of them." The Citizenship laws have been updated 1983, 2001, 2006 and 2021. Gov.UK. *Check if you're a British Citizen*. Available at https://www.gov.uk/check-british-citizenship (Accessed: 10 May 2023).

Their study investigated first generation migrant mothers from the sub-continent and second-generation mothers born in Britain. The two objectives of their study were to investigate, firstly, the importance of the mother's role in establishing core values within her children, "namely the mother tongue and religion – which are deemed to be crucial in the identity formation of young children." Secondly, they sought to explore

> the parent's attitudes towards racism, interracial marriages and
>
> the treatment of boys and girls in the family (Dosanjh and Ghuman,1997, pp.286-7).

This study has guided my thinking about the maternal in my research, particularly in terms of understanding how previous generations of women in my family have impacted my experience of motherhood. It also helped me to think about my experiences of racism, marriage to an English white man, and the gender inequalities that I observed and was subjected to within my family during my childhood. Dosanjh and Ghuman concluded that most of the second-generation Asian mothers in their study were,

> ...[i]n the process of developing and shaping a new form of culture…this form of biculturalism provides an enriching experience for their children and helps them cope with the stresses and strains of living in two cultures" (Dosanjh and Ghuman, 1997, p.301).

The conclusions from the study, perhaps, has more relevance for me as a British Indian woman as I lived in two cultures. Although I would critique the 'positives' of the idea of living between two

cultures as dated, because for me it did not allow for independent autonomy of the formation of my identity and the conflicting impact of navigating two identities has led to this research into unlearning my identity to relearn what has constructed my identity. In terms of being a mother of dual heritage sons, there is a difference, in that they are of Indian and English heritage, so consolidation of their biculturalism may not be as extreme. They also have no experience of the sibling gender inequalities that I was exposed to as a child. Their experience of racism varies depending on how they pass in social interactions. This is where I reflect upon the impact of the women in my family had on my identity as a British Indian woman and mother.

My practice highlights how a child's identity is formed by matrilineal influences that obtain, an Asian household. As Zahid (2011) explains

> I always thought my father was the head of the household, but after my mother died, I realized that she was the head of the family, the force that kept us together as a symbolic unit (Zahid, 2011, p.314).

Reflecting on my childhood in the course of this research, I was struck by the parallels; the women in my family assumed the traditional male role as head of the household and it was their willingness to step beyond the traditional roles for women, their drive to maintain their families in mind, body and soul, and strength to push back against their detractors that kept our family intact.

Theory into practice

Through my practice I have had to (un)learn what I thought was my British Indian identity. My art constantly questions my brown female body, its purpose, it's meaning, it's being. This transformational process of my (re)learning and reacquainting myself with my British Indian female identity, I question who I am constantly becoming. As I learn through artistic investigation the facets that make up my identity, I become aware of the necessity to sit in Bhabha's third space, that space I equate with the 10cm hole, an entry into and an exit from an existence. To satisfy, nourish and grow this hybrid identity, surely the rightful existence is within a shared space with Others like me, so that we can disseminate the knowledge of what it means to be a brown, British-Indian woman.

Part 2 Practice Review

With the increasing emergence of a new wave of British South Asian female artists on the contemporary art scene in Britain, there is a gap in the knowledge regarding the conceptualisation of our individual visual practices, the personal histories, emotional connections and the embodiment of our British-South Asian female identities. This leads to questioning our sense of belonging as I discovered for myself through my practice.

From discussions with other British South Asian female artists, a reoccurring theme appeared.[46] We all had the need for exploration of our hybrid identities. This need arose and became a conscious thought when an individual moment occurred in each of our lives, albeit a personal decision made by everyone, rather than a life changing moment thrust upon each of us without

[46] The informal discussions were held between 2019 – 2023.

our control. We each experienced a moment of awakening that made us question our individual selfhood, and the identities that had been created. This ‘need’ is not only confined to South Asian artists, but is also felt by other South Asians wanting to explore their background and life in British society today.

The chosen artists are prominent in current debates on Brownness and the British Indian women’s identity, and are thus relevant to my research. As I progress, it will become apparent that many of the issues discussed have been experienced to lesser or greater degree by these women artists. But what has not previously been captured through simultaneous artistic practice and theoretical analysis, is what constructs the British Indian woman’s identity and the maternal, from the perspective of a British Indian woman artist.

The thoughts behind my making, production and the installation of artworks is discussed in relation to various narratives, that also inspired the works of the other South Asian women artists working in the field of identity unlearning for the subsequent relearning. My works within the field of contemporary art are contextualised among the following artists and their artworks, *Bride* (Jai Chauhan, 2012), *Mother* (Raksha Patel, 2017), *Untitled* (Raksha Patel, 1996), *Black as a Thava* (Nisa Khan, 2018), *No Pain no Gain* (Nisa Khan, 2018), *Fractured Earth* (Suman Gujral, 2017), *Innocence* (Permindar Kaur, 1993), *My Womb is Empty* (Saam Noorah, 2020) and finally *Housewives with Steak-knives* (Sutapa Biswas, 1983-85).

Some of these works have been specifically chosen for their representations of South Asian women’s bodies, whether figuratively, as with Patel and Chuhan’s artworks, or more abstractly as my own artworks along with Khans’ (Khan and Noorah identify as British Pakistani or British

Muslim women. I felt it necessary to include their work in this artist review, because they deal with similar themes of identity construction through practice, and highlight our shared Punjabi heritage). The underlying intention of making the personal political through our individual practices is collective. However, there has been an evolvement in the visual representation of the South Asian woman, leading to a re-presentation of her. This together with the accompanying titles of artworks and descriptive texts, has led to a more radical approach to re-representing her sexuality. This approach is in a reaction to the stereotyping of the South Asian woman as a subservient being stripped of sexuality.

We are all British women of South Asian descent, and while our practices span over forty years, our general histories may be shared, because we have two (the sub-continent and Britain) or three (sub-continent, East Africa and Britain) geographical spaces in common. Our cultural upbringings merge because of our heritage, but where we do appear to separate is in the presentation of our experiences of sex, birth and motherhood, as not all of us are mothers. There is an expectation that we should be a mother. As perceived widely within the dominant culture of Indian society, motherhood is the sole function of the woman's body, and her main role in life, once married.

The maternal in art

Raksha Patel's work *Mother* (2017) Fig.23 is an example of how blood and the colour red can encapsulate the mother figure or the portrayal of motherhood. This artwork relates to my artworks *Khoon* (2012-20), *10cm Holes* (2017-18) and *Seven Years of This* (2015-18) which are

my portraits of motherhood. *Mother* (2017) does also break the taboos associated with menstruation enforced by Indian society.[47]



Fig.23. Raksha Patel. *Mother*. Painting. Blood on paper 5 x 5cm (2017). Reproduced with permission of the artist.

A small painting reminiscent of Indian miniature paintings of the Mughal era, Patel uses her period on canvas. Patel and I had several informal conversations about the use of the colour red, although in this painting the blood has dried and appears brown, which I think adds another dimension to the painting, inclusive of the political, as a brown identity.

Individually, as artists, we have used both red and blood in our practices. During our talks it transpired that Patel was unwilling to share this painting and what she had used to make the painting. The in-depth discussion about my artworks and the intimacy of some of them encouraged Patel to discuss openly the use of her period blood to create the painting. She felt

[47]Unequal power relations between men and women result in women's and girls' voices not being heard in decision-making within households, communities, and development programmes. They have also led to cultural taboos, stigma, and shame around menstruation, including the belief, prevalent in many cultures, that menstrual blood, and menstruating women themselves, are impure. During menstruation, women and girls may be excluded from using water and sanitation facilities, are unable to participate fully in social, educational, productive, and religious activities and, in some cultures, are even excluded from the home. (Mahon et al. 2015, p.7).

empowered to talk about collecting the blood in a vessel and using it as a material in her making process, this blood that "goes to waste" (Patel, 2021, n.p), each month has a deeper meaning.[48]

In Indian society, menstrual blood is seen as dirty and waste, because it is associated with impurity and pollution of the woman's body. Menstruation represents another means by which Indian women are controlled and literally kept in their perceived place. Menstruating women are restricted from engaging in certain activities (cooking) and places (kitchen, temples). Yet this[49] has the capacity to link us to our bodies and nature and being. This blood can connect us to the Lunar cycle and to other females. Patel visually makes the connection to her mother through the portrait and a verbal connection to me through discussion.

The portrait of an Indian woman in her cultural dress, a red sari…is she celebrating? She wears her red bindi and her long black hair tied back in a bun. The hair reminds me of henna that is used to dye hair, giving the appearance of red highlights. The apt use of blood also evokes the expression 'you are my blood', my family. The portrait evokes a certain time, an era when the first generation migrated to Britain. It is reminiscent of some of the super8 footage in my film *Khoon* (2012-20), and there is a resemblance to the make-up and clothing which was fashionable among Indian women in the 1960s and 1970s. Patel has captured in this one portrait the effervescence of a young Indian woman in a new land. This image is an updated version of the British Indian woman in the 1960s in Britain.

[48] In conversation January 2021 as part of the Perspectives series BA and MA Fine Art Chelsea, Camberwell and Wimbledon. University of the Arts London. Online, mediated by Kelly Chorpening.

[49] Khoon translation blood.

Nisa Kahn's performance piece *As Black as a Thava.*[50] (2018) Fig.24, is a play on words that have a loaded coded cultural message.[51] This phrase was used by her mother when referring to skin colour, an idiom well known among South Asians. I heard it many times growing up. What Kahn does is to turn this phrase into a clever performance of female subservience and domestic duty, by scrubbing the thava. Here Kahn points to the degraded and impurity suggested by the word 'Black'. "The colour of shame. The stain of dishonour. The mark of evil. Undesirable. Permanent. *Beautiful?"* (Kahn, 2018, n.p).

What I appreciate about the piece is that the harder Kahn scrubs the thava the cleaner it becomes, but the shinier and blacker it remains. Many young South Asian girls are instructed that they must routinely scrub their skin to lighten its colour. Products such as 'Olivia' are still available in Asian - and African - supermarkets in Britain (Fig.25). Before their wedding day, brides are scrubbed by female relatives with a yellow dough- like mixture consisting of gram flour, lemon and turmeric, to

[50] Thava, cast iron flat black pan for cooking roti and other flat breads.

[51] Fair skin has long been part of India's national psyche. The various settlers, rulers, invaders, and colonizers who entered India starting in the 1400s were relatively light skinned. This includes the Dutch, French, Portuguese, Mughals, and of course, the British, who were in India from the 17th century until India's independence in 1947. During the British Empire, skin tone prejudice became formally ingrained; the colonizers kept light skinned Indians as allies, giving them extra advantages over the rest of the "blacks." The British East India Company even named their settlement at Fort St. George "White Town" and their Indian settlement "Black Town."

The British colonizers were able to build on India's existing caste system, a socio-economic hierarchy with origins in Hinduism but which now permeates across Indian society. The upper castes like the Brahmins and Kshatriyas were traditionally powerful (also fair-skinned), while lower castes (including the "untouchable" Dalits) performed manual tasks and had darker complexions. (Dixit. 2019, n.p).

‘help’ lighten their skin. This ceremony takes place before applying the henna. The bride is considered attractive if she is fair skinned and the henna is dark.



Fig.24. Nisa Kahn. *As Black as a Thava.* Performance 45 minutes (2018). Reproduced with permission of the artist.



Fig..25. *Olivia*. Photographer Rana Allen (2020).

Kahn's description of *As Black as a Thava*,

> This performance was inspired by my memories of the colour black. Its cultural associations and the weight it carries. In this performance I use a Thava, a white washing up bowl, filled with clean cold water and white soapy suds. […] The burnt blackness of a thava (Kaalak and or/kalank[52]) can also refer to shame and dishonour. I play with these ideas by using a steel wool scouring pad and vigorously scrub the thava, removing and transferring the debris into the clean water and restoring the thava as simultaneously being saaf (clean) and black. (Kahn, 2018, n.p)

[52] Kaalak or Kalank, English translation blemish, disgrace, slander, infamy, smear, spot, stain, stigma, taint, or tarnish.

For Khan, cleanliness, to be clean, is not inherently to be fair or white. Menstruation, to bleed, is not innately dirty, unclean. Such fallacies are perpetuated by patriarchal and matriarchal ideologies and practices to enforce conformity to particular aesthetic ideals on to South Asian women. By not conforming, women are considered to less attractive, less likely to attract a husband, less likely to have social status/capital.

The bride in art

Kahn's artwork which presents the beauty standards imposed on South Asian women by society finds resonance with my artwork *The Golden Temple* (2017-19), and artworks by Chuhan and Patel. Each of us portray artistic interpretations of the bride and the enforced social rituals and ceremonies that lead up to marriage. The British Indian bride inhabits the west but is expected to adhere to eastern social norms.

Our artistic depictions of the Indian bride are individual artistic representations. We are four artists born decades apart, but with similar cultural influences. This is an important point, which will form the basis of Chapter Six *Ika Kilo, Killer Queen,* where I explore the unseen and unrepresented sexuality of British Indian women from East Africa amongst my family.

The one constant amongst the selected artworks is sexuality. The South Asian bride is situated in a sexually empowered context. Is this a unified rebellion by artists against the suppression of our sexuality? As artists we ask the questions South Asian society forbid. Through our artworks we create discussions regarding our desires.

I begin by comparing Chuhan's work *Bride* (2012) Fig.26 to Patel's *Untitled* (1996) piece Fig.27.

On first appearance, we have the use of the colour red, as was discussed earlier in relation to periods. Here red is associated with celebration, though its use has changed historically, for red was originally worn by,

> Indian monks and hermits in the third millennium B.C. but wasn't worn by brides until the Mughal Era in the early 16th century. With astrology so closely connected to the Hindu religion, red is also a symbol of Mars—the planet that rules marriage […] In our culture, it means new beginnings, passion, and prosperity. Red also represents the Hindu goddess Durga, who symbolizes new beginnings and feminine power. (Shamdasani (2021) cited in Tandon, 2021, n.p). [53]

The two artists employ different styles to convey a similar message. My interpretation of both pieces is an intrusion of the British Asian woman's sexuality, and in Chuhan's work, a more literal violation of the body and mind. The darkness behind the figure could perhaps symbolise an unhappiness, or a dark space within the mind, or the environment she finds herself. Are we in the bedroom? Has the bride been abused? Is this her wedding night?

These questions can have differing impacts depending on how the piece is read. The way the solitary figure reclines, arms behind her, maybe she is restricted, alert the viewer to the possibility that perhaps this is not the appearance of a happily newlywed bride. The body is brown, her

[53] Red has brought together superstition, heritage and mythology. The areas very much associated with Indian culture. These topics will be explored in relation to *Killer Queen* in chapter six.

breasts exposed and her parted legs displaying her genitals. The legs appear to be moving perhaps under duress, whilst the rest of her body is stilled. My interpretation of this artwork is that it represents the violation of a brown woman's body, like my abstract presentation in *1947* (2017) of the violence inflicted on the bodies of Indian women during the Partition of India. For me, most importantly, Chuhan's *Bride* (2012) does appear to exhibit the unashamed defiance of the brown woman, suggested in the way she gazes directly at the viewer. Hers is a gaze that meets and does not lower her eyes in fear.

Thinking about Chuhan's figurative painting in reference to my *Golden Temple* (2017-19) artwork exhibits a tension with the intention to expose the internal female body. To glimpse the inside of a woman, always judged by external appearance. The tension created in *The Golden Temple* through the tightly wound gold braid and threads creates visual resonance with the tension Chuhan creates in *Bride*. What appears to have been a representation of a physical violation of the woman in *Bride* (2012)*,* is presented alternatively as a metaphorical invasion of the golden opening in *The Golden Temple* (2017-19). As artists perhaps we intended to find some commonalities in our understanding of the same subject matter, and perhaps we did; however, our difference lies in Chuhan's artwork having an underlying darkness, whilst the abstract nature of mine carries fewer dark undertones.

From my perspective, *Bride* (2012) is the dark representation of a woman who has had an arranged marriage, and has been raped on her wedding night. It is unclear if the red she lays on is fabric or her blood. She has upheld her side of the bargain by honouring her parents through marriage. Chuhan has captured the experiences of many Indian brides who are unaware of their fate once they marry. The burden of honour that was imposed upon her, becomes the reality of

sexual and mental abuse by both the husband and his family. The only way to honour herself would be to leave. Perhaps she is the protagonist bride that has survived abuse or maybe she will be the victim to an honour-based killing. Or could Chuhan's artwork be a love letter dedicated to the empowerment of abused women, who have had the strength to regain their honour by leaving and surviving?



Fig.26, Jai Chuhan. *Bride*. Painting, Oil on Canvas 120 x 170cm (2012). Reproduced with permission of the artist.



Fig.27. Raksha Patel. *Untitled*. Painting, Acrylic on canvas, 51 x 51cm (1996). Reproduced with permission of the artist.

Patel's painting on the other hand, may appear more playful, but the configuration of the symbolism employed within the painting evokes a quality of a violation or 'invasion'. The spatial arrangement of the different elements suggests an arial perspective. Viewed from above, Indian woman in her demure red and gold embroidered sari or lehenga is seated. The sexual silky, smooth fabric of the sari or lehenga covers her from head to toe. The glistening fabric is pulled taut against her thighs, revealing her female form. Patel deliberately exposes the female feet in a pair

of chupli.[54] Her feet are pale brown, conversing with Kahn's piece "As *Black as a Thava.*" (2018) The fair feet, a symbol of beauty in South Asian culture. The fairer the skin the more attractive one is considered. The codes of beauty are instilled at a very early age in young women. Do not sit out in the sun, you will become black.

The female has not crossed her legs in a defensive pose. Instead, she is sitting straight with both feet on the ground, creating a divide between the legs. The folds of fabric upon her lap, in various shades of red, are suggestive of the vaginal folds and crevices, though the artist seems to be allowing for a small, restricted opening, perhaps alluding to the bride's virginity? The foot donning brogues, intrudes between the separated feet thus occupying a phallic presence within the composition. He stands towering over her, roughly two feet away. She would have to raise her head to meet his gaze. To look up to him. For her to do so her head would turn upwards, with chin pointed out, to meet the male gaze. This could be interpreted as defiance. If she was to look straight ahead her eyeline would be on his genitals.

The foot is invasive and phallic; it enters her space, which is depicted as soft and glistening. This can be interpreted as a representation of the Yoni Linga. The masculine and feminine has been encapsulated in this painting though whether intentionally is uncertain. The female has not sought to take up less space. As Ahmed (2017) points out,

> Becoming a girl is here about how you experience space. Gendering operates in how bodies take up space: think of the intense sociality of the train, how some men

[54] Chupli, Chupla meaning flip flops.

> typically lounge around, with their legs wide. […] Women might end up not even having much space […] that space has been taken up. To become accommodating, we take up less space. The more accommodating we are the less space we have to take up (Ahmed, 2017, p.25).

In *Untitled* (1996) the female figure has not shrunk away from the male figure invading her space, she has 'stood' her ground, made a feminist statement. Not apologised for her existence in taking up space.

It is this space that I aimed to present in the scale of *The Golden Temple* (2017-19). The 215cm x 215cm installation refuses to apologise for taking up space. It was originally installed as a hanging piece, where the viewer must raise their head, to look up to the artwork. To look up to the abstract representation of the Indian woman. *The Golden Temple* (2017-19).

The matriarch in art

Kahn's performance piece *No Pain No Gain* (2018) is a documentation of the chura[55] ceremony (Fig.28). In traditional Pakistani culture the chura is worn during Eid or a wedding and in Indian culture by a bride. Kahn's relationship to her mother is addressed in the performance. The memories of what she was told when she was growing up. The covert codes of matriarchal control within the Indian/Pakistani mother daughter relationship are exposed through her retelling of her experience of wearing the chura.

[55] Chura meaning a collection of bangles bought as a complete set.

As Kahn explains,

> Every Eid or wedding I would have to face the bittersweet experience of wearing churiya.[56] I connect my mother with this ritual as she would; grease my hands with baby oil, using her left hand, she would gently squeeze the widest point of my hand loosening up my bones. She would whisper Bismillah *in the name of God (an invocation used by Muslims at the beginning of an undertaking).* Taking four churiya (bangles) she would manipulate my hands until the churiya slipped onto my wrists. (Kahn, 2018, n.p)

At first, her mother performs this task in a quiet and soothing. This reminds me of what Ahmed (2017) calls the 'willful feminist', referring to the original Grimm text *The Willful Child*. As Ahmed explains

> We do not know in the story what it was that the child was not willing to do […] the child must do whatever her mother wishes (Ahmed, 2017, p.67).

[56] Churiya translation bangles.

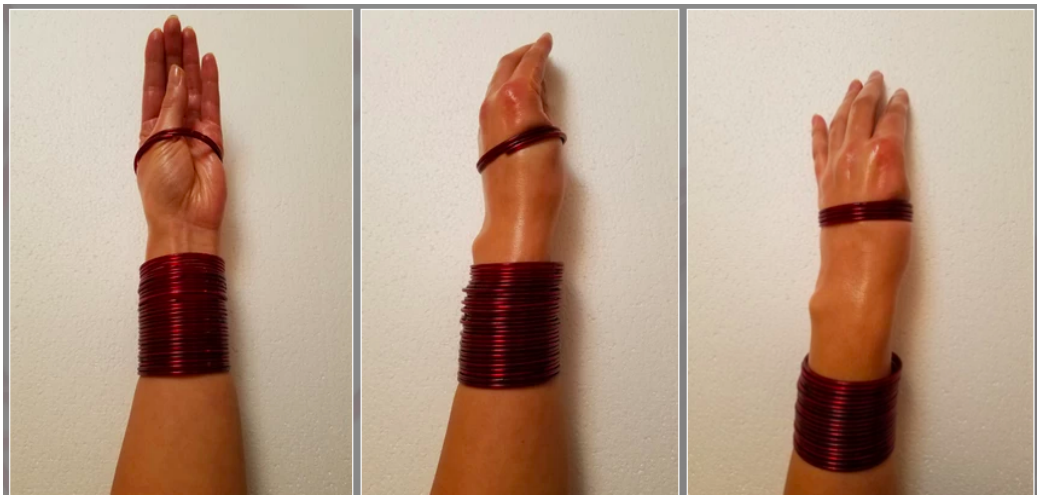


Fig.28. Nisa Kahn. *No Pain No Gain*. Performance 25 minutes (2018). Reproduced with permission of the artist.

In Kahn's *No Pain No Gain* (2018), her wilfulness in not wanting to wear the chura, tests her mother's patience, and,

> As I'd fidget and wince her patience would grow thin, and we would lose a few churiya as they shattered against my hands scratching my skin" (Kahn, 2020, n.p.).

Kahn's performance can be viewed as a representation of the wilful arm, the feminist fist raised in protest against pain and the forceful wrongdoing by her mother. Ahmed continues:

> In a willful womanist rewriting of the story, the mother would be on the daughter's side. Willfulness becomes a connecting tissue between mothers and daughters; it is a style of being or a behaviour that mothers recognise in their daughters (Ahmed, 2017, p.67).

Kahn's mother is not on her side, instead she is intent on the task at hand, no matter the amount of pain she causes her daughter. Kahn explains:

> In this performance I attempted to face my fears of wearing glass bangles (churiya) whilst wearing red, glass churiya in the size that fit my mother's hands, a size too small for my hands" (Kahn, 2020, n.p).

This is another attempt by the mother to position herself as the authority on beauty, Kahn's larger hands are punished through the act enforced by her mother, she is silently reinforcing what symbolises beauty in their culture.

There are many subtle and complex layers to this performance, one of which is feminist protest. Kahn's pain inflicted by her mother under the guise of religion or ceremony did indeed cause her to reinforce her position of the authoritarian matriarch, my interpretation is that in retaliation Khan raises her fist in a feminist statement of protest. The chura in Punjabi is also a slang term for a Dalit individual, formerly known as an 'untouchable'. Indian society perceives Dalits as having darker skin, due to outdoor work in the sun.[57] This is a return to the theme of fair skin and dark skin and its many misconstrued derogatory associations with colourism. This one artwork reveals how caste, classism and colourism are at play under the guise religion, ceremony and ritual.

[57] At my paternal familial village Paramghara in India, I remember at the age of nine on a family visit, my mother pointing out the Dalit lady who was employed by my grandparents to gather cow pats and mould them into patties for fuelling the fire for cooking.

The protesting arm in Kahn's work I associate with the brown feminist women who raised their arms and fists in support of equality at the Grunwick film processing laboratory in Dollis Hill in 1976. Jayaben Desai, the leading figure and most prominent activist appears in a protest pose, as depicted in Figure 29. So unusual was it to see Indian women involved in labour protests that it was widely reported in the press. One newspaper, *The Economist* reflecting back on the protest from across decades, reported how

> Workers, mainly Indian women and men, walked out in protest at exploitative and demeaning treatment such as being coerced into working overtime and having to ask to use the toilet, and sought to form a union. Desai led the strike. (R.V. 2016, n.p.).

These images were part of an exhibition in 2016 to celebrate forty years since Desai's protest for equal rights. The exhibition was titled *We are the Lions*, Desai's response to her employer's' statement that he was not running 'a zoo'. To which Desai replied,

> What you are running here is not a factory, it is a zoo. In a zoo there are many types of animals. Some are monkeys who dance to your tune; others are lions who can bite your head off. We are the lions, Mr. Manager." (R.V. 2016, n.p).



Fig.29. Jayaben Desai. *Grunwick Strike*. Photographer Homer Sykes. Screenshot[58] (1976).

The Partition in art

Suman Gujral's artwork *Fractured Earth* (2017) Fig.30 and poem *Dinosaur* (2020) represent her personal history of migration, diaspora and growing up in Britain. *Fractured Earth* (2017) addresses the entangled history of the Partition of India in 1947, and the struggle for

[58] Available at https://www.researchgate.net/figure/A-typical-image-of-Jayaben-Desai-against-massed-ranks-of-London-policemen-Photo-taken-by_fig1_233439944 (Accessed: 05.09.2023).

Independence of the country from British rule. These two pieces have been chosen in relation to my artwork *1947* (2017) and the similarities we faced growing up in England during the 1970s.

Fractured Earth (2017) is comprised of etching onto copper a map of India post-Partition, the dividing line drawn up by the British separating the Punjab into Indian Punjab and Pakistan Punjab. Gujral allowed the process of the acid to bite into the copper for longer than necessary to achieve a deep line that represented the division between the two countries, the deep pain, scars and intergenerational trauma that remain today. Gujral's history is like my own, in that our paternal great grandfathers were displaced due to partition, and they made the journey from what became Pakistan to the safety of Indian Punjab.

As Gujral describes,

> *Fractured Earth* shows the border between India and Pakistan. It is reversed to symbolize all the borders created to divide and displace. I left the plate in the acid for a long time so there is foul bite, where unexpected lines have appeared. Reflects life in general – individuals and governments take actions which have both intended and unexpected consequences (Gujral, 2021, Instagram post).

The strict silence observed by survivors of Partition, like my father, has only been broken in the wake of a growing interest and global awareness of the events. This is due to the current political awareness of the effects of colonisation. These stories are beginning to be documented through historians, galleries, museums, collections, researchers and artists. The acknowledgment of trauma as a key symptom of these histories, is slowly gaining recognition. This intergenerational

trauma caused by the division of India in 1947 has led to my generation wanting and needing to understand what occurred to our families, and how they came to be who and where they are today. For us to understand our place and space in Britain today we have had to trawl through our pasts. It is through our artistic practices as Indian Punjabi women we have attempted to make some reparation for what our predecessors endured. The rivers of blood that ran through the Punjab, were our blood, the blood of friends, families, people, no matter what their religion, India's population. India's Indians.



Fig.30. Suman Gujral. *Fractured Earth*. Etching, 280gms Fabriano Rosapina, 40 x 40cm (2017). Reproduced with permission of the artist.

The poem *Dinosaur* (2020) also read by Gujral at the launch of the publication *Cha* in October 2022, bluntly declares that the words of the old school – as in the UK Prime Minister Winston Churchill - are outdated. Gujral is referring to Churchill's 1942 speech delivered during negotiations with separatists in Delhi. Gujral's poems are insistent that this generation of Indians will not be silenced - they have found a voice, and will stand up to racism.

This was a poignant moment at the event, as I had already made a speech incorporating my research, by drawing attention to Thomas Macaulay's 'Minute on Education' speech. These readings and event coincided with the week during which Rishi Sunak became the first British Indian Prime Minister of the UK. I had set a date for the launch event in April 2022 and I could not have predicted that the government would be in turmoil throughout the summer, by the election of the first British Indian Prime Minister. It felt strange, and especially relevant for the launch of the publication. 'What does Brownness mean to you?' the question posed, became more pertinent and relevant. Paradoxically, it has been noted that Indian politicians within the Tory party have gone further than white members to engage in polarising policies that exclude and marginalise people on the grounds of their race, class, gender and sexuality.

There was an emotional response to Gujral's poem, especially when she spoke the last sentence. This poem was inspired by a quote from Winston Churchill's speech on the 9 September 1942:

> *I hate the Indians. They are a beastly people with a beastly religion.*
>
> (Churchill (1942), cited in Langworth, 2020, n.p).

Dinosaur (2020)

You do not hesitate to shout at me,

as if I'm nothing?

how right you feel, showing me I'm wrong,

your triumphant malice blazing

your words are old words though,

your kind has nothing new to say

your aggression, a camouflage for fear

the world is changing-you can't stop it

everything you have relied on

to puff you up, make you feel important

is toppling like the broken statues

lying at the feet of the new generation

Religion in art

Permindar Kaur's artwork *Innocence* (1993) Fig.31 was selected as it spoke to themes in my artwork *The Golden Temple* (2017-19). I wanted to explore the concept of religion as presented through artworks. *The Golden Temple* (2017-19) takes its title from the iconic Sikh gurdwara in Amritsar. Sikhs globally make their pilgrimage to the gurdwara, where they listen to the ardas[59]

[59] Ardas, Sikh prayers from the Guru Granth Sahib scriptures.

and are served langar.[60] Kaur's piece *Innocence* (1993) 60 x 72cm has been interpreted by many as a child's dress. The dress is in a shade of orange that is specifically associated with the Sikh pro separatist movement's mission to create the independent state of Khalistan. The movement was involved in civil fighting and violence in 1984 following the invasion of The Golden Temple, known as Operation Bluestar. It is widely believed that the invasion was ordered by the then Prime Minister Indira Gandhi. This ultimately resulted in her being assassinated by her Sikh bodyguard.

Kaur plays with scale in this installation as she does with much of her work. This style of dress is worn by Sikh priests and the kirpan[61] is also carried by them, this is used to divide the blessed prashad[62] in the gurdwara. This dagger is also one of the five symbols of Sikhism, alongside the kanga[63], kachera[64], kesh[65] and kara.[66]

By titling the piece *Innocence* the viewer instantly assumes that the clothing must belong to a child, but I feel that Kaur has cleverly played on the audience's perception of childhood and innocence. But due to the inclusion of the kirpan, that perception of childhood innocence is jarred. After all, why would a child carry a dagger? The outfit has intentionally been scaled down and may at first appear to be a dress for a female child. These contradictions and stereotypes can only be

[60] Langar, food cooked in the Gurdwara and served to all visitors three times a day for free.

[61] Kirpan, a steel sword, or small dagger.

[62] Prashad, a sweet food offered to all who attend a gurdwara as a blessing.

[63] Kanga translation comb.

[64] Kachera translation cotton underwear.

[65] Kesh translation uncut hair.

[66] Kara translation steel bracelet.

reassessed if the viewer understands Sikhism and its symbolisms. In Sikh temples the male priests where this outfit and not the female priests. The blue band is significant, as it is a secondary colour worn by priests and the primary colour worn by Sikh warriors as either their main dress or their turbans. The dagger is actual size and is carried by both priests and warriors. Sikh warriors tended to sleep on their left-hand side so that in the case of an attack they are able to grab their kirpan swiftly with their right hand, the same hand they wear their kara. The artwork is encased in a glass fronted black box; perhaps indicating an object that belongs in a museum rather than a gallery, perhaps this is due to the fact there is so much Sikh history and representation attached to the artwork.



Fig.31. Permindar Kaur. *Innocence* (1993). Installation, iron, fabric 60 x 72cm. Screenshot[67]. © Permindar Kaur 2023.

[67] Available at https://www.permindarkaur.com/art/child/innocence/ (Accessed: 05.08.2023).

The female body in art

I draw attention to Saam Noorah's work, *My Womb is Empty* (2020) Fig.32 I first came across the artist as a student at Chelsea College of Art. She requested I tutor her in her final year, after visiting my artist talk for *HOLES* my solo exhibition *in* 2019. Noorah was observant and astute regarding the representation and subliminal meanings behind my materials. Noorah is a muslim female artist of Mauritian heritage. Her family were indentured migrants working on tea plantations. My interest in Noorah's work stems from the fact that she is unafraid to push the boundaries, which relate to fertility, a taboo subject within South Asian households, as it can be perceived as a disability, in terms of motherhood being a sole function of the Indian woman. Her artwork brings awareness of fertility as taboo to audiences inside and outside of the South Asian community. This work also potentially highlights the changing nature of contemporary British South Asian women's art, through its unabashed frankness. By discussing 'shameful' topics, we as contemporary British South Asian women artists contextualize our experiences and our lives.

As with the conversation with Patel, which led her to a re-engagement with the miniature painting of her mother, by discarding the sharam and basti associated to the use of menstrual blood, a similar discussion between myself and Noorah allowed her the confidence to develop her work into this digital print. The taboos surrounding sex, sexuality and fertility are topics that South Asian society refrains from discussing, out of a sense of sharam, basti and izzat. For a woman to openly own her sexuality allows for her behaviour to be labelled as loose, whorish or a kanjari.[68]

[68] Kanjari meaning whore in Urdu and Punjabi. Nisa Kahn produced an artwork titled Kunjari and presented an essay for my publication *Cha* – from BL&ME: Brown Leaders & Makers Exist.

Noorah's image at first glance appears as, the fruits of fertility from the female body. Although on closer inspection the body is asexual, non-gendered but could be of Asian heritage. The artwork was produced in response to Noorah's discovery that she was infertile, and through conversations with her parents who refused to accept the fact, Noorah released her frustration and responded creatively with this piece. I recognised this as an important work in relation to my artworks *10cm Holes* (2017-18) and *Seven Years of This* (2015-18), which also discuss the female genitals, reproduction, childbearing and motherhood. I had thought that I was alone in confronting these topics, as I had been unable to find a connection to other South Asian artists who had shared their thoughts through practice on these themes, until I connected with this new wave British South Asian female art scene.

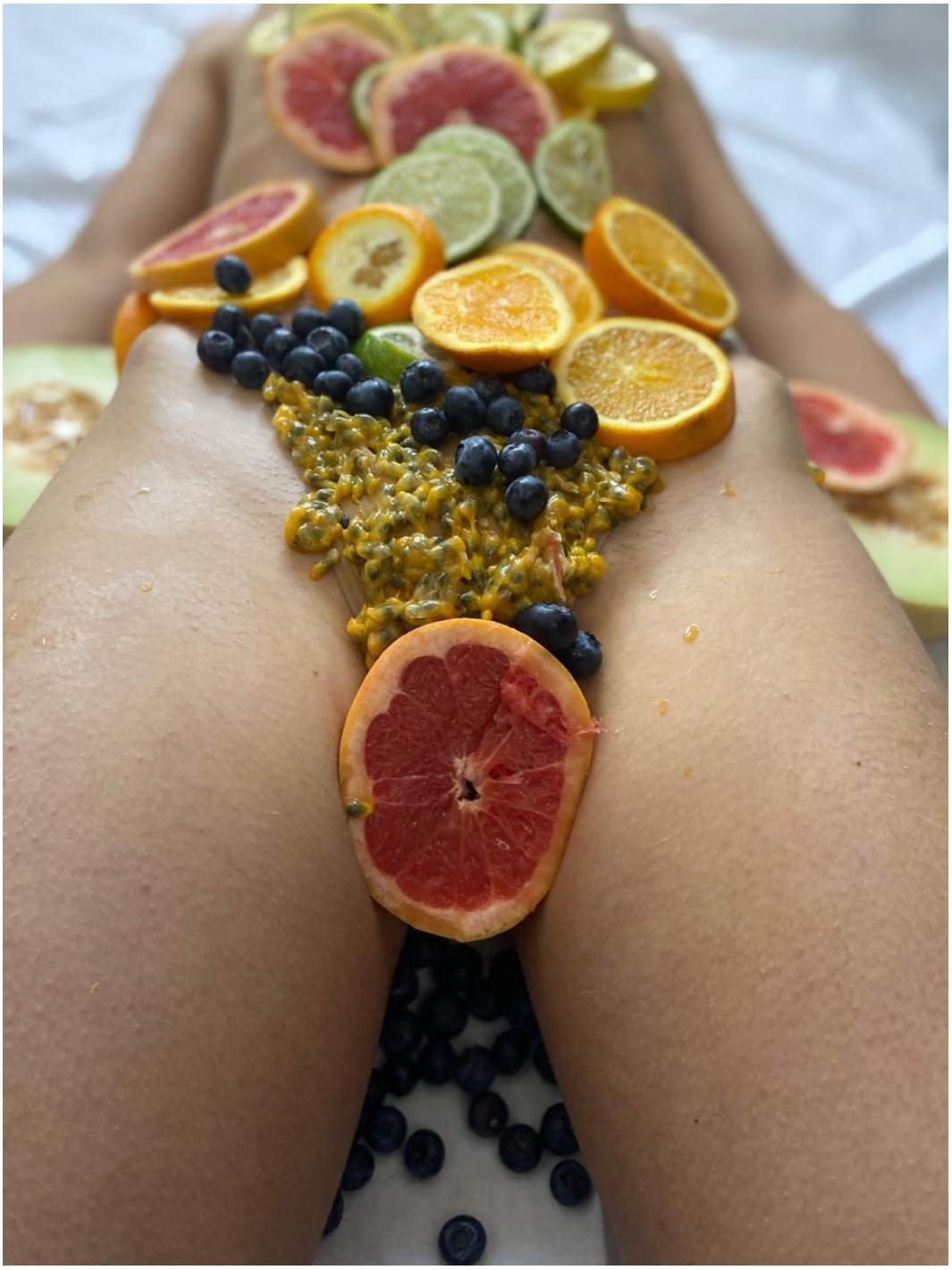


Fig..32. Saam Noorah. *My Womb is Empty.* Digital Photograph supplied by Artist (2020). Reproduced with permission of the artist.

The empowered female in art

Sutapa Biswas' artwork *Housewives with Steak Knives* (1983-85) Fig.33 has been chosen to converse with *Killer Queen* (2019). I had only seen this artwork in print, until I visited Biswas' show *Lumen* at Kettles Yard, Cambridge in January 2022. The artwork was larger than expected, and hung at height and leaning forward towards the viewer has a profound affect. This representation of Kali, one of the tantric goddesses, considered by Indian revolutionaries during the 18th century as a manifestation of Mother India, encompasses a modern and contemporary aura. This can be attributed to the selection of the political figures forming the necklace around Kali's neck. The complex, multi layered artwork in both materiality and interpretation, draws the viewer in; as you stare up at Kali, you realise that there are many commentaries taking place – patriarchy, feminism, politics, revolution and defiance.

The figure is empowered and autonomous, this is displayed through her visual appearance, she is of a dark brown complexion (reflecting the anti-Black colourism of South Asia, as I have previously discussed in the context of Kahn's artwork *Thava*). Kali is muscular, her hair is tamer than depicted in other artworks of Kali.[69] Biswas' Kali has armpit hair, again defying the conventions of beauty and femininity in the West. I listened to an online talk Biswas presented on the launch of the *Tantra, Enlightenment of Revolution* exhibition at the British Museum, during lockdown in 2020. Biswas recounted that when *Housewives with Steak-knives* (1983-85) had been previously exhibited, it received quite violent and abusive reactions. In one incident, the artwork was spat at by a viewer. In relation to this incident, I was pleased to receive further information from the artist to help with my reading of the artwork. As Biswas explained via written communication,

[69] Untamed hair a symbol of madness as discussed in chapter 6.

> The one spit mark was between the eyes in the position of the 'third eye'.[70] At a later exhibition in 2009 at the Neuberger Museum in New York the Hindutva Indian community attempted to have the artwork removed from the group show on the spurious grounds that *Housewives with Steak-knives*, 1983-85, was offensive to Hindus since "Hindus don't eat beef" and this image represented a Hindu goddess. The museum with the artist's backing, refused to take the artwork down, on the grounds that ultimately the work is a painting and a fictional, allegorical portrayal. The point being made during Sutapa Biswas's interview with Courtney J. Martin is that what we witnessed between 1985 and 2009 on a global platform, was oddly, an increase in the emergence of extreme right-wing views.[71] (Biswas. 2024).

The ignorant behaviour towards the artwork confirms that Biswas has sensitised the viewer, a provocation leading to discourse.

The knife that Kali wields is reminiscent of the pungha,[72] which is used by farmers to harvest their crops, though the blade is also used by women when cooking in the outdoor kitchen. The appearance of blood on the blade can also be provocative, as most Indians adhere to a vegetarian

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[70] Further information supplied by Biswas on Sutapa Biswas's artwork Housewives with Steak-knives, 1983-85: The violation happened between November 1985 and January 1986 when the work was exhibited at the ICA, London, as part of the landmark exhibition Thin Black Line curated by the artist Lubaina Himid. It is unknown who spat at this work, though the accuracy with which the spit landed in the artist's view suggests one of two possibilities – that the person who spat at and defiled this work was (i) expert at spitting accurately, or (ii) had been practising in order to gain an accurate range in spitting. Or perhaps both. Given the precise nature of where the spit mark landed, the artist asserts that it seemed likely that whoever undertook this act of violation had uninhibited (regular even) access to the gallery space where the artwork was situated and was most likely a racist. (Biswas. 2024).

[71] The exhibition British Subjects: identity and self-fashioning 1967-2009, curated by Louise Yelin.

[72] Pungha a large blade or machete used in the Punjab to harvest the crops.

diet, especially during religious festivals. So, is this the blood of the oppressor? Kali's tongue is shown, a common depiction in most iterations of the goddess. It evokes in me a reading of Spivak's (1988) text '*Can the Subaltern Speak*?' Here Kali is not silenced by colonialism or patriarchy, she is the goddess, exerting her power and rage through her pose, facial features and expression.

Biswas has stated that top worn by Kali was purchased from Miss Selfridge, a boutique fashion store, during her twenties. The design is in keeping with the third eye chakra, which offers protection from evil.[73] Finally my attention is drawn to the raised red painted hand, is it raised to signal 'stop!' or is it raised in peace? Or victory as Jayaben Desai and the Grunwick strike. The sindoor[74] on Kali's hand is ambiguous, it can be the sindoor found on iconographic statues outside Indian temples, representing blessings, fertility, or celebration. Lastly, in her secondary right hand is the English rose and a photocopied image of *Judith Beheading Holoferness* by Artemisia Gentileschi As Biswas explains,

> Many artists have painted this narrative, but Gentileschi's portrayal in my view is the most powerful; palpable in the way that representations of Kali are (Biswas, 2019, p. 29).

[73] Biswas in conversation with Courtney J. Martin at the Yale Center for British Art in Autumn 2019.

[74] Sindoor a powder/pigment worn by Indian women either on the forehead as a bindi or in the parting of their hair, expresses celebration, marriage, power, or fertility.

Summary

My discussions with Noorah, Khan, Patel and Gujral have guided my research in the British South Asian women's contemporary art scene. The discovery that there is a new cohort of British South Asian women visual artists, who unashamedly unveil the taboo without fear was critical to my research. These discussions are not only between us but with a wider audience. The themes range from our personal experiences of female sexuality, repression, oppression, womanhood, autonomy and empowerment. Some of these topics have previously been represented by artists such as Zarina Bhimji, Sutapa Biswas, and Chila Kumari Singh Burman – who I know as the three influential 'Bs' of modern British South Asian women artists. Biswas is extremely influential and relevant to my practice and research, in particular Kali's representation in *Killer Queen* (2019). I have deliberately not included Bhimji and Burman in this review for the very reason that they are all too often referenced by South Asian researchers, writers, critics and artists.

I believe that through my artistic practice, research and networking I have unveiled a generation of contemporary British South Asian female artists. Some have been overlooked by the industry, because it is easier to reference the known, tried and tested Brown artists that emerged from the Black art scene in the 1980s and 1990s. Alongside Biswas and Chuhan who have both been prolifically working for many years, the other artists contribute a fresh perspective on what it means to be a British South Asian woman in contemporary Britain. The foundation to our artistic practice is that we are not intimidated or embarrassed to present our work based on identity. In the past Kaur and Bhimji have argued their work was not based solely on identity but addressed other issues. Indeed, they have refused to take part in group exhibitions based on the theme of South Asian identity.

Today as British South Asian women artists, we are on a mission to engage in the politics of identity construction, under the heading of our brownness. It could be assumed that as some of us have not historically been a part of the Black art scene, we are able to create a contemporary Brown art scene. This scene that I explore through my practice to answer my research questions.

1. How have different geographic and historical contexts contributed to the development of a distinctly British Indian female identity amongst women in my family?

2. How have maternal roles impacted the formation of that identity in my family?

3. How can my multi-media art practice unearth and piece together the constituting factors in the development of that identity within my family?

In Chapter 4 which follows, *Khoon* sets the foundation for my artistic practice. *Khoon* (2012-20), a multi-layered film work details the history of my maternal family. Their journey from India in the 1900s to East Africa and later, to the UK in the early 1960s. *Khoon* interprets the lives and roles of five generations of my matrilineal heritage, of the women within the controlling patriarchal hierarchal family structure.



Fig.33. Sutapa Biswas. Installation shot of *Housewives with Steak-Knives*. Painting acrylic, pastel, xerox collage on canvas mounted paper, 275 x 244cm (1985). Exhibited at Kettles Yard 2022, *Lumen*. Photographer Remi Rana Allen.

Chapter 3

Khoon

Khoon – ਖੂਨ – Blood

https://www.remiranaallen.com/portfolio-collections/recent-works/khoon-blood

This chapter, *Khoon,* introduces my artistic practice and lays the groundwork for my research. *Khoon* (2012-20) is a five-minute and thirty-three second film I produced partially in 2012, which I rediscovered in my studio during the Covid19 lockdown in 2020 (Fig.34). The film tracks my maternal family history from India in the 1900s to East Africa and to the UK in the 1960s. It was through reviewing the multi-layered film work that I realised the importance of reassessing the lives of five generations of my matrilineal heritage. The chapter specifically explores the lives and roles of the women within the controlling patriarchal hierarchal family structure. *Khoon* is an invaluable resource to enable me to address two of my research questions.

1. How have different geographic and historical contexts contributed to the development of a distinctly British Indian female identity amongst women in my family?

3. How can my multi-media art practice unearth and piece together the constituting factors in the development of that identity within my family?

The rediscovery of my film was also the opportunity to reassess my research and to rethink my objectives for the thesis. At this stage an introduction to my research seemed incomplete. *Khoon* allowed for that introduction and formulated the direction the thesis would take. The themes that run

through *Khoon* encapsulate the role of ‘the maternal’ in the construction of British-Indian female identity amongst women in my matrilineal line from 1914 - 2023.



Fig.34. Remi Rana Allen. *Khoon*. Film (2012-20).

Khoon was produced from over thirty minutes of super8 footage, various photographic documentation and MRI scans. The film has been re-worked for my PhD research. The sound recorded from a remembrance ceremony for my Great Aunt in 2017 has been looped for the film, allowing the film to exist in the present. The film visually evidences the trajectory of family history from India to East Africa to London (Fig.34a), between the 1900s to the 1970s. The sound expedites that journey to 2017.

The footage, photographs and manuscript emphasise the importance of personal family documentation in contextualising my research and contributes to answering one of my research questions. What geographical and historical contexts have contributed to the development of the British Indian female identity among the women in my family? and how is this identity influenced by the maternal? I will address this question through *Khoon* and through the analysis of documents including, family diaries, manuscripts and photographs. I use self autodriving as a methodology to pursue my research questions. I have discussed this in more detail in Chapter two.

This chapter introduces the history of my maternal Sikh family as they arrived in Kenya, their lifestyle and relationships, and how they exited as the country became Africanised. *Khoon* provides a visual lens to my research, The compilation of authentic primary data dating from the early 1940s in Kenya can possibly contribute to new knowledge, as the footage has not been previously seen or documented.

The original version of *Khoon* was *Death, Disease, Life* (2012) the first rendition of the same film. At the time it reflected the matrilineal passage of time. The reworked version is a more complete representation of the Dhillon women, because I have incorporated original sound, text and stills from a funeral, that relate to Manji (great grandmother), Gurnam Kaur (great aunt), Mama (grandmother/Uttam), my mother and finally, myself. These layers of *Khoon* represent the journey of the women and their lives as Indian, Kenyan, British-Indian Sikh females. The reworking of the film allowed me to include a Kirtan[75] a form of religious singing or chanting performed at funerals, weddings, or memorials and, I was able to reconsider the lives of the women.

[75] Kirtan translation, prayer, religious singing.

The text in the film is taken from the sounds of an MRI scanner. I requested a CD of my son's MRI scan following a severe flare up of his Inflammatory Bowel Disease. As the patient is scanned the scanner makes a loud alarm type beeping noise as it operates. Each of these sounds has a title. The four titles from the MRI sounds that I selected were BIDE, FLARE, RAGE and KISS as they resonated with the visual imagery in the film. The four words become more relevant as the story of the family unfolds. These sounds/text I incorporate to divide the film into sections, a criterion of the family's journey, this allows for an announcement in the film that time is passing, and a change is coming. The sound, text, footage and photographs combined produce *Khoon*. The title translated into English from Punjabi means blood.

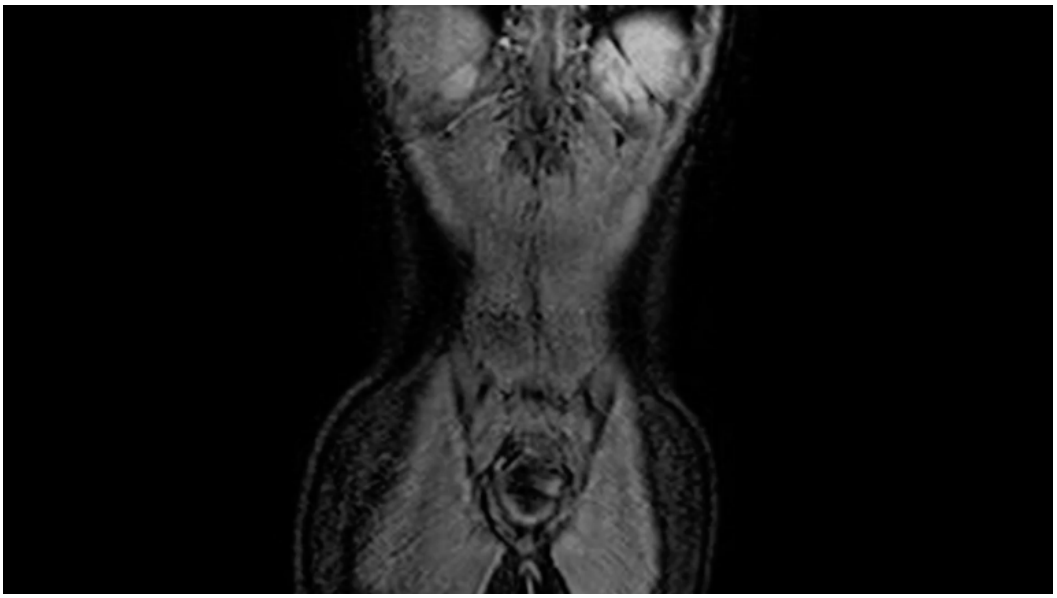


Fig.101. Remi Rana Allen. *Khoon*. Film (2012-20).

The MRI scans of my son's body, diseased and rotting, from a condition that may or may not be hereditary (Fig.101). The metaphor of the scans is the rotting disease and infestation of the patriarch, the focus of the film. Their cell like pulsating, tearing apart, moving to abstract diffusion. The innocent younger women in the family, equating to the innocence of the child's body. The internal disease

unseen by the naked eye, destructing the internal structure of the growing body, stunting it, bleeding the khoon from it gradually, until it is cut out and removed. The life blood, the blighting organ of demolition that slowly destroys the family, related either by blood or marriage. These scans the metaphor for my great grandfather Kehar Singh, his distorted views and megalomania. His diseased obsessive sexual deviance, which will unfold in this chapter. His sexual abuse was evidenced through court records from the High Court in Nairobi, which themselves provide the foundation for an academic chapter: *R. v. Mrs Utam Singh: Race, Gender and deviance in a Kenyan Murder Case, 1949-51*, by Hynd (2015).[76]



Fig.102. Remi Rana Allen. *Khoon*. Film (2012-20).

[76] "Chunilal Singh, a lifelong family friend, asserted that Mankaran Singh had been 'highly sexed' and 'had made improper advances in the past to Asian women'. This accusation was supported by Utam Singh, who claimed that 18 months prior to the shooting his father had 'got hold of [Harjit] and wanted to dishonour her' before his mother and Jessa had intervened. Guadias Kaur, the wife of Mankaran's nephew, also went on record stating that Mankaran had previously 'entered her bedroom and demanded to have intercourse with her, and she had difficulty persuading him to leave her unmolested' when she was staying with the family in her husband's absence." (Hynd. 2015, p.238).



Fig.103. Remi Rana Allen. *Khoon*. Film (2012-20).



Fig.104. Remi Rana Allen. *Khoon*. Film (2012-20).



Fig.105. Remi Rana Allen. *Khoon*. Film (2012-20).

The following text unpicks the four descriptor sounds selected from the MRI scanner, and how I explicate them in *Khoon*.

1:08 BIDE - remain or stay? Or bide one's time, is the family to remain or stay within the confines of the patriarch in Kenya? Unable to escape? Or will a female bide her time to rise and stop the abuse? (Fig.102).

2:04 RAGE - violent uncontrollable anger? Kehar Singh's rage or the internalized rage of the women in the family? Or a vehement desire or passion for change, only achieved by dislodging the status quo? (Fig.103).

2:55 KISS - a caress with the lips, greeting hello, sexual desire, a sign of love? Or the ending, parting sign off ‘X’ goodbye, the exit from Kenya initiated by the younger generation of women? (Fig.104).

3:56 FLARE - a sudden brief burst of bright flame or light? A device producing a bright flame as a signal or marker? A sudden recurrence of an inflammation or medical condition? The disease constantly flaring and eventually uncontrollable, the only solution is an intervention signalling the end for there to be a new beginning. (Fig.105).

The words precisely chosen and situated in the film, to penetrate the flow, to jar and question the unseen, the covert visibility, events and traumas hidden in plain sight, seen by all yet unacknowledged. My intention in making *Khoon* was to disrupt from a position of power and authority the patriarchy of this family. By questioning and exposing its role in the household. I engaged my process of self-autodriving the images of the women, formulating my exposition of their personal stories. Their roles as daughter, wife, mother and widow will be investigated further in the following chapters. Through the conceptualization and making of the artworks, I attempt to formulate answers for one of my research questions - how can my multi-media art practice unearth and piece together the constituting factors in the development of the British Indian female identity within my family?

The title *Khoon* was selected not only for its literal translation into English as blood, but ‘coon’, the term was used in America as a dehumanising racial slur for Black people. Stepin Fetchit brought the

anti-black caricature to the big screen.[77] I felt the *Khoon* / coon correlation was important as there are racial tensions which are exposed through the film.

[77] "The prototypical movie coon was Stepin Fetchit, the slow-talking, slow-walking, self-demeaning nitwit. It took his character almost a minute to say: "I'se be catchin' ma feets nah, Boss." Donald Bogle (1994), a cinema historian, lambasted the coon, as played by Stepin Fetchit [...] The coon caricature was born during American slavery. Slave masters and overseers often described slaves as "slow," "lazy," "wants pushing," "an eye servant," and "trifling."" Pilgrim. 2012, The Coon Caricature, https://jimcrowmuseum.ferris.edu/coon/homepage.htm (Accessed: 23 May 2023).

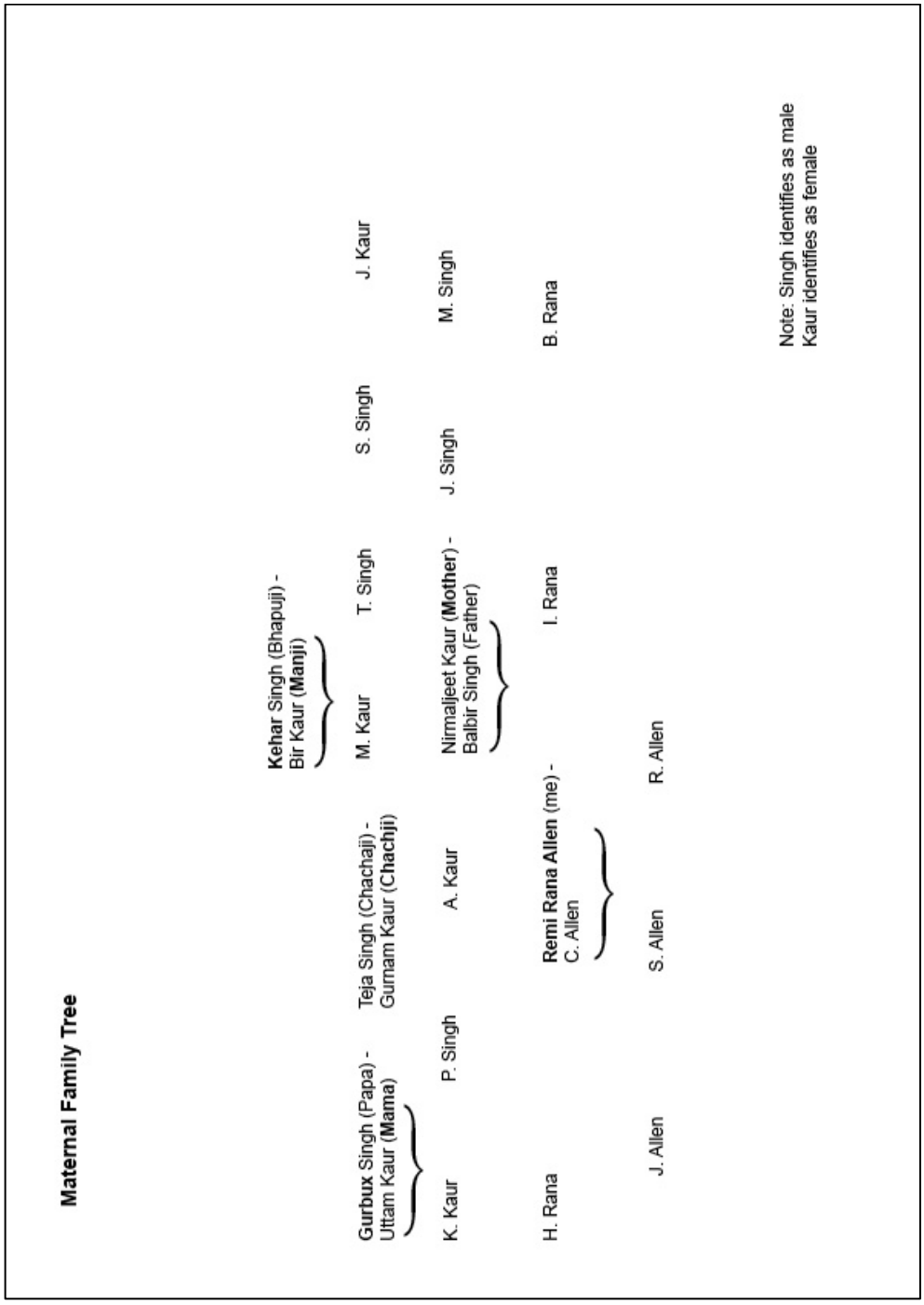


Fig.34a. Remi Rana Allen. Maternal family tree (2023).

I discovered in reworking the film that I had been rash in some of the previous opinions and judgments I had made, based on the material that had been available at the time. I had come to form opinions and judgements based on limited knowledge of the women in my maternal family. I only had material, which was subjectively patriarchal, demonstrating the role of the men. I needed to review

some of those judgements and was prompted to do so by additional photographic evidence and written personal journals that had since been uncovered. A renewed analysis of the collective material together with the reworked film may provide answers to my research questions, which are:

1. How have different geographic and historical contexts contributed to the development of a distinctly British Indian female identity amongst women in my family?

2. How can my multi-media art practice unearth and piece together the constituting factors in the development of that identity within my family?

The film along with notes from my grandmother's diary, great grandfather's (Kehar Singh) daily journal, grandfather's (Gurbux Singh) unfinished manuscript, my uncle's (P. Dhillon) published books and archival photographs provide insights into the relationship between migrant Indian Sikhs and Africans during colonialist rule in Kenya. These insights are supported by academic research (see for instance Ghai 1965, Bhachu 1985, Wilson 2018).[78] These relationships will be discussed in this chapter to underline the three-tier hierarchical social structure imposed by the white colonisers, how that impacted my family history, and the views and aspirations of the women in my family.

[78] Suggested further reading:

Jajgit Singh Mangot, *A History of the Asians in East Africa, ca. 1886 to 1945*, Published by Clarendon. P, 2012.

George Gona. *Zarina Patel An Indomitable Spirit*, Published by Zand Graphics, 2014.

Nikos Papastergiadis, *The Turbulence of Migration: Globalization, Deterritorialization and Hybridity*, Published by Polity Press, 2000. With especial reference to chapter 8, *Tracing Hybridity in Theory*.

Pankaj Mishra, *From the Ruins of Empire,* Published by Picador, 2012.

Barbara D. Metcalf and Thomas R. Metcalf, *A Concise History of Modern India (Third Edition)*. Published by Cambridge University Press, 2013.

In terms of my research into how the geographical and historical contexts contributed to the construction of the British Indian female identity among women in my family, the research material collated for the making of *Khoon* was difficult to assess from both an artistic and research point of view. The super8 footage had been shot by Teja Singh, my great Uncle between 1930s-1950s. It was masculine, documentative and at times inhumane and cruel. Shot through a patriarchal lens there was minimal evidence of the existence of women in society. The daily diary Kehar Singh[79] (great grandfather) wrote on his passage from Bombay[80] to Mombasa and the life he led in Kenya was written in Punjabi, and translated into English by Gurbux Singh (grandfather). The translated notes were discovered by P. Dhillon (uncle) who through further research compiled two books. The published books were loosely based on Kehar Singh's first-hand accounts, but mainly fiction novels, although the front end of the book *Kijabe* is factually based on Kehar Singh's life story, this part of the book resonates with photographic documentation and records at the National Archives in Nairobi. I have not had access to either the original diary written by Kehar Singh or the translated manuscript by Gurbux Singh. I must rely on drawing from the factual elements of the semi fictitious novels and oral histories from family members.

Reflective analysis of the additional super8 footage shot in East Africa, in conjunction with the writings of three generations of the male Dhillon family, their documentation provides a window into a patriarchal society which exists in India, and later, the experiences of a male immigrant as he ventures to a foreign land, to make a life for himself as a trader and businessman. There is no mention of the women in the household in his daily journal. The first time we hear about the women is

[79] Singh meaning lion usually the middle name given to a male, females are given the name Kaur, meaning princess.

[80] Bombay the colonial name for Mumbai.

when they make cameo appearances in the fictitious books written by P. Dhillon, they generally appear in limited roles, as stereotypical love interests or as villains.

In the making of *Khoon* I have tried to redress the biased male perceptions of my family's life in Kenya, as captured by my great uncles super8 footage. I address this general exclusion of women family members by incorporating supplementary photographic documentation and text. I have drawn on Uttam Kaur's (grandmother) diary, and a discussion with my mother, to gain their perspectives on what it meant to be a Sikh Indian woman living in colonial Kenya from 1914 to the early 1960s. These sources revealed women's inner strength as they struggled for their rights as women, and their independence, as they relocated their children to London in the 1960s.

The two women's stories that I explore are those of Mama[81] (grandmother/Uttam) and Gurnam Kaur (Chachiji my great aunt). Chachiji was cast as 'the evil other' by the Dhillon family for the accidental shooting (according to the court records at the National Archives of Nairobi) of Kehar Singh, my great grandfather. Chachiji's story is based on fact, and is extraordinary. Together these two women are the emerging feminist matriarchs, the missing characters from the patriarchal filming and writings. This additional primary research material in *Khoon* as part of my multi-media art practice can aid in unearthing and piecing together the constituting factors in the development of the British Indian female identity within my family.

[81] Mama the Swahili for mother. Ma or Amma the Punjabi for mother and Mum the English for mother. I find these interpretations relevant, as my family travelled from India the Ma-land to Kenya the Mama-Land, to England the Mum-Land each generation in the diaspora has acquired the word for mother connected to the culture of that country.

Uttam's diary, found among her possessions upon her passing in February 2010 was one of the first instigators into the journey of researching my matrilineal family history. The manuscript dated 2009 was a recollection of her life as a daughter, wife and mother in Kenya, and onward to her arrival in the UK in 1967. The personal memoir together with photographic documentation enables me to contextualise the history of four generations of mothers from India to Kenya to the UK.

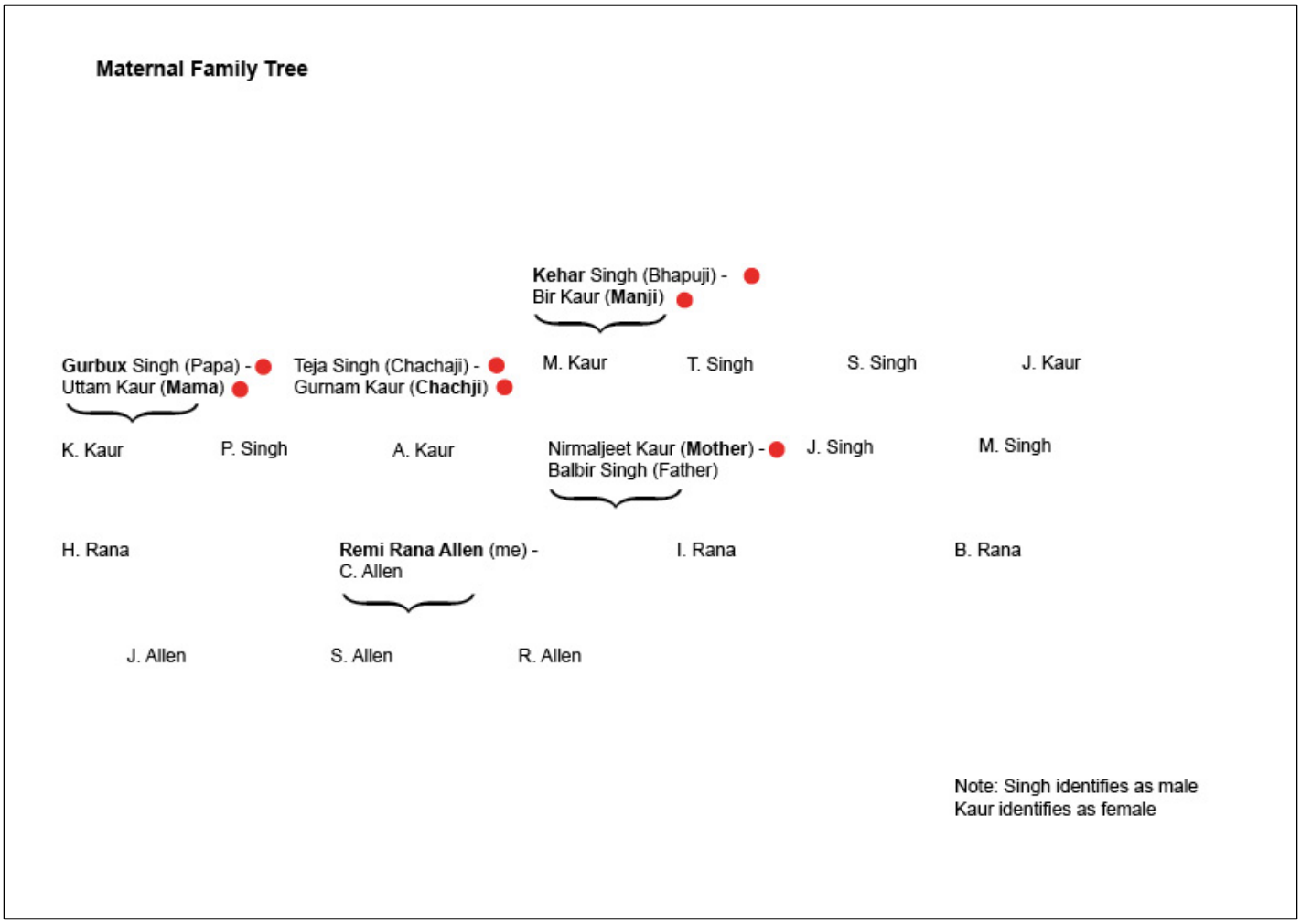


Fig.34b. Remi Rana Allen. Maternal family tree (2023).[82]

[82] This family tree highlights the characters in this chapter.

The point of departure for the film *Khoon* is the settled family in Kijabe, which is at,

> The edge of the Great Rift Valley Escarpment […] About 6000 feet above sea level, the climate is cool and the winds often blow at a strong pace. Kijabe means “windy” in the Masai dialect (Dhillon, P. 2008, p.307)[83].

At this time in the 1930s, Manji and Kehar Singh’s six children are grown up, and it is their second son Teja Singh who has shot the super8 footage. The film’s opening sequence juxtaposes shots of wild animals, filmed on a hunting safari organised by the Dhillon brothers together with some Masai. The hunting of the animals is extremely distressing to watch as the images of the zebra, hoisted and lifted to hang from the tree is cruel. The hunting was mainly for the animal hides. These hides would be traded, and the meat eaten. The safaris were originally for the family, specifically for hunting. Later, as they developed their tourism business the safaris would expand to include tourists residing at the Dhillon’s Lodge in Ngorongoro Forest Resort, Arusha. The intimate filming of the rituals of the Masai witnesses the close relationship the family had with the tribesman. As I delve into the family history in the next part of the chapter, this relationship is presented through accounts of how the family were invited to restricted rituals that were reserved for the Masai or ‘special’ guests.

In the first part of *Khoon* there are still shots from my great grandfather Kehar Singh’s funeral. These three surviving images have been merged with the shot footage, forming the foundation for the historical story of the women protagonists in the Dhillon family. In Kenya in 1949, Gurnam Kaur (great aunt) would become the main accused embroiled in the controversial death of Kehar Singh. Chachiji

[83] To differentiate the citations of the Dhillon family I will include the initial of the author.

(Gurnam Kaur his daughter-in-law) would be imprisoned, accused of his murder. She would be the first Indian woman to be sentenced to be hanged in Kenya. Manji (great grandmother) would not only lose her husband, but would witness her sons' sibling relationships deteriorate due to their mistrust of each other and financial difficulties. Mama (grandmother) would gain independence and autonomy to instigate the end of her family's lives in Kenya, which included my mother beginning her new life in London.

The chapter is divided into two parts: The first part details the life of the Dhillon family in East Africa, and the second part examines their lives following their migration to the UK.

Part 1 - The family in Kenya – East Africa

For over two thousand years Indians were at the heart of the economic activity which brought the influences of a wider world to the East coast of Africa […] the Indians showed themselves the most persistent and the most resilient […] when old trading systems were being shattered by the advent of new political powers, whether Portuguese, German or British, Indians were still in demand for their skills and labour (Singh, 1965, p.1).

Before embarking on his journey to Kenya, Kehar Singh (Fig.35) had married Bir Kaur (Fig.36) in 1905, when she would have been around seven years old. As Dhillon writes,

> …the girls didn't quite understand the significance of their preparations, neither realising that upon their sixteenth birthdays they'd be joining […] as their arranged wives, whether in the wilds of Africa or at home in the Punjab (Dhillon. P, 2008, p.35).

Following their wedding, Kehar Singh migrated to Kenya, while Manji remained in her parent's home. She joined her husband in Mombasa in 1913 at the age of fifteen to start her married life with a man ten years her senior. She had only seen him once before at her wedding ceremony, eight years previously in the village of Ladhe, Amritsar, in the Punjab, where she was born.



Fig.35. Kehar Singh (Bapuji), Photographer unknown (no date).



Fig.36. Bir Kaur (Manji), Photographer unknown (no date).

Indian migration to Kenya

> Life in India was good, but I want something more – not the sedate life my father and my father's father led, but a life that makes the blood sing in my veins. Hunting lions, taming a continent, forging a living out of the steel of my will and the bounty of nature, a new life in a new land; what more could I ask for? (Dhillon, P., 2008, p.5).

Kehar Singh left behind his birth right, the land he would inherit in India, and in his mind there existed no 'myth of return'; in fact he would assist many more family members to travel from their village in India to settle in Kenya.



Fig.37. From left to right Kehar Singh, Turlock Singh, Bir Kaur, Atri Kaur, Nihal Kaur (Holding Sardool Singh) married to Kala Singh, Front row Gurbux Singh and Teja Singh. Photographer unknown (c1923).

Kehar Singh Dhillon and his childhood friend and neighbour Kala Singh (Fig.37), both from the village of Thamanghar, Bhatinda in the Punjab, and many other Sikhs, Muslims, Guajarati and Hindus answered the call of the British to construct the Kenyan-Ugandan railways. They travelled to Mombasa c1905. The charter of 3rd September 1888, (the year Kehar Singh was born),

> …granted by Queen Victoria to the Imperial East Africa Company: 'the possession by the British Company of the coastline, as above defined and includes the port of Mombasa, would be advantageous to the commercial and other interests of our subjects in the Indian Ocean, who may otherwise be compelled to reside and trade under the government or protection of alien powers (Singh, 1965, p.3).

The first group of 1000 indentured male labourers or 'coolies'[84] as they were termed, arrived in Mombasa in 1896. They were freely recruited to save costs and to speed up the construction of the railways. Their contracts stipulated that they spend a maximum of three years labouring, "…at the end of which a man was entitled to a free passage back to India or could remain in East Africa" (Bhachu, 1985, p.21).

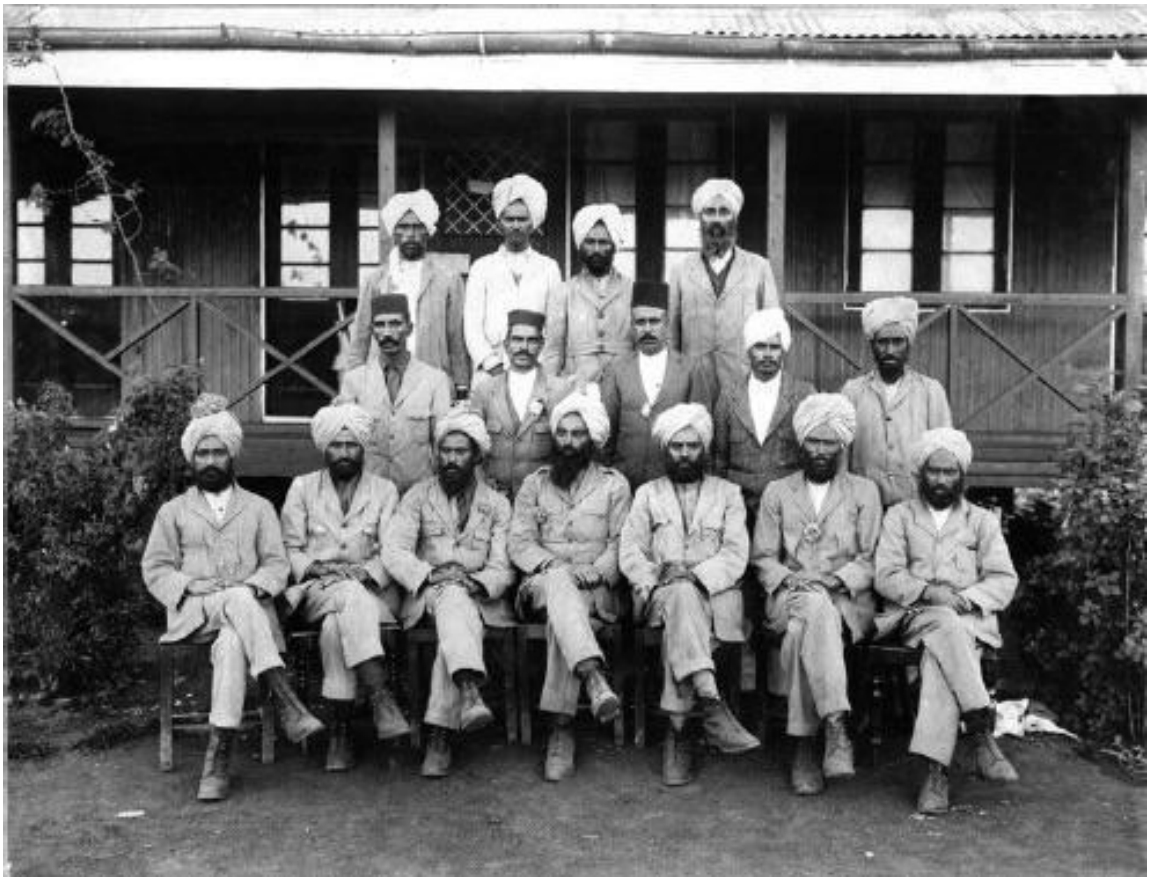


Fig.38. Nairobi Traders Masai Reserve. Kehar Singh front row, 4th from left. Photographer unknown (1914).

[84] Coolie is a term meaning an unskilled labourer but was applied to all Indians in East Africa.

Africanisation of East Indian migrants

Kehar Singh and Kala Singh remained in East Africa. Kehar Singh would build a life first as a trader (Figs.38, 39, 40 and 41), specifically trading in the heart of Masailand, where he "…began his travelling duka[85] business which helped make his fortune" (Dhillon, P, 2008, p.307). In 1944, the Dhillon family started further businesses in Kijabe and Loliondo (Figs.42 and 43). They went on to build one of the first powered sawmills in Rotian, Narok in 1955 (Figs.44, 45 and 46).

> Within the Sikh community the Dhillons were referred to as 'Masai waleh' in reference to their ties with Masailand […] The term 'Kala Singha' used to identify all Sikhs by the local Kenyans[86] was derived from Kala[87] Singh's name (Dhillon, J. 2017, n.p).

Sardool Singh (Fig.47), the youngest of the Dhillon siblings, was,

> …popular with the local Masai in Loliondo, where he spent most of the time, they named him 'Dhilo'. He would often playfully challenge young Masai morans[88] to see who was stronger at lifting barrels, lifting the Masai mkuki[89] single handed from one end and other tests (Dhillon. J, 2017, n.p).

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[85] Duka, Swahili for a small grocery shop.

[86] 'local Kenyans' referring to the indigenous Kenyans. As time progressed the Indians would start to refer to themselves as Kenyans, East African Sikhs, Indian Kenyans, or Sikh Kenyans.

[87] The masculine 'Kala' in Punjabi and Hindi means Black – as in the feminine 'Kali'.

[88] Masai warriors.

[89] Mkuki meaning spear in Swahili.

This would imply that the Dhillon family at this stage had successfully integrated themselves into both the Sikh and Masai communities.



Fig.39. Nairobi Traders Masai Reserve. Photographer unknown (1914).



Fig.40. Transporting Goods. Photographer unknown (1938).



Fig.41. Transporting Goods. Photographer unknown (1938).



Fig.42. Customers to the Dhillon Store in Loliondo. Photographer unknown (1944).



Fig.43. Gurbux Singh and Jang Singh at Posho Mill, Loliondo. The mill was powered off an old Dodge truck engine modified by Gurbux Singh. Photographer unknown (c1944).



Fig.44. Sawmill, Rotian, Narok. Photographer unknown (1955).[90]



Fig.45. Sawmill, Rotian, Narok. Photographer unknown (1955).

[90] This sawmill business opened eleven years after the first sawmill in Fig.43.



Fig.46. Sawmill, Rotian, Narok. Photographer unknown (1955).



Fig.47. Sardool Singh ‘Dhilo’. Note the westernised dress, but he still retains his white turban. Photographer unknown (1940).

The integration process had begun with Kehar Singh, who as a trader in Masiland and an advocate of the politics in Kenya at the time supported the rights of the nomadic Masai tribe. Kehar Singh, his wife and sons travelled extensively throughout Masailand. (Figs.48, 49 and 50 depict a trip c1939 and Figs 51, 52, 53 and 54 a trip in 1957). The family appear to be advancing and growing, and the picture represents an example of the typical extended family structure that Indians still adhere to.

At this time in Kenya the political career of an Indian could only reach a certain level. This was to ensure the political, economic and social three tier hierarchical system the white colonials enforced remained in place – whites at the top, Indians in the middle and Africans at the bottom. Kehar Singh passed away in 1949 at the age of sixty before his ambitions to be more politically active could be

realised. With his departure, his sons were not interested in pursuing politics but focused their energies on building profitable businesses.

Their relationship with the Africans alters, as western ideology of colonialism takes a hold. They become less invested in equality and more accepting of the myth of white superiority and their position as middle men, knowing they were not equal to the whites but that they were better off than the Africans. The relationship further fractured with the demand for the Africanisation of Kenya, and their fear that they would be ruled by people they considered beneath them in the hierarchical structure the British colonialists had engineered.[91] It is possible that as India had gained Independence of British rule in 1947 that the Dhillon family realised that Kenya would also be following suit at some point.

[91] As Ghai states in *'Portrait of a Minority Asians in East Africa'*,

One of the most striking features of colonial rule was the compartmentalisation of society in three or so racial groups, a compartmentalisation which was reinforced by economic, social and political discrimination and segregation. There were separate residential areas for the different communities, separate schools, hospitals, maternity homes, clubs; on the political level, the institution of separate electoral communal representation stimulated racial political parties and made racial interests inevitable as political issues; and the nominated majorities in the legislative councils, and so the absence of a genuine parliamentary cabinet system made less imperative forms of racial co-operation among the elected communal members and their political parties. (Ghai. 1965, p.131).



Fig.48. Campsite. Photographer unknown (c1939).



Fig.49. Campsite. Photographer unknown (c1939).

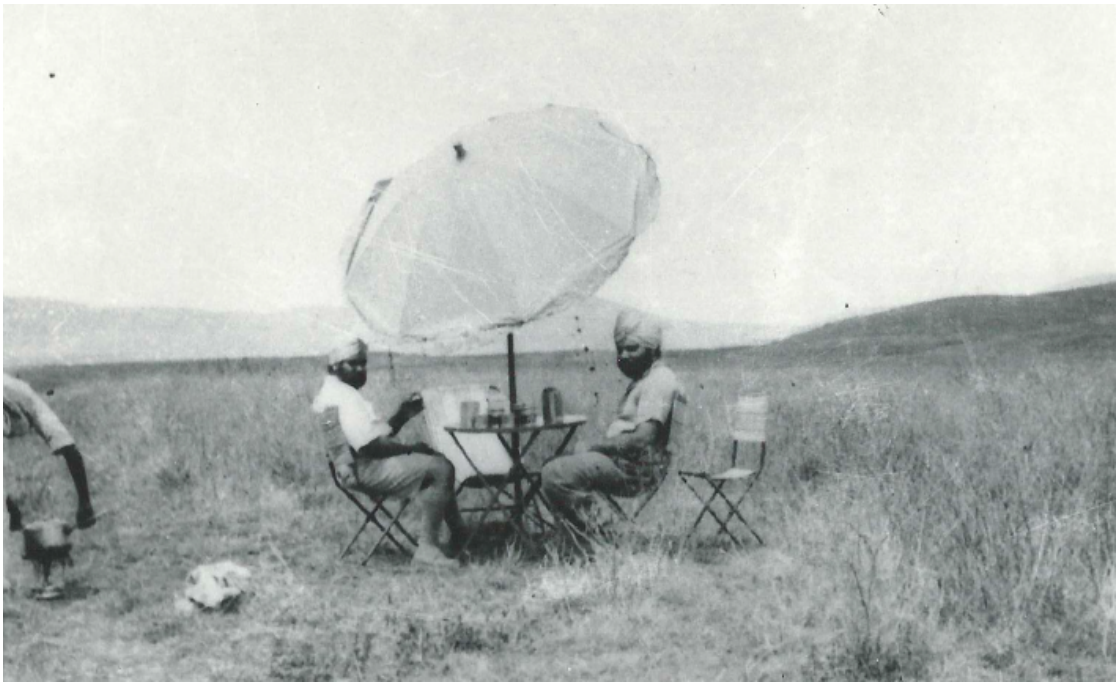


Fig.50. Campsite Sardool Singh and friend. Photographer unknown (c1939).



Fig.51. Family campsite. Photographer unknown (1957).



Fig.52. Family campsite. Photographer unknown (1957).



Fig.53. Family campsite. Photographer unknown (1957).



Fig.54. Family campsite. Photographer unknown (1957).

Although Kehar Singh backed the Masai claims for land and voting rights, the colonial system would act as a roadblock to the progress of both Asians and Africans.

> On the economic level, the compartmentalisation was reinforced by different scales of salaries in the public, and imitatively, the private sectors, the exclusion of the non-whites from the White Highlands; the African reserves; the lack of equal opportunities in public and private services; the necessity for Africans to have kipande[92], etc if they wished to stay in towns (Ghai, 1965, p.131).

[92] Kipande a system of requiring a passbook to inhabit a place.

It must be pointed out that Indian settlers in colonial East Africa were restricted from acquiring land. This is a paradox as the recruits from the Punjab, specifically the Jats,[93] a caste from an agricultural heritage, would aspire to settle on and cultivate land they owned. Instead, they were leaseholders, reinforcing their status as immigrants in a temporary home. Without rights to land ownership, individuals had no political, social or economic rights. If your status is of an outsider with a constant sense of impermanence, how can you reconcile the place as a homeland? This would have been difficult for Kehar Singh to accept, as he had given up his rights to his inheritance – the land in the Punjab - when he decided to take up permanent residence in Kenya.

This may have influenced Kehar Singh's decisions to fight for not only his rights under the discriminatory laws set by the colonisers, but also for the rights of the Masai. The areas that the migrants were allocated tended to be in urbanised Nairobi, a central location for many Asians, and where the Dhillon Brothers owned a shop. Here they developed their interest in technological gadgets, conveniences and machinery, and they started to adopt western lifestyles, signalling the beginnings of the change in their identity. As Bhachu states,

> With the weakening of the ‘myth of return’ and the overall improvement in their economic status, the structure and attitudes of the Indian community changed considerably.” (Bhachu, 1985, p.24). They aspired to remove themselves from the image of the poor migrant from rural Punjab, and instead to be regarded and respected as ‘tech savvy’ businessman,

[93] In the caste system the Jats are the farmers, the Tharkans/Ramgarhias – carpenters (the majority of Sikh settlers in East Africa), the Aluwalias – businessmen, the Beawer – tailors and the Dalit/Chura/Untouchables - labourers.

> In essence, they initiated a process of East Africanisation of Indian immigrants and the gradual decline of their initially strong links with India (Bhachu, 1985, p.24).

The East Africanisation of the Indian was the emergence of their hybrid identity, shaped by their lives in East Africa and the detachment from India.

The Dhillon brothers used the knowledge they acquired from working the machinery to develop a sawmill business. During WWII, a shortage of alcohol inspired Gurbux Singh (grandfather) to open a distillery to produce alcohol from potatoes. In terms of the organisational side of their businesses, community and social structure, the skills which they acquired and later exploited after migrating to the U.K, were gained by

> … exposure to an efficiently organised community, that of the Ismaili Muslims led by the Aga Khan […] it acted as a 'pace-maker' for the rest of the East African Indians, who tended to imitate this progressive community in developing communal facilities and an individual identity" (Bhachu,1985, p.26).

East African Indians realised that it was important to organise a community centred on facilities for education and religion, communal places where they reinforced their Indian identities. The colonialists cleverly played on the idea that Asians wanted segregation from the wider community, because they wanted to preserve their culture, religion, language, and rituals, and opposed integration with the Africans. This may have been the case for some Asian communities, but Kehar Singh's history does not support this as his belief. The colonial laws were in place to divide and

conquer the two races. It would be their 'fear' of unity and harmony between Asians and Africans that would expose their vulnerabilities, and lead to losing their ruling status. The colonials promoted this divisive tactic as positive to the Asians, in that they were supporting them to preserve their cultural identity. Perhaps so, but it also hindered inter-communal and inter-racial contact.[94]

In addition, the 'home' leave granted to Asians also undermined their national identity and status; this provision reminded them of their lack of permanent residence in East Africa, thus reinforcing their uncertainty of their rights in an African country.

> … for a long time, there was immigration from India and the immigrants tended to come from certain specified regions of India, the Punjab, and Gujarat, which had already provided the bulk of the Asian community. The effect of all this was to make the Asians a self-sufficient, ethnocentric community (Ghai, 1965, p.133).

The race-based social hierarchy imposed by the colonisers was a means to control the population through unjust discriminatory economic, social and political means. Why there was not a higher degree of resistance to the system is astonishing: perhaps, the Indians felt that it was self-serving to

[94] As Ghai writes,

Laws were enacted in East Africa providing for the application of personal, religious laws e.g., marriage, divorce, succession, to the Asian communities [...] In addition, the Asians, by and large continued to maintain links with their communities of origin [...] this was helped by fairly generous provisions for 'home' leave every four years or so. (Ghia. 1965, p.132).

agree with the status quo. Or perhaps they felt sheltered from competition with Africans, even though they were aware that certain important positions were closed to themselves.[95]

Relationships with Kenyans

As Kehar Singh built up his resources and businesses, he would have been aware of the inequalities of the hierarchical social structure, especially with his keen interest in politics. The older Indian generation accepted this hierarchical system because of a

> …low political consciousness and little education […] Sensitivity on matters of human rights area relatively new phenomenon (Ghai, 1965, p.133).

Therefore, Ghai's argument writes makes sense, there was little consideration for the human rights of the Africans, or of women in general, and there was no consideration at all for animal welfare. We witness the Dhillon men's lack of care toward animals in the super8 footage shot on safari during the 1930s.[96]

The super8 camera which was used to take the footage that became *Khoon*, was acquired by Teja Singh (Fig.55), and Turlock Singh (Fig.56), who appear in the film on safari; they filmed and photographed the excursions. They stand back and watch as the animals are loaded on to the truck

[95] In a curious way, the Asians had come to believe in the myth of white superiority. The pyramidical racial structure was sometimes taken too much for granted; it was proper and inevitable that in the order of things, the white men should be at the apex. (Ghai. 1965, p.133).

[96] Under colonial British rule in India there was also a growth of hunting for sport.

(Figs.57, 58, 59 and 60), under their supervision. The footage explicitly portrays the hunting of wildlife, including gazelles, zebras, and lions. These animals are shot and roughly handled when hung from the trees, ready for the rope to be attached to the vehicle for loading.

I remember as a child visiting Chachiji and Mama's houses and there would be hides hanging from the walls, paintings of the Masai and wildlife framed and displayed. Round coffee tables made from the zebra hide, with a leather top. These would have been possessions they would have transported to London on their exit from Kenya.



Fig.55. Teja Singh (Chachaji). Photographer unknown (1940).



Fig.56. Turlock Singh. Photographer unknown (1944).

On closer inspection of *Khoon,* the Dhillon brothers have presented themselves in the role of the colonialist, especially in the scene of the African carrying Turlock Singh across what appears to be a stream (Figs.61, 62, 63 and 64). The white man's rules were accepted by both Indian and African.[97] Had the Indians in East Africa voicing their rights for equality and contributing to the economy, then East Africa may well have been another Southern Rhodesia or South Africa.[98]

Khoon portrays the Dhillon family as having been 'better off' than most Asians, their status much elevated from the humble Punjabi farmer who entered Kenya in the early 1900s. The stereotyping of Asians in Kenya is a two-fold projection of the Asian that exists in Britain. On the one hand is the middle-class East African Indian – as in the Dhillon family. On the other, the working-class self-employed shopkeeper working long hours, running his business with the free labour of his family, who represents a typical western stereotype of the direct migrant from India and the Guajarati migrant from Uganda.

[97] As Du Bois writes in his 1925 essay '*Worlds of Colour*',

The Empire could never keep its colored races within it by force [...] but only by preserving and safeguarding their sentiments. Perhaps this shrewd Kenya decision was too shrewd. It preserved white control of Kenya but it said in effect: "Africa for the Africans!" (Du Bois, 1925, pp. 439-440).

[98] They strenuously resisted European settler claims of Kenya being a white man's country [...] the Africans deny that the Asians have made any significant contribution for the good, they under-rate Asian political contribution [...] The Asians are a more hated minority than the Europeans. (Ghai. 1965, pp. 134-135).







Figs.57, 58 and 59. Remi Rana Allen. *Khoon*. Film (2012-20).



Fig.60. Remi Rana Allen. *Khoon*. Film (2012-20).



Fig.61. Remi Rana Allen. *Khoon*. Film (2012-20).







Fig.62, 63 and 64. Remi Rana Allen. *Khoon*. Film (2012-20).

I have questioned these images (Fig. 61, 62, 63 and 64) since my very first viewing of the footage. How could anyone expect another human being to do this? It is uncomfortable viewing a throwback to the days of slavery. On the other hand, from the accounts of the relationships between the Dhillon brothers and the Masais, as discussed earlier, were the African workers in such a subservient position that their employers could so blithely order them to carry an Indian across the water? I believe this to be so, though when I discussed this event with my mother, this was not her view. Indeed, she suggested that they may have been 'messing around' or even that perhaps Turlock Singh was unwell, and the African man had offered to carry him. This I find an unlikely scenario – if they were of equal status why would the African offer to do so, or why have the other Indians not carried their sick relative? She went on to say that the family had a good relationship with 'their servants', who were treated well, 'almost' like family members. They were not abused or ordered to do anything, and were not beaten. These statements in themselves are questionable, and significantly, the language used is inappropriate. The lack of any remorse on my mother's side suggests her unawareness of her racist acceptance of the status quo based on perceptions of Africans by Dhillon family members as inferior.

My interpretation of the footage is that the brothers had an amicable relationship with the workers, though this relationship was hierarchical, based on the colonial tiered structure. The Dhillon family relied heavily on their businesses trading with the local Masais. In return the Africans employed by the family relied on them for accommodation and wages. The economic relationship may have been an equal exchange, but I question if the humanitarian one was so.



Fig.65. Samuel the chef at Dhillon Lodge, originally the Lodge was self-catering until Samuel was employed. Photographer unknown (1963).



Fig.66. Samuel the chef at Dhillon Lodge. Photographer unknown (1963).



Fig.67. Samuel with his new German employer at Dhillon Lodge. Photographer unknown (1963).

There is another story, of Samuel the chef (Figs.65, 66 and 67) who in 1963 was offered a position with a German family who had visited the Dhillon Lodge. The Dhillon family had ventured into tourism, and the lodge provided accommodation for global visitors. When this story is recounted, I question whether Samuel was asked if he would have liked to migrate to Germany to work for the family, or if the discussion took place between the Dhillons, his current employers, and the German family. Could this have been a transaction involving human labour? If so, then this amounts to the sale of an African. When I further question this type of contract and labour, the conversation is shut down, often with the statement ‘that is the way it was’. I believe the Dhillon brothers moved away from what may have been considered the almost ‘too liberal’ relationship Kehar Singh had in terms of

inter-communal, inter-racial contact, because of the changing political climate in the East African countries.

It is known that Kehar Singh formed a close enough relationship with the Masai to be invited to the circumcision ceremony of a young girl; once the ceremony had taken place, the special guests were offered a Masai woman for sexual purposes. This is an activity he would likely have participated in given his reputation among the Indian community as a sexual deviant. And it is known that Asian men did have causal sexual and marital relationships with African women. Mama's brother is married to an African woman, and chose to remain with her in Kenya when the Indians migrated to the UK.

Kehar Singh also had insider knowledge of sexual and other traditions of the Masai, that are recounted through written and oral history recorded by the Dhillon family. For example, the liberal sexual relationships within Masai culture:

> Sex was allowed between any consenting adults, and the Moraans[99] or siangikis[100] could choose a different partner anytime they wished. As a ritual of courtship, a Moraan would walk outside a hut in the Manyatta[101] and plant a spear in the ground to signal that he was spending the night with the woman there (Dhillon. P, 2000, p.33).

[99] Masai warrior.

[100] Young Masai woman.

[101] A group of Masai huts.

Mama's journal entry confirms this knowledge. Another example of insider knowledge about common African health problems,

> The tribe suffers a lot of tetanus which could result in lock jaw. They pull two of their front teeth when they're young so that, in case of lock jaw, they can still feed medicine made from tree roots and branches through the gap (Dhillon. U., 2000, p.165).

The last example is the super8 footage (Fig.68) of a member of the Masai smoking a pipe. All this information is gained because of Kehar Singh's knowledge of and relationship with the Masai people. It is the reason why his sons had access to the tribe, and their rituals, and why they were enabled to shoot the footage of Masai marching through the high grasslands in their traditional dress as they herded the animals in their village. Had the relationship between the Dhillons and the Masai not been amicable, surely the brothers would not have been allowed to film on safari when they visited a Masai Boma[102] (Figs.69, 70, 71 and 72).

[102] Boma meaning an enclosure made of sticks and shrubs.



Fig.68. Photographer Teja Singh. *Untitled.* Film (1957).



Fig.69 and 70. Remi Rana Allen. *Khoon*. Film (2012-20).





Fig.71 and 72, Dhillon family visit a Masai Boma. Photographer unknown (1957).



Fig.73. My mother herding with the Masai. Photographer unknown (1957).

I discussed Fig.73 with my mother regarding the herding of the donkeys, her reply was that she ‘wouldn’t have done that’. Was her opposition to the herding of the animals or the working under the supervision of the Masai? This makes me question her perceived racial superiority to the Africans, and whether she may have been coerced by her parents or siblings into performing for the camera.

Another example of this is a photograph of her, aged nine, in traditional Masai dress taken in a Nairobi studio Fig.74. It is unclear if she chose to dress up as such or whether the adults encouraged or forced her into doing so. This image raises questions of cultural appropriation or appreciation. Is the act through an appreciation of their relationship to the Masai culture, or is it the imitation of a culture that they ridicule?

I am unsure of the meaning of this photograph and why it would have been staged and taken in 1956. It would have been eight years since Kehar Singh's death; is it possible that the Dhillon brothers had become embroiled in the socio-political movement promoting the Africanisation of East Africa? Perhaps they realised their time was coming to an end in the country. This would explain the changing attitude of Asians in Kenya and their subsequent migration. The rumblings of change on the horizon. The fear of uncertainty which turns people inward and allows for disdain of others.



Fig.74. U. N Patel & Sons Ltd. Nairobi, My mother in traditional Masai dress. Photograph (1956).

Women of the Dhillon family

Addressing the women within the family structure, in relation to the British Indian female identity in my family and the role of the maternal. I spoke to my mother to piece together my research. Our conversation revealed the Dhillon family relationships and hierarchy. More importantly, it uncovered information regarding the controlling and abusive behaviour of the patriarch Kehar Singh, my great grandfather, and his dominance over the female members of the family. His sexual deviance was directed not only towards the women within the family, but also to other South Asian women within the wider community. His sons' wives, whom he selected, were usually fourteen or fifteen years of age, and from educated families. Chachiji's (Gurnam Kaur my great aunt) father was a headmaster and Mama's father was an army doctor. Kehar Singh was uneducated as were his sons, apart from his eldest son, my grandfather. Would choosing these women as wives for his sons aid in elevating his status within Indian society? My great grandmother and my grandmother each gave birth to six children. Their identities as women and that of their daughters had been moulded by his controlling behaviour; perhaps they feared ostracism if they did not comply with his demands. This is central to the thesis in gauging the nature of the construction of their British Indian female identities from twentieth century Kenya through to contemporary Britain. It also helps to understand the role played by the maternal in the construction of these British Indian women's identity.

Chachiji's (Gurnam Kaur my great aunt) story

Time factors in this history, as once my mother's generation has passed, the history will be lost forever. Therefore, the conversation has an urgency, in revealing what life had been like in Kenya for the women of the family, and how the patriarch suppressed their individual and group identities. What follows is my recollection of a discussion with my mother.



Fig.75. Kehar Singh Funeral. Photographer unknown (1948).

In April 2022 my mother was blue lighted to hospital with breathing difficulties. I visited her in Intensive Care. I was shocked to see how frail and old she appeared. She was so small lying in the hospital bed with machinery attached to aid her breathing. As I watched her sleep, I realised for the first time that our time together was limited and that there were conversations that needed to take place between us. When she was able to sit up and talk, she felt the urge to discuss historical events. Perhaps this was her form of reparation and confession. We discussed the funeral of Kehar Singh Dhillon. This is what I remember from our conversation.

"Uṭhō Bapujī cāha pī la'ō"[103] With these few words the funeral party burst into tears. Fig. 75. This image in *Khoon*, is a seventy- four-year old photograph. It is an important document of the patriarch and the surrounding members of his family over whom he ruled. But what the photo does not evidence is the life the patriarch led behind closed doors.

The Chachas[104] enjoyed going on safari, they would be away for days, filming and photographing everything. Leaving the head of the family at home whilst his sons were away.

They had servants to help around the house, but the cooking was done by the women folk. They spoke Swahili to the servants and eventually Punjabi as the servants had learned the language. Apparently, they were treated well and were a part of the family.

Chachaji (Kehar's second son) and Chachiji (Kehar's daughter-in-law) were a childless couple who had been trying to conceive for many years after being wed in 1940. Chachiji was born in 1927, the eldest of nine siblings, her father was a headmaster in Nairobi. Chachiji had complained of being sexually harassed by the head of the family. At one time he had cornered her in the kitchen and tried to force himself on her. He had said that if his son could not give her a child then he would do the job. She confided in her husband. He gave her a handgun for her own protection.

[103] "Get up Grandfather drink your tea" Nirmaljeet Kaur Dhillon (1949).

[104] Chacha meaning paternal uncle.

On February 20th, 1949, Bapuji[105] had gone to the post office and a servant was sent by Chachiji as a ploy to fetch him home. She wanted to shame him into apologising for his sexual harassment towards her. Chachiji was in the toilet and when he arrived a physical struggle occurred, she shot him. Nobody knew if it had been intentional or if the gun went off by accident. There were two shots and no witnesses.

The police were called and Chachiji was arrested. She was jailed, then moved to a house next to the prison warden's home, where she was put under house arrest.

The incident broke up the family. The family blamed Chachiji for the 'murder' of Kehar Singh and ostracised Chachaji for defending his wife. Chachaji went to the Belgian Congo to work for a company that mined diamonds, but he returned to visit his wife in prison many times. He stood by her throughout her imprisonment.

The story made the national newspapers, as she was the first Indian woman to have been sentenced to be hanged for murder in Kenya. Chachiji spent seven years in prison and was finally released, it was thought that as she was, of 'good character' and that the shooting had been accidental.

In 1956, Chachaji and Chachiji heard through a doctor at the local hospital that a Goan woman had recently been widowed and already had one child. She was due to give birth to

[105] Bhapuji meaning grandfather.

twins and because there were no social services to help the poor and vulnerable, Chachaji and Chachiji adopted the babies.

The story of the shooting of Kehar Singh had been confirmed by Chachiji in 2017 before she passed away. Through further conversations regarding what had happened to the family and how it had fallen apart, there were implications that other women in the family may well have been sexually abused by the patriarch.

It is my mother's voice as a toddler, asking her grandfather to wake up and drink his tea, his morning ritual, that brought tears to the people at the funeral. Many of the mourners would have known the 'real truth' of the life he had led, but they would not have revealed it because of the sharam and basti it would have brought upon the family.



Fig.76. Gurnam Kaur (Chachiji) seated centre with Dhillon family members. Photographer unknown (c1944).

Chachiji was an example of an empowered Indian woman who through her actions protected her virtue (Figs.76 and 77). To the western male gaze, Indian women were often portrayed as the sexually available other; Yet here ‘she’ is a victim of the patriarch, who abused his power in the pursuit of ‘proving his manhood’. In other words, in pursuit of his wilful desire to exercise control over another human subject (in this case a woman). Chachiji was a feminist, who at the age of twenty-one had the courage to stand strong in the face of an authoritarian male relative. This story can be interpreted to represent feminism and female empowerment in global south countries. Although this woman would not have had the language to describe herself in those terms, it is through her actions we glimpse her desire for sexual autonomy, and the British Indian woman as feminist.



Fig.77. Gurnam Kaur (Chachiji). Photographer unknown (c1942).

My relationship with Chachiji was a close one, she purchased my wedding sari and took on the role of my maternal grandmother in 1994, as there were tensions between Mama and my mother. Chachiji taught me through her life story, and demeanour as an Indian woman in my family that the choices you make throughout life are yours alone. Feminism for her was a woman's right over her body, equality for all. This is displayed through her willingness to adopt children that were not from the same religion, caste, or class – which would be unthinkable among Indian society. She was intelligent and good at communicating with people, no matter their background and whatever their race, culture, gender, or social status.

Chachiji served her seven-year sentence, though her reputation among the Dhillon family and the wider community of East African Indians was that of the 'evil female murderess'. To preserve the izzat of the patriarch, the family and the community remained silent about Kehar's sexual predations. Chachiji was the inspiration for my artwork *Killer Queen* (2019).

Once in the UK, over time Chachiji's relationship with other female members of the East African Sikh community was reinstated. She was popular among the group; she shared many stories with them, and they spent much time together on day trips to Brighton, preparing a lunch of samosas,[106]

[106] A savoury, triangular pastry of South Asian origin, typically filled with spiced vegetables, lentils, or meat, and either deep-fried or baked.

bhajias[107] and parotas (paratha)[108] the night before. They arranged holidays in Cyprus, and when they appeared as a group, they would sing and dance.

The one special relationship she maintained was with my mother. My mother had been 'given' to Chachiji by Mama and my great grandmother, as it was assumed by the family that Chachiji was infertile. This I question, the family had knowledge that Chachaji was the infertile spouse because Kehar Singh stated that he would 'give her a child' if his son could not do the job. A further example of the silencing of the family members by the patriarch?

My mother organised Chachiji's funeral in 2017 and remembrance ceremony in 2018. The sound for *Khoon* (2012-20) was recorded on my mobile phone, it is the East African Indian women from Chachiji's social circle that sing the kirtan.[109] As I sat at the ceremony and listened to the singing, the effect of the chanting was meditational and hypnotic. Her voice and story had been silenced for seventy years, it needed exposure, because she had played a vital role in changing the family dynamic, and *Khoon* would be the vehicle. I had no footage of her for the film, so the recorded sound became the embodiment of her spirit as she was remembered by the women singing. Her empowerment came from her actions, she was aware of the consequences, but the actions led to what she considered freedom, the ability to say 'no', a powerful but suppressed tool in Indian patriarchal society.

[107] A savoury fritter made by coating vegetables (commonly sliced onions or potatoes) in a spiced gram flour (chickpea flour) batter and deep-frying until crisp; widely eaten in South Asian and East African cuisines.
[108] A layered, unleavened flatbread made from wheat flour, traditionally pan-fried with oil or ghee and commonly served with curries or vegetables in South Asian cuisine.
[109] Devotional singing of Sikh hymns.

Mama's (Uttam Kaur my grandmother) story

My account of the conversation with my mother about Chachiji, when examined in relation to *Khoon* and in conjunction with Mama's diary, casts light on the role and construction of the evolving British Indian female identity among the women in my family, and their maternal roles. I now turn to Mama's diary to contextualise what her life had been like within the Dhillon family.

The significant role Mama played in Kenya as an independent working woman, is confirmed by Parminder Bhachu in her book *Twice Migrants – East African Sikh Settlers in Britain,* who outlines how the younger generation of female migrants in Britain also came to pursue autonomy over their own lives.

Much of the footage in Kenya used in the making of *Khoon* relates to the males of the family, but as we transition to Britain and the women migrants' assimilation into British society, *Khoon* documents the lives of the women in the UK. What becomes of particular interest is the changing hierarchy of the family as the younger women take on the responsible role of the matriarch, and lead the exit from Kenya. Without the patriarch, the family disbanded, and the matriarch had no intention of migrating to the UK. This was not a forced expulsion of the Sikhs, as it was for the Gujaratis in Uganda when Idi Amin came to power in 1971.

My grandmother Mama states in her diary,

> We women folk had no means of expressing our wishes and desires. (Dhillon. U., 2009, p.19).

This excerpt signals the growth of a feminist consciousness among the women within the Dhillon family, a longing for freedom, and the rumblings of discontent within the patriarchal structure of the family.

Mama's untitled manuscript starts with the entry,

> My father was a doctor; he went to Somaliland from India in the late 1800s to serve in the army. Then after a few years he came to Kenya in East Africa and settled in a town called Nyeri, at the foot of Mount Kenya (Dhillon. U,.2009, p.2).

From this entry we can understand the difference between Mama's background and that of the Dhillon brothers. Her father was an educated man, unlike Kehar Singh, who was an indentured worker. Dr. Lall Singh Sandhu served in the British army in British Somaliland, known officially as the Somaliland Protectorate run by the British from India until 1898. This would correlate with the British views that "…their East African territories were extensions of an Indian empire." (Ghai, 1965, p.3). Dr. Sandhu arrived in Kenya around the same time as Kehar Singh, replicating the twice migrant, direct migrant to the UK in the 20th century. Dr Sandhu was married with two sons, but he travelled alone to work at a governmental hospital in Kenya. His wife and sons remained in the Punjab, where between 1902 and 1904 the Bubonic plague would reach the Punjab and claim the life of his wife and elder son.

Dr. Sandhu returned to India to fetch his remaining son,

> His elder brother had arranged for him to marry a very beautiful young girl from the neighbouring village, as his young son needed a mother […] The Doctor agreed to the marriage proposal and at the same time agreed to send his brother's two sons to be educated in England. The two boys worked hard and went back qualified as doctors (Dhillon. U, 2009, p.2).

What is interesting is that Indians and Africans were travelling to the UK for their education in the early 1900s. This is an example of how the East African Sikh settlers in Kenya would promote education as a foundation for their children. Mama would also send her eldest three children to the UK in the 1960s for their higher education, to the resistance of her husband and Manji. My great grandmother refused to migrate to the UK, and it would take my grandfather many years before he could sell the tourist lodge and join his family in England.

The emergence of the British Indian female identity among the women in my family began with Mama. Her father was already a member of the British army, and had introduced western ideas to his family. He had no intention of returning to India. He stayed in Kenya and raised his children, placing the importance of education on his children. The elder son was sent to board at The Catholic Mission school in Nyeri, and Mama and her younger brother would attend the Mission school in Nairobi. That Mama was also sent to school was unusual because of the gender bias among South Asian families. Moreover,

> Non-white children were not allowed in the English school. But as Dr. Sandhu was a doctor for the Mission at Nyeri, his kids were admitted at the Loreto Convent school. The fees were very high, but he wanted the best for his children (Dhillon. U, 2009, p.5).

Dr. Singh[110] continued his practice at the hospital, but also ventured into business, running a maize mill next door to the house he had built in Nyeri.

> His wife with the help of servants took care of the business […] the locals were mostly of the Kikuyu tribe. They would bring their maize and wheat which was then ground into flour at the mill […] His wife was only educated in Punjabi and had difficulty understanding English as there were mainly farmers from South Africa bringing their crops to be ground […] She had difficulty making conversation, so Dr. Singh decided to have an English tutor for her. This man was a Persian by nationality named Sarabji […] In a few months she could understand and hold a conversation in English (Dhillon. U, 2009, p.3).

This passage highlights the importance the doctor placed on his wife learning English, which would make it easier for her to interact with the locals, erase her Punjabi village background, and make her appear educated. The status of the British Indian army doctor had to be maintained by his wife and children through their behaviour and education. The doctor's hybrid Indian-British identity transformed the public identity of his wife in East Africa. This is reiterated when Mama writes,

[110] Note that Mama has altered Dr. Sandhu to Dr. Singh – Singh being the generic middle name given to male Sikhs. This would be the name the locals would also have called him by, it would be an identifier of the doctor being an Indian and a Sikh. The Singh name is taken up later in the UK as the surname of many Sikhs both male and female – it prevents the recognition of class, caste, status, region and occupation of an individual that can be identified by Sikhs through the given family surname, such as Sandhu – a Jat from a certain village in the Punjab.

> My father died when I was only ten years old. The few years he lived, my brother and I lived like royalty. Our toys and clothes were imported from England. Father took a lot of interest in the way we were fed and dressed […] Father had very strict rules about health and time keeping. Every morning he would grind a few almonds […] added butter and sugar to the paste. So, we were given a desert spoonful before breakfast. Then in the evening, we had a bowl of chicken soup before dinner. We would all sit down before the evening meal and discuss our day's activities and he would teach us lessons about life (Dhillon. U, 2009, p.6).

This description is unlike the regular setting of an Indian family at dinner; chicken soup would not be served and even polite conversation around the table was unusual, for Indian dinners are loud and celebratory, a time to relax and laugh and enjoy the communal setting and the food. This reserved behaviour resembles the middle-class British household. The almond paste, butter and sugar, however, are relatable to many Indians - this is a concoction my father abides by, and which his own father ate every day until he died at the age of 106 years old.

The doctor's education enabled him to elevate his class status from an agricultural working-class to middle class. His purchases of imported toys and clothes from England demonstrates this rise through the ranks. Also, from his time spent in army quarters, he acquired British dining habits. One way in which he emphasised his Britishness as an Indian in East Africa was his right to purchase land in Nairobi – this set him apart from other migrants, like Kehar Singh. As a British Indian male, Dr. Singh would have arrived in Somaliland and then Kenya as a British subject of the Indian empire, and holder of a British Indian passport. These passports were discontinued post Indian independence in 1947.

> Dad purchased some farms in Kibos and Miwani, near Lake Victoria. These were mostly sugarcane plantations […] We used to travel by train from Nairobi to Kisumu […] Most of the drivers and conductors were Indians and Sikhs […] This train journey was only up to Kisumu, the other few miles to Kibos had to be on a cart drawn by oxen […] It rained a lot […] … Wagon wheels would get stuck in the mud […] the men would try pushing and eventually give up and walk the distance, carrying us on their shoulders, coming back later when it was drier to get the wagons (Dhillon, 2009, p.7).

Speaking of the scene in *Khoon,* when Teja Singh is carried across the river by an African man. Mama recalled that this also happened with the Doctor and his family.

> The labour workforce in Miwani and Kibos were from the local tribe, Jaluos. They were physically strong (Dhillon. U, 2009, p.7).

I am unsure how to interpret this comment; were the tribe hired for their physical attributes alone? Or because they were local to the area and therefore available? The question of whether it was mutual acceptance that the African worker would carry the Indian and his children is still unanswered. Were these mutual expectations of each other? Was there a shared acceptance that their roles as 'master' and 'servant' were pre-determined because of the racialised hierarchical social structure imposed by the colonisers? This is more likely, than any pre-agreed contract made between Indians and Africans.

Class, caste and religion play an important role in the construction of the various British Indian female identities. There is no monolithic identity, as geography plays a part in shaping experiences, realities

and identities. For example, East African Indian Punjabi women have no experience of the brutality of the Partition of India in 1947, because they did not witness the struggle for Independence. Whereas for the direct migrant Punjabi Indian woman to the UK, the lived experience left a traumatic history that has been recounted through the generations.

Relations between the religious groups - Sikh/Hindu and Muslims - are marked by animosity, and similarly directed towards the British who segregated and divided India. In terms of caste and class, the majority of East African Sikhs were Ramgarhias of middle-class status, but upon arrival to the UK,

> …they [became] a minority within a much larger Sikh [community] one that was already in existence before their arrival in Britain […] Not only have they become more conscious of their more middle-class position, being prosperous settlers, but also their Ramgarhia caste status which is traditionally inferior to that of the dominant Sikh community in Britain, the Jats (Bhachu, 1985, p.30).

Mama's story illustrates the rigidity of caste and class. She was a Sikh woman from a middle-class family of a Jat caste, These factors altered the trajectory of her life. Her mother had an arranged marriage to Dr. Singh after his first wife and elder son died. The doctor's new wife became stepmother to the younger boy, and migrated to Kenya, leaving all that was familiar behind. She was introduced into another world, where she worked in her husband's shop and mill, learned English, and had an affair with a man from a caste 'inferior' to hers, a Ramgarhia. As Mama recounted:

> He became a family friend. He lived alone and was frequently invited for dinner […] In those days, there were very few Indians, mainly Sikhs, in Africa. So, whenever a Sikh came across a fellow mate he was welcomed with open arms (Dhillon. U. 2009, p.3).

This relationship continued, until one day:

> They just disappeared leaving the three of us at home with the servant. I was about seven years old, with my brother being four and the baby a few months old who cried all night […] she had gone to Mombasa, where they were to board a ship [my uncle came] took the baby to the railway station and handed him to her. They must have stayed in India for a whole year […] We both went to school and were looked after by an African Ayah. I had very long hair […] the maid had no idea how to comb these or tie them into a plait. I got lice in my hair […] Uncle came again to see us and how we were coping. I told uncle that I was expelled from school because of my hair […] Mother came back. It took a few months to get rid of the lice. Life went on, mom and dad argued. The atmosphere was hell for all of us. No proper care or love. We were never loved by our mother (Dhillon, 2009, pp.8-9).

This is Mama's childhood, as remembered through the eyes of a seven-year-old, who held the memory of an affair her mother had with a 'lower caste' Sikh man. Significantly, also, Mama remembered the relationship with the 'maid', and the chasm between them, exemplified by the lack of knowledge about each other signified through their different hair textures. She blames her African maid for the subsequent infestation of head lice, due to her 'not knowing' how to braid Indian hair.

This is an excuse, as African women often braid their hair in intricate styles. This also implies that the girl perceived there to be differences between the hygiene standards of Indians and Africans, vary: the Indian girl claims higher hygiene standards to that of the African woman. This attitude reflects her privileged position, although she is seven years old, she occupies a higher position within the social hierarchy. Racism is ingrained within the culture of the Indian woman, and informs her relationship to the African woman, whom she assumes to be inferior, unintelligent and unclean. The description of their hair is discussed further in chapter six in the context of *Killer Queen* (2019).

Mama questions her mother's love; indeed, the relationship between mothers and their daughters is a constant in this chapter, from the story of Chachiji and her relationship to my mother. The maternal factor is shaping each of these identities, as shown in chapter five which discusses the complexity of my relationships with Mama and my mother.



Fig.78. Uttam Kaur (Mama) with Gurbux Singh (Papa). Photographer unknown (1957).

Dr. Singh died on the 16th of September 1934 from pneumonia, when Mama was aged ten.

> My father had a few farms and two residential properties. This estate was worth quite a bit [...] He also paid forty-five shillings for my piano lessons […] We wore good clothes […] As soon as he died, we were thrown out of all this and could not afford to pay the rent [my uncle] rented us a room in Nairobi. This room cost fifteen shillings per month. Mother did some sewing for people […] We were surviving. The Khalsa School offered to educate me in Punjabi, if I taught English to the Nursery school kids. My brother was also offered free education at the Sikh school […]. After a couple of years we moved back to Nyeri where her man lived. They got married (Dhillon. U, 2009, p.12).

From this entry, it appears that the women members of Dr. Singh's family fell into poverty after his passing. Their status declined to that of the working-class, similar to Kehar Singh's family.

At the age of thirteen, Mama's mother "started looking for a match" for her daughter. This is the point at which Kehar Singh entered her life. His eldest son, Gurbux (Fig.78), ten years mama's senior, was educated and already engaged, but it was he that Mama's mother insisted that Mama marry, for he alone of Kehar Singh's four sons was educated. Kehar Singh broke off his son's existing engagement, perhaps due to ambitions for social mobility as Mama's status was originally middle class.

> When Kehar Singh's friends found out about this new engagement, they all came over and held a meeting. My father-in-law was well known in the community, but they all rejected his decision saying "How can you bring this girl into your family, her mother has disgraced the community." Kehar Singh said, "This is the difference in your thinking and mine. I cannot read or write English except Punjabi. Some of you are Doctors, Lawyers and magistrate. But, I speak fluent English. Now listen carefully, what wrong has the poor girl done to suffer her mother's doings. On the other hand, this stepfather of hers will marry her to a boy of his own caste, which he is trying to do. Then will you all be happy? I have accepted this girl for my son and that's that (Dhillon. U. 2009, p.15).

The Dhillon patriarch decided that Mama would become part of his family, despite his friend's opposition to his decision. They believed that Mama's reputation had been tainted by her mother's relationship to a man from a lower caste. The number of people who attended the ceremony, as

captured in the photograph (Fig. 75) confirms her diary entry that he was well known in the community.

It would be Mama's introduction into the Dhillon family that would begin the conversion of their identity from Indian to British Indian. The family even adopted the sending of Christmas cards to their customers. I presume this may have been a tradition Mama observed during her days at a private Convent school. (Fig.79).

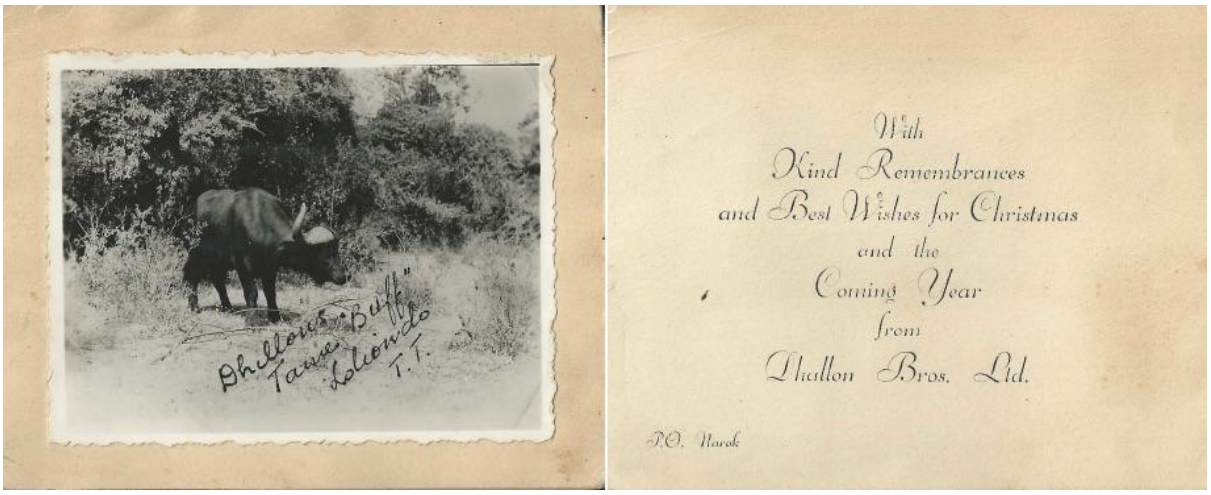


Fig.79. Christmas and New Year card featuring the Dhillon family's pet buffalo. Maker unknown (c1943).

> My four children were born at the Nagara Maternity Hospital in Nairobi, except Pally, he was born in Kijabe with the help of a nursing sister from the Mission Hospital […] This was a boy born in the family after twenty years." (Dhillon. U. 2009, p.18).

This entry supports the general Indians' desire for sons over daughters, and the duty of dowry. However,

> He was a weakling and was fed on Cow and Gate powdered milk as I didn't have enough milk to breast feed him. In those days there were only two or three brands of milk and all my children were fed on Cow and Gate. (Dhillon. U, 2009, p.18).

The mention of this brand of powdered milk is suggestive of her attachment to the symbols of Britishness, the fact that she chooses what would have been an expensive item imported from the UK. Her preference for British goods was in keeping with the way Dr. Singh had raised her. Also, she had decided to bottle feed her subsequent children, as I discuss in detail in chapter five *10cm Holes* (2017-2018). The brand is the only breast milk substitute my mother fed us as babies, she thought it was the best of British brands.

What is pivotal in recognising the change of the family's identity as middle-class British Indians in Kenya, which in my family's case was led by the mother. Mama dressed her children in western clothing. Figs.80 and 81 portray her two youngest sons in 1955 and 1965, respectively. The boys may have worn long hair - in common with Indian males, generally - in 1955 but over time, they sport short haircuts, another nod to British sartorial style. Their short hair contrasts starkly with Mama's nephews, who maintain a top knot (Fig.82).



Fig.80. U. N Patel & Sons Ltd. Nairobi, Mama’s son S. Singh (1955).



Fig.81. U. N Patel & Sons Ltd. Nairobi, Mama’s sons M. Singh and S. Singh (1965).



Fig.82. Mama's sons on the left and her nephews on the right (1957).

What I find of great significance is her next entry:

> Although we had servants to do the washing and cleaning, the women of the house did all the cooking and supervised the servants, who left alone were lazy and did nothing[111] (Dhillon. U, 2009, p.18).

This trope of the laziness of Africans confirms the attitude of Indian women generally. Their view of their African 'servants' as inferior to themselves as Indians reflects and reinforces the negative stereotyping of African people. I have tried relentlessly to find an answer from my mother regarding

[111] Reference to this racial stereotyping has been made previously in the chapter regarding Stepin Fletchit.

her and Mama's racist views towards the African people, the following entries in the manuscript are indicative of the racial order of Kenyan society.

> A bonny daughter was born, she weighed ten and a half pounds. We named her Nirmaljeet […] This time my father-in-law visited us and seeing my hands were full he advised me to have a servant for each chore and an Ayah to help look after the kids. This Ayah was a Kikuyu in her teens called Mary from a Catholic family. Her father was a cook working at the District Officer's house. She was from a clean house and slept with the young ones in her room (Dhillon. U, 2009, p.19).

It also speaks to the class order, and the signifiers of the attributes attached to the different classes, and how social status, rooted in race and class were invariably shaped by religion. The Ayah embodied the supposed hallmarks of her race, class and religion. The daughter of a cook employed by the District Officer, a sufficiently high status role in the racial and social pecking order. These criteria marked the Ayah to be appropriately qualified, from a good clean home and respected family. This is a reminder of the Victorian era, and a very British way of doing things.



Fig.83. Teja Singh. *Untitled.* Film (1957).

> The business we had in Loliondo was a store catering for the local Maasais. We supplied them with blankets, cotton sheets called Shukas. They would dip the Shukas in red ochre mixed with water and then dry these in the sun. By doing this they claimed that the bad smell disappeared. The Maasais did not like the smell of soap. Once a Maasai came to England and went back after getting his academic qualifications. The first few days whenever he came to the store, he spoke very good English and would dress up in shirts and trousers. But after a month he came back dressed in the traditional Shuka dipped in red ochre. When I asked him, he replied, “My wife does not like the smell of my clothes” (Dhillon. U. 2009, pp.19-20).

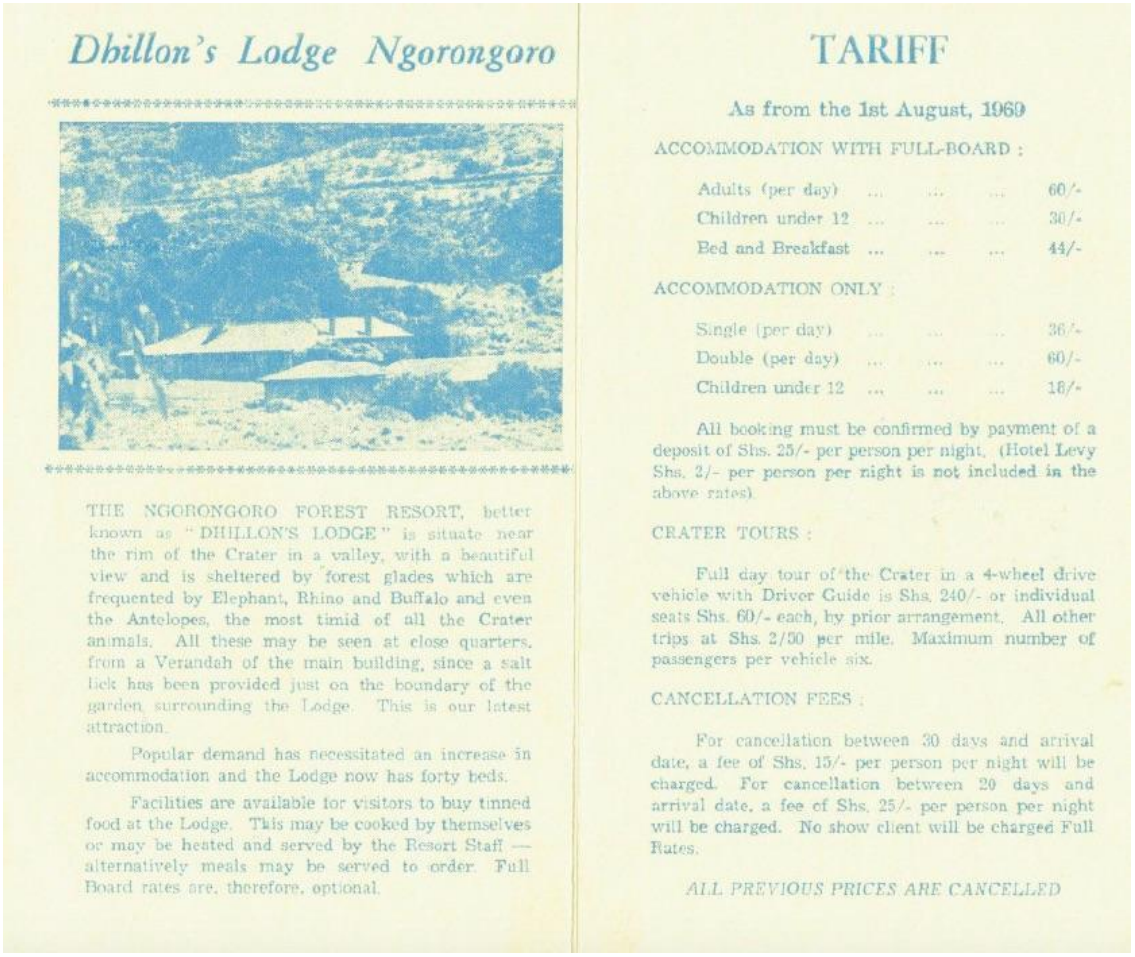
In this anecdote, it is possible to receive insight into her relationship with the Masai. That she remembers the story of this individual male who reverted to wearing his traditional clothing on returning from England where he had gone to receive an education, meant that it probably stood out

to her. Perhaps it was a recollection that made her laugh, thinking of the Masai's wife wanting her husband to conform to tradition. But what is valuable in this story is that at that point, no member of the Dhillon family had yet travelled to England, yet their aspirations to Britishness were pivotal in shaping their ambitions, and sense of themselves. Certainly, they already see themselves as British and superior to the Masai. Paradoxically it is the Masai man who travelled to Britain and gained an academic education – before returning to his life and wife, as an educated and traditional husband. The irony in this tale - who is superior to whom? This is very telling. (Fig.83).

Life continued in Kenya, and the family felt that they were economically and socially 'climbing' in terms of their status,

> …we were approached by the Ngorongoro Conservation Officer […] There was a government house nearby which had ten bedrooms and a large lounge. He asked if we could convert that to a rest house for tourists, get some four-wheel automobiles to drive the tourists into the Crater Game Reserve. The building would be rented from the Tanzanian government […] There was a high demand for this kind of business. I managed the booking office [and] accounts. My husband managed the lodge and the vehicles. We had eight Land Rovers and all African drivers. The cooks and waiters were also Africans, the bedrooms were cleaned and managed by young African girls (Dhillon. U. 2009, p.32)[112] (Figs.84 and 85).

[112] This deal was brokered by the colonial administrator Henry Albert Fosbrooke 1908-1996. The British Museum acquired artefacts from Tanzania through Fosbrooke. "Following a degree in Economics and Anthropology from Cambridge he served in Tanzania from 1931 as District Officer for 18 years and as a Governmental sociologist for 7 years. He was the first Conservator of the Ngorongoro Conservation Area Authority and 3 years as a member of the National Land Use Planning commission." (https://www.britishmuseum.org/collection/term/BIOG123402 Accessed: 18.08.2023).



Dhillon's Lodge Ngorongoro

THE NGORONGORO FOREST RESORT, better known as "DHILLON'S LODGE" is situate near the rim of the Crater in a valley, with a beautiful view and is sheltered by forest glades which are frequented by Elephant, Rhino and Buffalo and even the Antelopes, the most timid of all the Crater animals. All these may be seen at close quarters, from a Verandah of the main building, since a salt lick has been provided just on the boundary of the garden surrounding the Lodge. This is our latest attraction.

Popular demand has necessitated an increase in accommodation and the Lodge now has forty beds.

Facilities are available for visitors to buy tinned food at the Lodge. This may be cooked by themselves or may be heated and served by the Resort Staff — alternatively meals may be served to order. Full Board rates are, therefore, optional.

TARIFF

As from the 1st August, 1969

ACCOMMODATION WITH FULL-BOARD :

Adults (per day)	60/-
Children under 12	30/-
Bed and Breakfast	44/-

ACCOMMODATION ONLY :

Single (per day)	36/-
Double (per day)	60/-
Children under 12	18/-

All booking must be confirmed by payment of a deposit of Shs. 25/- per person per night. (Hotel Levy Shs. 2/- per person per night is not included in the above rates).

CRATER TOURS :

Full day tour of the Crater in a 4-wheel drive vehicle with Driver Guide is Shs. 240/- or individual seats Shs. 60/- each, by prior arrangement. All other trips at Shs. 2/50 per mile. Maximum number of passengers per vehicle six.

CANCELLATION FEES :

For cancellation between 30 days and arrival date, a fee of Shs. 15/- per person per night will be charged. For cancellation between 29 days and arrival date, a fee of Shs. 25/- per person per night will be charged. No show client will be charged Full Rates.

ALL PREVIOUS PRICES ARE CANCELLED

Fig.84. Brochure for Dhillon's Lodge. Maker unknown (1968).



Fig.85. Advertising slide for Dhillon's Lodge viewed in cinemas in Arusha. Design S. D Shah (1968).

Khoon captures this part of the Dhillon family life, a point in time when life was 'good', according to Mama. The tourist industry was flourishing, and the Dhillon brothers went on safari. Mama does not appear in the film, but her journal is an in-depth account of the life the family led. It was her eldest son who decided to leave Kenya to pursue higher education in London.

Leaving Kenya and settling in Britain

Against the wishes of her husband, Mama financed her son's exit from Arusha and to London in 1962. Three years later my mother and her elder sister also left Kenya, after Mama borrowed money from a local businessman to fund their flights, as she no longer had enough money. She felt there was an urgency to get her daughters out of the country as "…an incident had happened on the island

of Zanzibar where a Sikh girl was kidnapped by some Africans"[113] (Dhillon. U, 2009, p.34). The two daughters were met by their older brother and moved into nursing accommodation at Greenwich Hospital, ready to start their course.

Leaving behind her husband and mother-in-law Mama arrived in London in 1967,

> …the whole of England is so clean and respectable. Whenever we travelled on the underground trains, a lady was always respected and men would get up and offer their seat […] I used to wear a saree and everyone admired it especially the caretaker who used to say, "That is a graceful dress that you are wearing" (Dhillon. U, 2009, p.35).

Mama perceived her initial arrival in Britain as welcoming and she appears to have enjoyed respect and admiration. She appreciated the courtesies that women received from men - the giving up of their seats to women - and the admiration that her sarees attracted. I believe that when Mama finally arrived in England, she felt that it lived up to her romantic vision of British society, though her rosy view of her new home was soon to be transformed. In the following chapters I discuss what it means to be a British Indian woman based on the experiences of women in my family in contemporary Britain, a very different Britain to that Mama encountered upon her arrival.

[113] Majority of the Asian-African relations have been at shopkeeper-customer or master-servant level [...] the Asian social organisation is closed to outsiders; whereas in towns, schools and universities, the African learns much of European ways of life, the Asian remains a mystery. This suspicion of the Indian and the Indians fear of the African coming to rule who he considers to be beneath him and the stories of young Indian girls being raped is a factor that plays an important role in the subsequent Africanisation of the East African countries and the exodus of the East African Indians (Ghai. 1965, p.135).

The photograph from a Christmas celebration held at Ngorongoro Youth Hostel in 1961 (Fig.86) encapsulates how far the family progressed in three generations. Kehar Singh's grandsons grew into the western children of Mama's ambitions. In contrast to the African and Masai children with whom they grew up, the two boys went on to enjoy privileged middle class, wealthy, westernised lifestyles.



Fig.86. Mama's sons on the right celebrating Christmas at Ngorongoro Youth Hostel. Photographer unknown (1961).

This is an important photograph that I have processed through self autodriving as part of my artistic practice. It supports my argument that the identity of the British Indian women in my family evolved much earlier than the period I had previously assumed, and it did not occur in Britain. This morphosis

occurs in the 1920s in East Africa, and in Mama's instance, the seed was planted in her childhood, nurtured by her father, the British Indian army doctor. As Mama became a mother, she shared her love for Britain with her children. It is her role as the maternal that imposed upon her children the contours of their British Indian identity, especially so with her daughters. Their mother instilled in them the recognition that life should offer women more than just marriage, and she taught them the value of an education for women. She taught them the value of work as a means to an independent life, made particularly possible outside of the narrow constraints for middle class Indian women of East Africa. Mama views her daughter's futures from the perspective of her own unhappy childhood, and wanted more and better for her own daughters. In her aspirations for her family, for her daughters, Mama reshaped the Dhillon household, particularly in her rejection of limited gender expectations for women. Mama's personal journal is invaluable in demonstrating how, the role of the maternal is crucial in the construction of the British Indian female identity among the women in my family from East Africa to the UK.

Part 2 - The family in London – United Kingdom

By layering photography, film, scans and sound *Khoon* brings together the history and the journey of my British Indian Sikh family. At two minutes thirty-six seconds the film morphs an image of my brother with that of the Mercedes truck on safari (Fig.87). This I felt represented the desire for Indian families to have a son - to carry on the family name and their aspirations of wealth, symbolised through material possessions. The sequence continues with images of me and my elder sister and cousins outside Mama's house in Hayes, west London in 1973 (Fig.88). We wear faux fur coats and are playing in the front garden as the adults prepare to travel to a function. The images of Kenyan wildlife start to disperse as life in the UK begins.



Fig.87. Remi Rana Allen. *Khoon*. Film (2012-20).



Fig.88. Remi Rana Allen. *Khoon*. Film (2012-20).



Fig.89. Remi Rana Allen. *Khoon*. Film (2012-20).

My father migrated to Britain in 1962, coincidentally the same year my mother's eldest brother arrived in London from Nairobi to study. The difference between the arrival of the Sikhs from India and the Sikhs from Kenya is evidenced by my family's history in the early 1960s. When my uncle arrived in London to study, he found accommodation in a shared house with friends in Southall, in west London He secured a job in a bank and saved enough money to purchase a house in Windsor. The East African Sikhs had no intention of returning to Kenya.[114] My father, however, a direct migrant from the Punjab arrived in London, intending that his arrival in the UK's capital would be a stopover, before he travelled on to Canada for his studies.

My father lived in a shared house in Southall with his elder cousin and other single men. They were in the UK to work, mostly as manual labourers working shifts in factories; their main goal was to earn

[114] The Jats have mostly migrated from the Indian sub-continent and have been in Britain for much longer than the East Africans. In the latter case, residence in Africa for over sixty years has resulted in the loss of their ties with India, unlike the direct migrants who maintain them more intensely [...] They formed a settler community which lacked a crucial feature common to South Asian minorities: that is, the myth of return. (Bhachu. 1985, p.5).

enough money to send back to India and then return themselves.[115] The low wages they earned made it unlikely that these migrants would ever be able to acquire property. It would take my father five years to acquire British citizenship, in return for his British passport the Home Office kept his Indian passport without his consent.

The two migrant men continued to build their lives in London and tried to 'fit' in with society. London was where my father first experienced racism. Having migrated directly from India, a society without a three-tier racial hierarchy, his encounter with prejudice stood in stark contrast to the imposed colonial structures found in Kenya. He formed close bonds not only with other Indian men at the factory, but also at lodgings he shared. Other close bonds the direct migrant Sikhs formed were with their black colleagues and housemates.[116] This building of close ties with other 'others' was unlike the Sikhs from Kenya.

In a conversation with my father, I asked whether the Punjabi Sikhs felt inferior to the East African Sikhs?

> No, we were unskilled workers, here to make money to send home. I didn't come here thinking I would stay. It was to be a short-term arrangement and I was to return home.

[115] Settlement abroad was seen to be a temporary phase, at least initially. It was supposed to be a period of spartan living to accumulate savings to be channelled into the homelands to build properties there. (Bhachu. 1985, p.46).

[116] "The subjective experience of racism, including perceived racism and anticipated racism, is closely bound up with preference for members of one's own group and with the desire to affirm one's origins and cultural heritage." (Modood et all cited in Soni. 2012, p.28).

> Then I met your mother, and the rest is history (Balbir Singh Rana, in conversation with Rana-Allen, 2012, pp.41- 42).

Khoon's cynosure of the white turban is significant. Two minutes and fifty-one seconds captures an image of my grandfather Gurbux Singh carrying my brother in the front garden of the Hayes house (Fig.89). Most direct Sikh migrants cut their hair upon their arrival in the UK, to avoid unnecessary racism, as in the case of my father.[117] (Fig.90 and Fig.91). This would have been a difficult decision as it meant erasing a symbol of their religion in order to avoid verbal or physical abuse. Twice migrant Sikhs retained their turbans upon arrival, connecting them fiercely to their Sikhism, the white turban also symbolised the migrant from East Africa rather than India.[118]

[117] Fig.90 Image of my father at the age of seventeen at college in the Punjab wearing a turban, stood far right second row. Fig.91 Image of my father with cut hair.

[118] "For an East African Sikh, a white turban is an important symbol of group identity." (Bhachu. 1985, p.51).

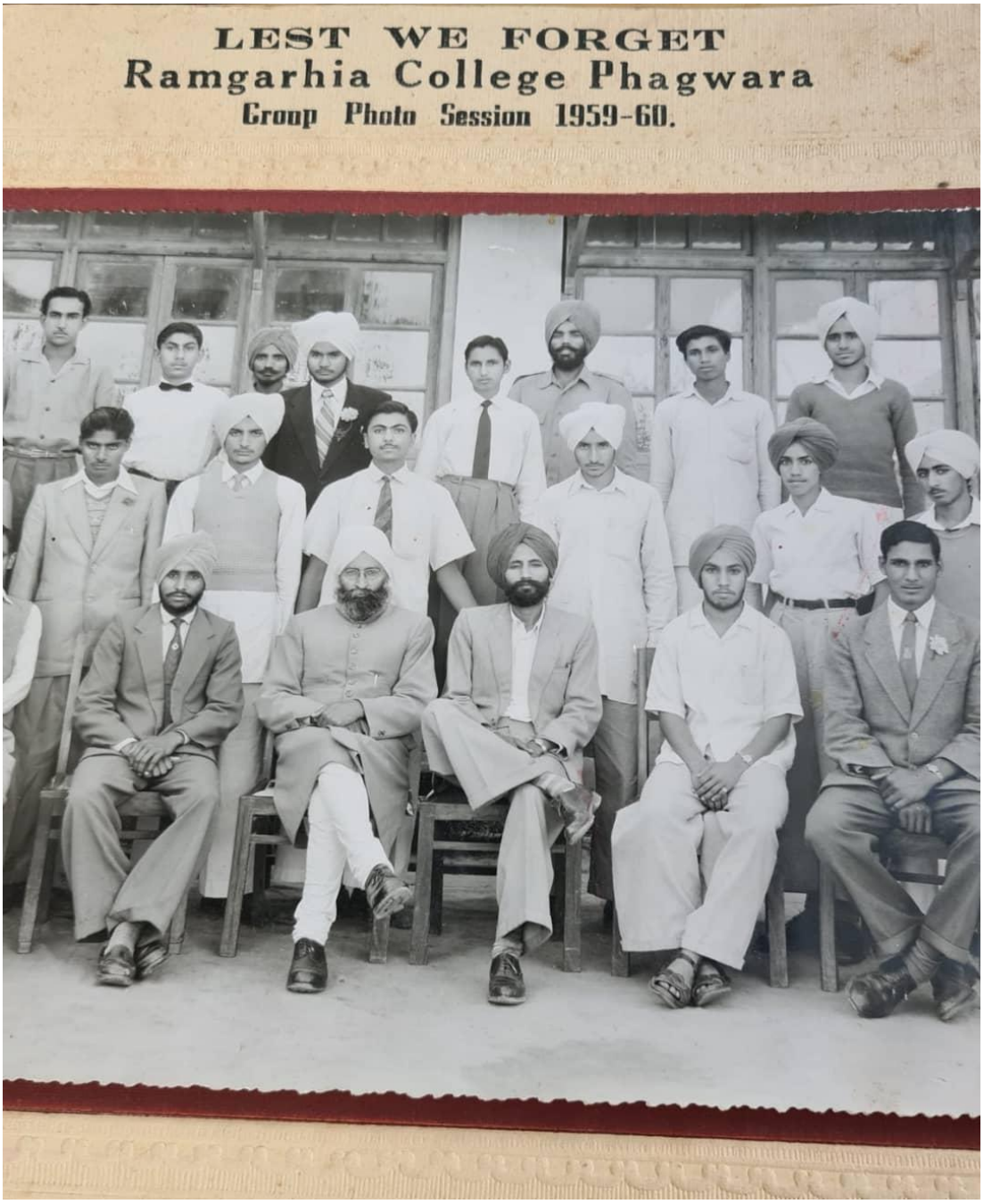


Fig.90. Ramgarhia College Phagwara Group Photo. My father far right second row standing. Photographer Unknown (1959).



Fig.91. Wedding Portrait. Charles Glover Studio (1967).

Another difference between the Sikhs who travelled from Kenya to Britain rather than directly from India, was their acquired wealth from East Africa, which they transferred to the UK. The Indian Sikhs built their communities after their arrival, unlike the East African Sikhs who arrived with their social and economic networks already established.

> … arriving in family units is of importance, for it is the women who know about social customs (rasam-rawaz), i.e., procedures of conducting life-cycle rituals, the gifts to be exchanged at marriage etc. This knowledge plays an important part in retaining the traditional identity of the East African Sikhs (Bhachu, 1985, p.38).

This one fact is crucial to two of my research questions:

1. How have different geographic and historical contexts contributed to the development of a distinctly British Indian female identity amongst women in my family?

2. How have maternal roles impacted the formation of that identity in my family?

It is the mothers and grandmothers who do the social reproduction work of passing on and maintaining traditional customs. Passing these facets of their culture onto their daughters help to retain significant elements of their identities as Asian women. Women reinforce cultural customs, whereas the men reinforce religious norms, for example, by wearing the turban, thus taken together the visual and social identity of the East African British Sikh is manifested.



Fig.92. Group Shot Greenwich. My mother first left standing. Photographer Unknown (1966).

My Mother's story

My mother travelled to Britain in 1966 to further her education. She enrolled at the Nursing College in Greenwich[119] (Fig.92). My Mother did not dress as a South Asian woman was expected to dress. Unless she was attending an Indian function or visiting family in India then she would wear a sari. She was sartorially western, wearing skirts and shirts, a continuation from her life in Kenya (Fig.93). *Khoon* portrays this in the montage of images of one of my aunts, on safari in Kenya, wearing shirt and trousers and carrying a rifle, circa 1950s (Fig.94). My mother had also cut her hair, which was unusual for a Sikh woman (long hair is one of the symbols of Sikhism). This in some way explains her

[119] Group shot of trainee nurses Greenwich College. My mother stood first left second row.

attitude to integrating into white British society, Looking at Fig. 92, the group portrait of the trainee nurses at Greenwich, on closer inspection I note that my mother has positioned herself with the white nurses and not on the right with the black nursing students. She also rejects existing solely within the confines of the Sikh society in Southall by befriending white trainee nurses. 'Desh Pradesh'[120] meaning a home from home, is a phrase that encompasses my mother's attitude to making Britain her 'home from home' relatively seamlessly.



Fig.93. Nirmaljeet Kaur Dhillon (my mother). Photographer Unknown (1966).

Unlike more traditional South Asian families we wore western clothes at home. We ate English rather than Punjabi food two to three times a week, and we spoke English to our parents although they

[120] Desh Pradesh meaning home from home (Ballard 1994).

mostly responded in Punjabi. Our home and external lives were not 'opposites' as stated by Zahid (2011), who maintained her Pakistani identity through her dress, e.g. wearing salwar kameez at home, and eating only Pakistani food and speaking Punjabi. When she stepped out of the home she wore English clothes, spoke English and mixed with various cultures.



Fig.94. Remi Rana Allen. *Khoon*. Film (2012-20).

As previously discussed in this chapter my mother had her own views on class and race. Her attitude to black and white people is perhaps a consequence of her upbringing. She learnt from her mother and grandmother that white people enabled Indians access to social mobility, through both education and nationality. A British passport was something to be revered and held in great esteem. Black people[121] in the UK were seen by the East African Sikhs as an extension of the indigenous African community, as inferior because served South Asian families in East Africa. My maternal family's

[121] I use the term 'black' when referring to the East African Sikhs attitude to the whole of the Black community in the UK. It appears that to them there is no differentiation of the global origins of the community. Unlike when the East African Sikhs resided in Kenya, they use the term African, followed by tribal origin.

opinions and views are not unique amongst East African Sikhs; I quote from a conversation with my Mother who was the third generation in Africa.

> …we had servants but we didn't as children really mix with the Africans, we went to private Catholic schools, our parents did not want us to share classrooms with them, most Sikhs felt the need to leave when the Africans started to demand schooling with the Indians and when they wanted to marry Asian women (Nirmaljeet Kaur Dhillon in conversation with Rana-Allen. 2012, p.27).

Her views on marrying 'outside' are shared by many South Asians, using the covert acronym BMW – Black, Muslim, White. Their views that it is almost acceptable to marry a 'White man, no to a Black and definitely not a Muslim'.[122]

My parents were 'introduced' to each other in 1967, and they had an arranged marriage in the July of the same year (Fig.95). Direct migrant Sikhs like my father were often in Britain alone, or living with another male from the family. This in contrast to Sikhs from Kenya who arrived as a community, where the women and men travelled together or within a set time frame, after selling their businesses in East Africa. Mama migrated to the UK in 1967 for my parent's wedding. Her husband Gurbux Singh followed in 1969. With her arrival the Dhillon family were all settled in the UK. Gurbux Singh, Mama and their youngest son worked for Mercedes Benz in west London, in car sales or the spare parts departments. As Bhachu states,

[122] Bend it like Beckham references BMW, its meaning within South Asian culture. (Chadha. 2002).

The other striking aspect of the East African women is that the majority of them go out to work and have done so on arrival in this country […] Their situation in Britain is a complete contrast to that of directly migrant women, the majority of whom are from rural areas and were not wage earners prior to migration. Women's incomes have further added on to the financial advantages of the East African Sikhs. (Bhachu,1985, pp.38-39).

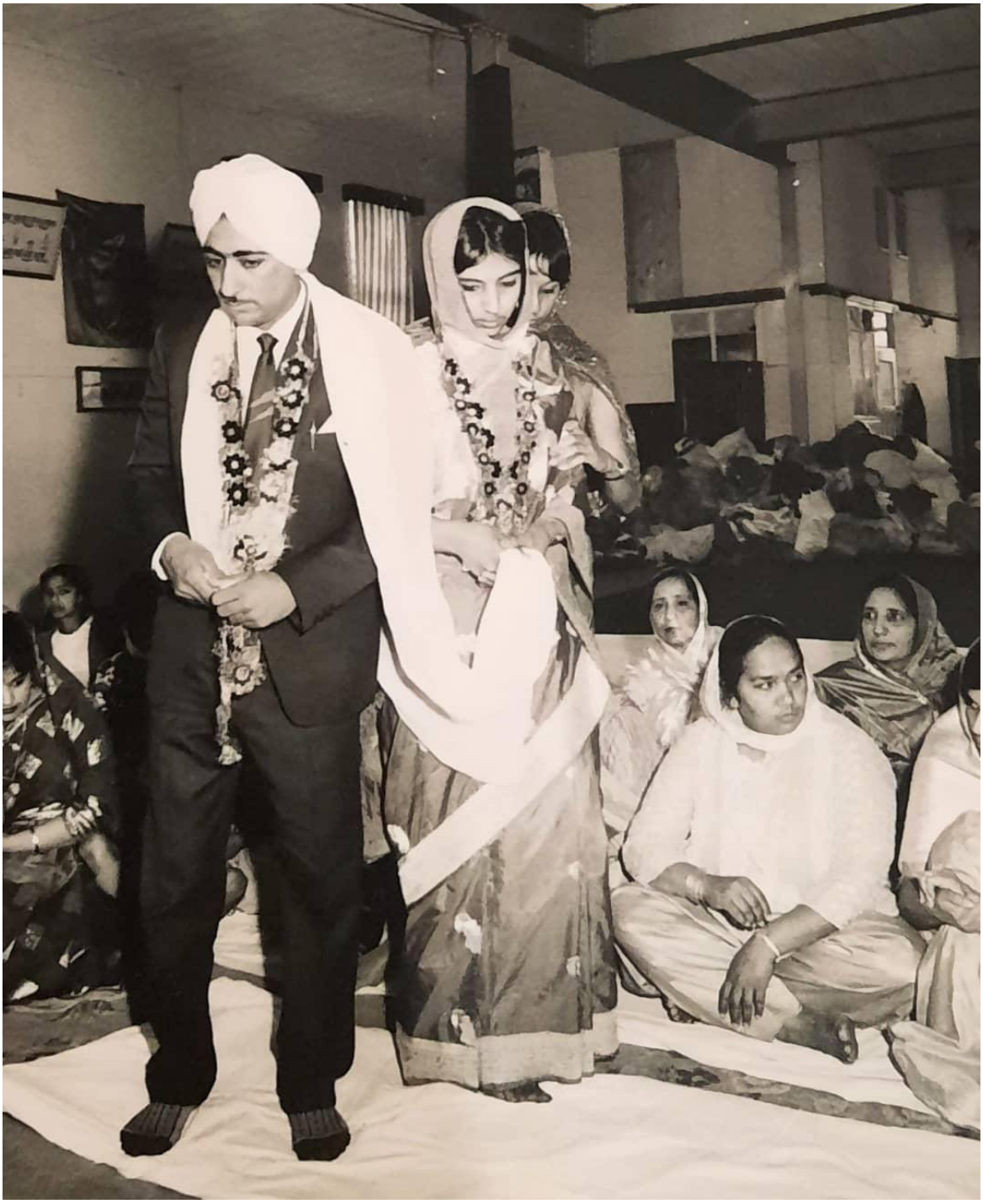


Fig.95. My Parent’s Wedding Portrait. Photographer Unknown (1967).

My parents were also unusual as they were the only couple in the family, where a member of the East African Sikh community had married a direct Sikh migrant.[123] My mother had a bad experience during her time at nursing college, when she had been attacked by a South Asian man. Consequently, she withdrew from her studies, and it was decided that she should be married. In all their attempts to save their daughters from the African men in East Africa, it is in London, that this incident instigated by a South Asian male, took place.



Fig.96. Remi Rana Allen. *Khoon*. Film (2012-20).

[123] Arrival in family units includes young people of a variety of ages within the community. The importance of having such a cross-section of young people in relation to marriage is that there is a pool of people from which to find spouses. [...] Only in rare cases do East Africans resort to India to find a spouses for their children. These are cases of girls who acquire a bad reputation or are not considered to be good-looking. (Bhachu. 1985, p.39).

Four minutes into *Khoon* there is footage of my mother sitting on a manicured lawn (Fig.96). Behind her is picket fence, perhaps the representation of perfect life in British society, along with the nuclear family, home ownership, the desire for the great British lifestyle. The event is a birthday party in Heston, west London.[124] She is holding a child's toy as she tries to get my attention and points to the camera. At that point my mother is three months pregnant with my brother. She conceals the pregnancy by wearing a white sari. In the chapter *10cm Holes* and *Seven Years of This*, I discuss the relevance of Indian women's clothing. I discuss how they are controlled by patriarchy through its imposition of respect and decency. I outline how they dictate Indian women's clothing choices, and how that determines her respectability. This form of control, which most women adhere to, is outrageous in its reinforcement of the taboos around sexuality and sex. Even as mothers, they must still retain the illusion of being sexually inexperienced and non-sexual by concealing her pregnancy.

Women's / my mother's role in shaping the Indian British sociocultural attitudes and practice

As a young child, I observed how the decisions made in my home mainly came from my mother. It was her strength in standing against the more traditional maternal role and conformist views of other women and patriarchal male society, that she enforced her expectations of how her children would be raised. With this determination, she implanted the belief of gender equality within her daughters. She also encouraged her daughters to pursue further education. Her idea of equality included the freedom to decide whom we would marry - if it meant that we married 'outside' (albeit marriage is a form of conformity within patriarchal culture).

[124] This was the home of my mother's elder sister and her in-laws, supporting the fact that the East African Sikhs arrived and settled in the UK as a community.

In my youth I realised not all South Asian families held the same attitudes. Some of my female cousins were refused further education, instead they were expected to get a job and have an arranged marriage. I later understood that my mother was different to other South Asian mothers that I knew, because of her determination to make the major decisions affecting our lives.

I believe that the South Asian mother in my family plays an integral role in key decisions throughout their children's childhoods. Those decisions whether seen as prohibitive or offering autonomy are based on her own experiences of being a daughter, and her relationship with her mother and mother-in-law. The cultural beliefs each of these mothers passed on to her child can only be a consequence of her own upbringing.[125]

So, if the mother is the key factor in the development of her child, this 'power' can become a double-edged sword. The times that my mother did not agree with my decisions for my future, for example, when I wanted to cohabit with my partner, my mother enforced marriage, through emotional blackmail. There was always the inherent South Asian fear of being excluded from the family. I would bring basti on the family by cohabiting. Izzat and sharam were words mentioned in my household.

[125] "For most Punjabi families, religion is the key element upon which their personal identities are nurtured and formed. But they are conscious of the fact that their children are going to live and work in Britain and will acquire at least some of the social mores of the host society. For this reason, it appears that the mothers are encouraging their children to be aware of the norms of both cultures and to develop a bicultural outlook and sensibilities." (Dosanjh and Ghuman. 1997, p.300).

Izzat was something that you maintained for your parents, your family name. To be gossiped about 'reflected shame' and the 'loss of face'. Izzat and sharam,

> … remained powerful mechanisms for exerting 'control' on the children and for maintaining the significance and power of 'izzat' and 'sharam' in the community." (Soni. 2012, p.360).

Mothers face pressure to

> …ensure that the norms and standards of acceptable behaviour within the community were upheld (Soni, 2012, p.360).

It is the mother's duty to ensure that "cultural practices were 'passed on' to their children" (Soni, 2012, p.360).

Whether Indian, Pakistani or Bangladeshi, as a rule, (though not always) religious belief is encouraged on the basis that it will enhance the bond with one's family. Pakistanis believe that "heaven is under your mother's right foot" (Zahid, 2011, p.313) this is one of the hadiths[126] they tell their children.

[126] Hadiths are stories about prophet Muhammed.

> The ideologies and concepts that proclaim the inferiority of women and demand their submissiveness and obedience to men have been deeply internalized […] Daughters therefore are worth very little […] And if daughters are worth so little, what does it say about women as a whole – including the mother herself? With this comes the erosion of all identity other than that of a wife (Wilson, 2006, p.34).

This is how girls as a rule are raised in Indian society, solely in preparation for becoming the 'good' wife. But this was not the case in my family; we girls went to university and adopted western views on life. Perhaps my parent's relationship was more complex than I originally thought. The direct migrant marrying into a class above his own, becoming a member of East African society. My mother, the only member of the family marrying a direct migrant, to save the familiy's izzat? These are questions I do not have an answer to, as they would be too painful to ask my parents, and I suspect that the answers I may have received would be in denial to the questions posed.

Women as protectors of family honour

Among Hindus, Sikhs, and Muslims - the three main South Asian religions - it is women mothers, daughters, wives, who carry the burden of family izzat.



My mother carried this burden (she protected me from carrying the burden, although my father did not speak to me for two years when he first realised I was dating a white man). When I married my husband in 1994, I had one of the first inter racial weddings that invited

the network of Indian society that my parents were a part of. My parents did not ostracise me for my choice. Inter-racial marriages occur more frequently today and are celebrated by most members of both the Anglo and the Indian communities.

> Becoming a mother brings with it a certain amount of power, and one only has to look at the relationship between mothers-in-law and their daughters-in-law to understand that the oppressed (woman) becomes the oppressor (mother- in-law) (Zahid., 2011, p.314).

This quote highlights the female power politics at play within a South Asian household.[127] Families live as an extended unit. When a mother 'loses' her son to another woman - his wife - the power politics between women emerge. Respect is demanded, rather than earned, by the elder generation. The daughter-in-law knows her place within the hierarchy of the family. The wife's parents will have instilled into her the imperative to be respectful of her in-laws, or else their own izzat will be lost. The parents must be 'seen' to have raised her appropriately. The matriarchal mother-in-law controls the home. She has the 'power' and 'authority' to shame the daughter-in-law in wider society if she does not receive the appropriate respect from her.

This cycle breeds contempt and is difficult to break, that is why so often the oppressed becomes the oppressor. This type of relationship can be witnessed in the Dhillon family, between Manji (my great grandmother) and her daughter-in-laws, Mama and Chachiji. However, I argue here that from my personal experience this relationship between oppressor and oppressed is not exclusive to Indian

[127] It could be assumed that this power structure is also prevalent within the familial structure of patriarchal cultures of the global north.

society. My mother-in-law is white, English and much of her behaviour towards me has been similar to that described above.

The mother is often thought of as inferior to the male father figure in the family. South Asian women struggle to ‘know’ their place in society

> On the one hand, they have to face racial discrimination and prejudice as "brown" minority women from the larger […] society, and on the other hand they have to deal with gendered oppression within their own communities (Bhattia (2004), cited in Sharma, 2017, p.46).

However, as stated previously, Zahid (2011, p.314) argues that the South Asian mother is in fact the ruler of the home, the main change maker and decision maker. From personal experience I would argue that the role of the matrilineal mother is the guiding influence in South Asian families. The mother and grandmother have influence over the child from birth onwards. The patriarch is often working, therefore remaining in the background of family life and in any case, childrearing is considered women’s work.

Dress and identity

In *Khoon,* there is a scene at the birthday party, where I am sitting on a chair, while my elder sister stands beside me facing the camera. My father is sitting cross legged on the floor, and spoon feeding me from his own plate of food (Fig.97). He leans back and looks into the camera as he chats to someone out of shot. I interpret this scene as revealing of the active role my father played in raising

us; he may have been disappointed earlier at having two daughters, but he upholds his responsibilities in playing the role of the engaged father, in his children's lives. My father is dressed in a dark suit, shirt and tie, having chosen to adopt formal western dress; there is no indication of his roots as a migrant from the Punjab. The anonymity afforded through the sartorial, perhaps is a recognition that he also could be from East Africa. Just as he cut his hair to 'fit' into white society, he has dressed in a way that draws no attention to his working-class roots. Another mask he wears to 'fit' in? As Mama had influenced the Dhillon family in Kenya in the westernisation of her family, I think the western style my father wore would have been my mother's decision.



Fig.97. Remi Rana Allen. *Khoon*. Film (2012-20).



Fig.98. Remi Rana Allen. *Khoon*. Film (2012-20).

The film cuts to my mother's youngest brother standing eating. I notice here that he is wearing a kitenge[128] shirt (Fig.98). Among my childhood memories of the 1970s, are many of my East African uncles wearing these shirts. The vivid colours and designs stand out. I find this peculiar, because as children in Kenya, their anglophile mothers dressed them in western shorts and shirts and cut their hair. Yet as young men in Britain they proudly state their roots and identities as East Africans by adorning the kitenge shirt. Here, *Khoon* illuminates the identity changes of the family through their dress. From the imagery in Nairobi, we view the younger male members of the family (some of whom retain a jura[129]) and the older men in western clothing, and a white turban. The young girls are also dressed in western dresses, shirts and trousers. Older women wear either salwar kameez or a sari.

[128] Kitenge shirt worn in Tanzania and Kenya, originating from West Africa where it is known as a dashiki shirt. Brightly coloured design, with embroidered V-neck, sleeves and hem.

[129] Jura, joora, topknot or kes, log hair tied into a bun covered with a white handkerchief for young boys and a turban by men.

Yet when the family migrates to the UK, we see them actively striving to differentiate themselves from other Sikh migrants by adorning kitenge designs, white turbans, saris and fashionable 1970s salwar kameez designs, shorter tops and flared trousers (Fig.99). This stands in contrast to direct migrant women who adorn traditional style salwar kameez, rather than a sari, which is not often worn. Kenyan Sikh women cut their hair, have it styled or add an additional hairpiece, unlike the direct migrant Sikh woman, who has uncut hair, usually styled and slicked with coconut oil, and worn in a straight long plait down her back. The elder widowed women dress only in a white salwar kameez and white chunni, their uniform for the rest of their lives, indicating their role as the elder matriarch. She who divulges and passes on her knowledge and experience but has no other womanly function (Fig.100).

The East African Sikhs' assertion of his identity through dress disassociates them from the direct migrant Sikhs. Their dress represents a declaration of how far they see themselves having advanced from their roots as indentured labourers. Their statement implies 'we are not you and we are not all the same'. However, their perceived differences from the direct migrant labourer, is culturally coded and lost on a white society which perceives all Indians to be outsiders, immigrants. These anglophile Sikhs insist that they are a class above, educated, white collar, aspirational, an exclusive club of East African Sikhs. Entry to this club is denied to the 'pindu',[130] an attitude in keeping with their previous attitudes towards the Africans. Now they project these views on to the direct migrant Indian Punjabi Sikh.

Khoon the nucleus, has raised many other questions that my work responds to. *Khoon* addresses my research questions through the personal diary of Mama and the story of Chachiji and my mother, that different geographic and historical contexts have contributed to the development of a distinctly British

[130] Pindu a derogatory term used to degrade a working-class manual labourer migrant from the village. Pind means village.

Indian female identity amongst women in my family. The maternal roles impact the formation of that identity in my family. And *Khoon* demonstrates that as a starting point my multi-media art practice can unearth and piece together the constituting factors in the development of that identity within my family.

As I move on to Chapter four *1947* and *The Golden Temple* the overarching theme of this chapter is to scrutinize the colonial and patriarchal control, violation and forced division of Indian women due to their faith. There are continuities between the two artworks, where the first sets the historical foundation of the upsurge in female mutilation and violence. And the second artwork expands upon the ongoing impact of religious male dominance.



Fig.99. Remi Rana Allen. *Khoon*. Film (2012-20).



Fig.100. Remi Rana Allen. *Khoon*. Film (2012-20).

Chapter 4

1947. The Golden Temple.

The previous chapter *Khoon* addressed my research questions through the story of Mama (grandmother/Uttam), Chachiji (great aunt/Gurnam) and my mother. Their narratives reveal how different geographic and historical contexts have contributed to the development of a distinctly British Indian female identity amongst women in my family, and how their identity is shaped by their maternal roles. a foundation to my studio work, *Khoon* (2012-20) also demonstrated that my multi-media art practice can unearth and piece together the constituting factors in the development of that identity within my family.

This chapter seeks to analyse some dimensions of colonial and patriarchal control of Indian women, expressed through their sexual violation and enforced religious division. There are continuities between the two artworks *1947* (2017) Fig.106 and *The Golden Temple* (2017-19) Fig.107, where the first sets out the historical background to the spate of gender-based violence against women during the Partition struggles of 1947. The second artwork expands upon the ongoing impact of religious male dominance.

I will assess through my artwork *1947* the impact of the partition of India upon the construction of the British Indian identity among women in my family from 1947 onwards to today. *The Golden Temple* tries to capture critical moments, events and themes that structure their lives: religion, marriage ceremonies and birth. An analysis of both artworks from conceptualisation through to production and installation are contextualised by theoretical text and narratives which inspired the

works. The two pieces unveil the ongoing evolving hybrid identity of the British Indian women in my family and the maternal influences in shaping the physical geographical migratory journeys, but also their journey towards a new identity as British Indian women in the UK.

1947 explores themes of violence, mutilation and rape. It was upon reflecting on my artwork that I began to feel the impact of the Partition of 1947 on my identity as a British Indian woman. I felt the visceral effects which I aimed to encapsulate during the making process.

1947 (Fig.108) is a white silk digital print 3m x 1m, stretched and hung from a white curtain rail with another at the base which is held in place by two small stone sculptures. This installation commemorating Indian women, their histories, their religions and their aspirations. My aim in making this piece was to unite these women who had been divided through religious warfare. The artwork attempts to state their self-governance and empowerment, their resistance to stifling patriarchy that disempowers them through religious control.

I also wanted to commemorate how some of these women, such as my paternal grandmother and her eldest daughter did victoriously survive in a white and brown male dominated world. They were not sexually assaulted, shamed, abused or murdered in the religious warfare incited by the British. They survived famine, disease and exhaustion whilst protecting their remaining children (my grandmother lost two children during the migration) on the journey from northern Punjab where they lived to what subsequently became Pakistan, to the south of Punjab which remained a part of India. If I could remake this artwork, with no limitations on the cost of materials and an

endless timeline, I would make a monolithic installation from stone with engraved typography, in the style of Baskerville's hand engraving.[131]

The Golden Temple (Fig.109 and Fig.110) presents and explores some elements surrounding the traditional universal ceremony of Indian or British Indian Sikh marriages, which has not altered even with the global migration of the Sikhs. The religious marriage ceremony known as the *Anand Karaj* meaning 'blissful union' takes place in a Gurdwara. The ceremony is centred around the Guru Granth Sahib, the Sikh holy book. Four Lavan (Sikh hymns) are sung by the granthis (priests). Upon each Lavan, the bridegroom leads the bride around the Guru Granth Sahib.

The inspiration for *The Golden Temple* came from a visit to the Pantheon in Rome in 2016 (Fig.111). The dome like structure is hidden from the front of the building by a rectangular entrance made of columns. Steps lead up to the main entrance. You find yourself unexpectedly inside a dome, walking slowly in a circular formation. This is what excited me as an artist. Staring upward at the circular opening allowing bright sunlight to enter the otherwise sombre dimly lit surroundings. Most visitors appear to have the same expression on their face – awe at the vastness of the structure and that gaping hole for a ceiling, yet not a ceiling. My immediate thought was that the hole was an opening for spiritual awakening. The gateway to life, the cervix.

[131] Baskerville produced some of his most renowned printed works, including his edition of the Bible and the Book of Common Prayer (reissued by Cambridge Library Collection, 2014). The decision to engrave the text in this typeface invokes the historical authority and moral gravity associated with these sacred and canonical works. In contrast, the engraved erect monolith, simultaneously suggestive of a headstone and a phallic symbol, commemorates Hindu, Sikh and Muslim women murdered during warfare incited under British colonial rule, thereby juxtaposing typographic heritage with the violence embedded within imperial histories.

The Golden Temple is a religious building with a large central dome at the front resembling the Pantheon in many ways. The iconic Golden Temple[132] in Amritsar which I had visited in 2010 had a profound effect on me. I felt overwhelmed visiting what I interpreted as the gateway to my cultural heritage (Fig.112). I felt an awakening and a rebirth of my faith, being at The Golden Temple amongst the Sikhs and tourists, in a way represented my British Indian identity. Where the tourist was my Britishness, the other in India. The Sikh element of my identity allowed me entry into my heritage as an insider, the Indian part of my identity. This visit to the Golden Temple made sense of who I was and united my being British and Indian. It was these memories and elements of my identity that were my aims in creating *The Golden Temple*. I wanted it to represent my British Indian female identity, this identity through an artwork that potentially incorporated and presented the themes of religion[133], culture, life and birth that I experience as a British Indian woman.

This chapter will begin with a brief history of how the historical image of South Asian women in India presented as a homogenised identity of Indian women by the west. In relation to the previous chapter, I have explained that the British Indian woman's identity cannot be generalised because the British Indian female identity of the women in my family is specific to their experiences, history and geography.

I move on to discuss the value of a daughter in South Asian society. It is well known that males are favoured over females in Asian society. Culture is a manmade construct, used to suppress and subjugate the brown woman. Indian parents are often disappointed when they discover they will

[132] Also known as Sri Harmandir Sahib.

[133] Jasleen Kaur and The Singh Twins are contemporary British Indian Sikh female artists that have explored religion within their practices.

have a daughter. She may be considered a burden to them until the day she marries. On that day it is expected that a dowry will have to be endowed on the in-laws and extended family. I acknowledge that the custom of dowry is not exclusive to South Asian culture but exists globally.

I discuss how the enforced codes of culture attempt to brainwash the Indian woman, resulting in their acceptance of their limited lives. The chapter specifically focuses on the body of the Indian woman, in particular, the perceived functions and expectations of the brown female body in transnational South Asian society. I will discuss the Indian woman's body in relation to colourism and puberty. Some of the revelations will be drawn from my personal life experiences and memories. I also discuss how certain values are thrust upon her through societal, cultural, matriarchal and patriarchal ideologies and practices.

The terms izzat, sharam and basti are crucial in unfolding the identity of the Indian or British Indian woman; they are derived from, and are essential to upholding the burdensome cultural, matriarchal, and patriarchal ideologies and practices that shape the contours of women's lives. These burdens are placed upon Indian women and become her duty to uphold.

Through history, women in India and the UK have endured subjugation and oppression by white colonial and brown Indian men. Tracing this historical trajectory aids in identifying when their identities were transformed from that of Indian women to becoming British Indian subjects, and lastly, a British Indian woman. *1947* and *The Golden Temple* address these changes with the objective to unfold the construction of the British Indian female identity among women in my family, more specifically my British Indian identity. For my thesis, the historical research inspiring my

artworks centres around the Partition of India in 1947 because this is directly a part of my paternal history.



Fig.106. Remi Rana Allen. *1947* (2017). Digital silk print, metal, stone. Installation, Camberwell Space Gallery (2020).



Fig.107. Remi Rana Allen. *The Golden Temple* (2017-19). Thread, braid, steel, wood, dupatta. Installation, 215 x 215 cm. NEC Birmingham (2022).



Fig.108. Remi Rana Allen. *1947* (2017). Installation, Camberwell Space Gallery (2020).

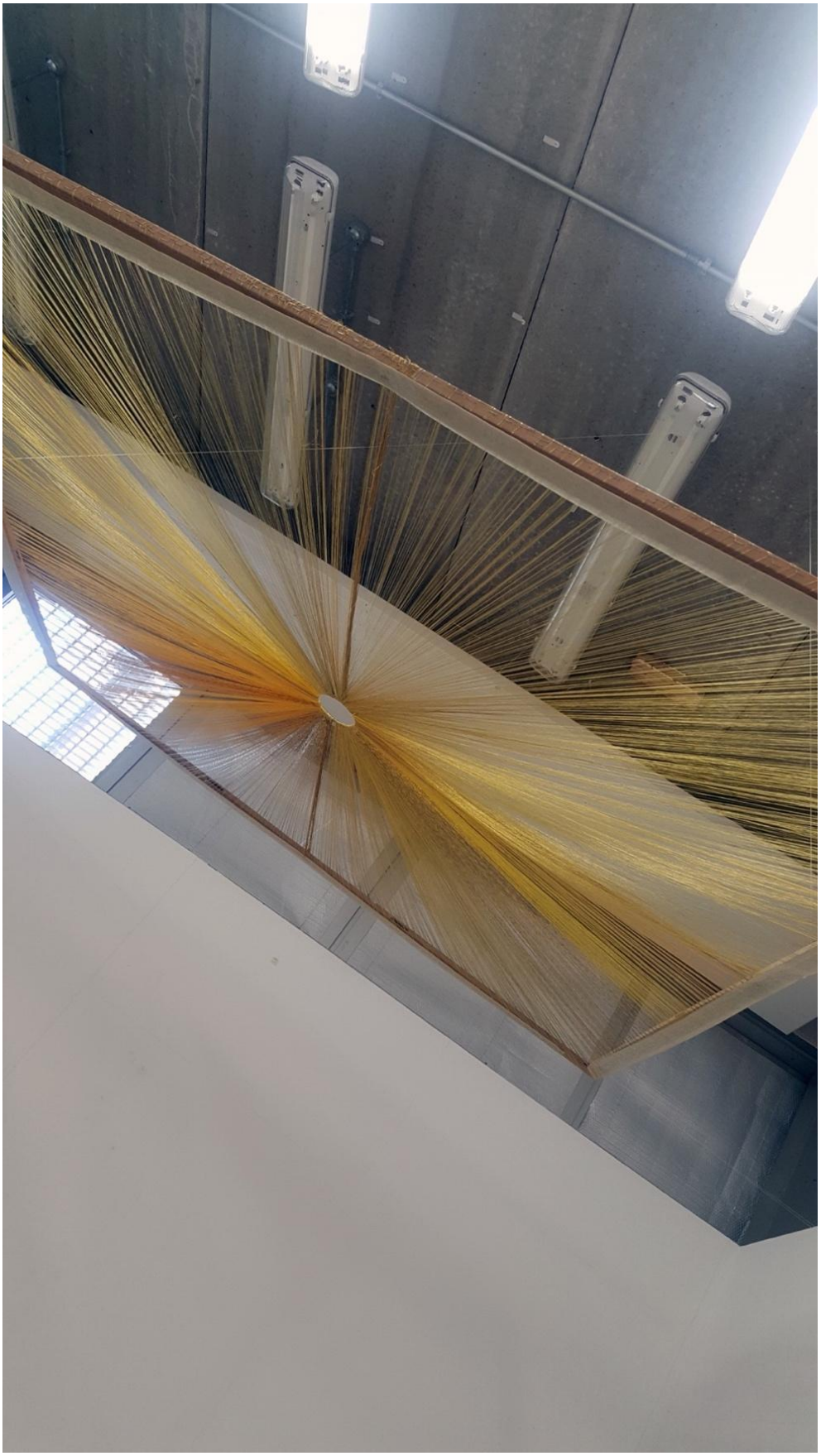


Fig.109. Remi Rana Allen. *The Golden Temple* (2017-19). Installation, The Triangle Space, Chelsea (2019).



Fig.110. Remi Rana Allen. *The Golden Temple* (2017-19) Installation.

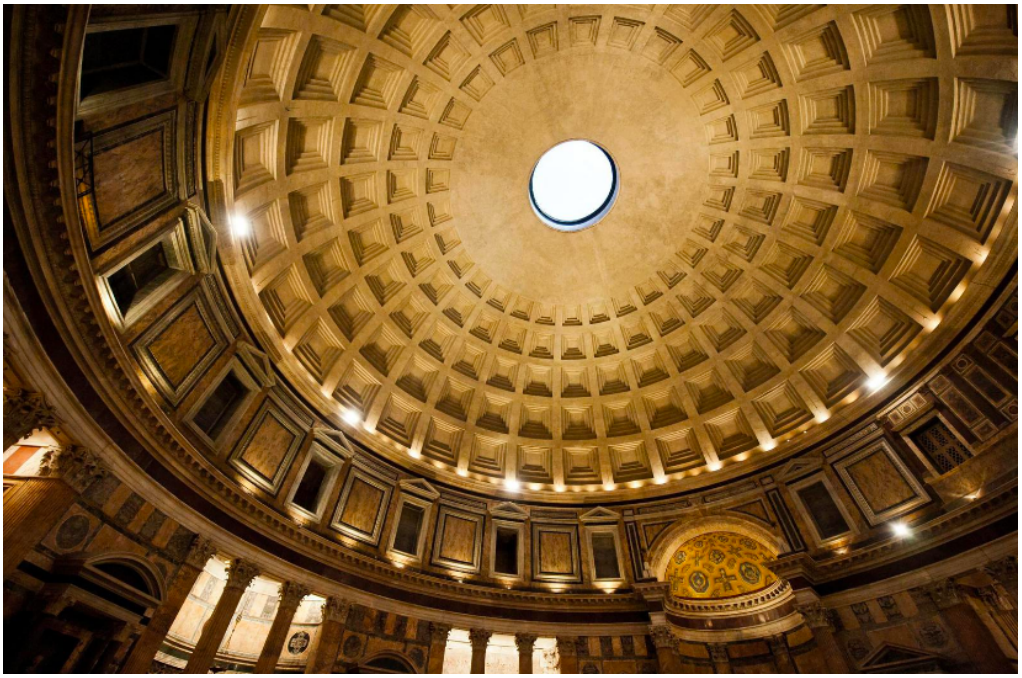


Fig.111. The Oculus in Massive Concrete Dome lights the Rotunda Below. Rome. IMAGE BY STAR5112 VIA MONOLITHIC DOME INSTITUTE (CC BY-SA 2.0).[134]

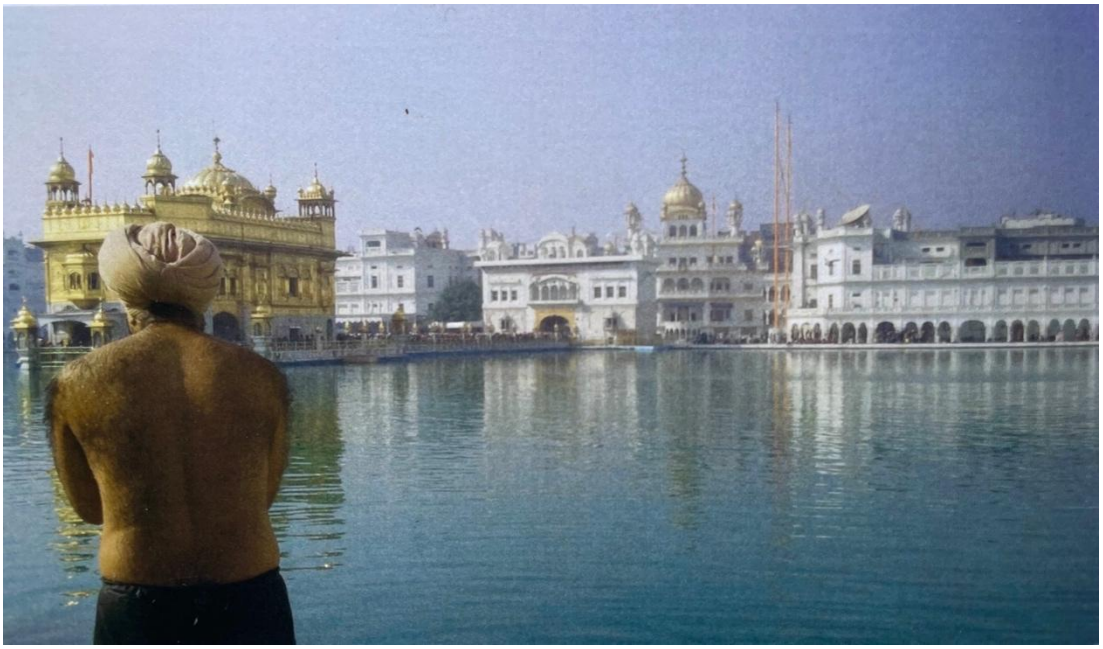


Fig.112. Remi Rana Allen. The Golden Temple, Amritsar. Artist's own photographic documentation (2010).

[134] Available at https://monolithicdome.com/pantheon (Accessed: 14.06.2023).

Imposing colonial ideas and ideals

I have previously discussed British colonial rule in India through practices such as of the mother tongue – Arabic and Sanskrit. In schools, subjects were to be taught in English, and English was to become the lingua franca of education. The colonisers decreed that Indian students in the most elite schools would be taught western literature, which was deemed to be more cultured than Sanskrit and Arabic literature. These were the languages of the sacred books, read and cherished by a population of over one hundred million people. These books allow for an entitlement to "peculiar encouragement". (Macaulay, 1835, n.p). The point Macaulay makes is that the British government should not encourage students to read Indian language literature that has no value in the eyes of the British. This is due to the religious, spiritual, superstitious, historical contexts of the Sanskrit literature. By devaluing indigenous literature, the British retain autonomy over their subjects, "…a single shelf of a good European library was worth the whole native literature of India and Arabia." (Macaulay, 1835, n.p). The cultural implications of Macaulay's views played a major role in shaping the future of Indian education by devaluing indigenous knowledge systems. The aim was to create a sense of cultural inferiority among many Indians regarding their own heritage. The political strategy of the British was the 'downward filtration' model where the British would create an elite, loyal, educated class of Indians to help administer colonial rule alongside the missionaries. It was a cost-effective and manipulative strategy that served British imperial interests.

Colonial white men and Indian woman

In their writings and in their art, colonisers depicted Indian women as bereft of agency or autonomy (Fig.113). Sharma's film *Belonging* (2010) is her artistic interpretation of how the image of the Indian woman has been historically represented both 'at home' in India and beyond.



Fig.113. Ranu Sharma. *Belonging*. Film (2010). Screenshot. © 2019 Public Service Broadcasting Trust.[135]

The colonialists' oriental representation of and their perceived lack of agency reduce identity to that of women who are restrained by South Asian society and culture in the name of izzat.

According to Sen,

[135] Available at https://psbt.org/films/belonging/ (Accessed: 05.09.2023).

> the second half of the 19th century witnessed a definite cultural focus on the Indian woman […] In addition to missionary writings […] the new generation of Anglo-Indian newspapers, journals, travel writings, as well as studies by *memsahib* writers discussed different facets of such a woman (Sen, 2001, p. 2).

This literature is helpful in pointing out the perception of the homogenised and stereotypical representation of Indian women. There was a limited range of representations of the Indian woman among them being the concubine with whom white males had sexual relations. She was perceived as the exotic other, sexually available and

> …in many cases the legitimate target of sexual exploitation – a perception no doubt compounded by the latent race/gender ideology of Victorian Britain (Sen, 2001, p. 3).

Officers from the East India Company married Indian women, sometimes from the upper classes. A division between the races in 1857 was initiated by the empire to uphold their own elite identity as an,

> …aloof imperial identity and, perhaps most important, the encouragement by the government of white, resident wives. The ethos of the empire came to be rooted in a middle-class sensibility marked by a preference for a self-contained English-style society – as it was felt that the stability of empire necessitated […] the reaction of such a society moulded on the pattern of home. It also required a distancing of the

> English administrator from the 'native' woman, thereby containing in effect the power of 'native' female sexuality over the white man (Sen, 2001, p.3).

The imperial government felt that the two races were becoming too entwined and decided to deploy white women as wives of the British officers to the sub-continent, positioning them as sexual rivals to the Indian women. The fear was that white men may go 'native'; the sexuality of Indian women was seen as a threat that could potentially disrupt the racial hierarchy by disrupting white cultural hegemony.

White women impact the representation of the Indian woman through classification

The data produced by the observations of white women acknowledges that the Indian woman was categorised depending on class, caste, religion, education, dress and occupation and not a monolithic identity as previously represented. From the concubine to the courtesans or *nautch* meaning dancing girls who,

> …formed a part of British cross cultural social life in India from the 18th century till about the middle of the next […] To the Anglo-Indian gaze the practice signified Eastern decadence and institutionalised sensuality, occupying a space outside the familiar and containable one of domestic space (Sen, 2001, p. 4).

The colonisers were simultaneously both fascinated and repulsed by the dancing girls, and interaction between the British officers and the courtesans eventually ended. Although the colonial

government encouraged British soldiers from the lower classes to visit Indian prostitutes, rationalising that

> …prostitution was a hereditary profession among the ‘natives’ and therefore not ‘immoral’ by Indian standards (Sen, 2001, p.4).

This was an attempt by the government to reinforce the class system among the English, therefore maintaining their power whilst distancing the elite from the Indian subjects. This can be understood by the sanctioning or condoning of “class-based relationship between white master/memsahib and ‘native’ servant” (Sen, 2001, p.4). To reinforce the class-based relationship between the two races the British government centred its attention on the ayah who was the main point of contact for the white man or woman. This Indian woman was considered a threat in that their influence on white children was “undesirable, irrespective of whether she was perceived as lovingly indulgent or cruel” (Sen. 2001, p. 4) The main fear of white women was that the close bond formed by some ayahs and their white charges would - among other things - lead to the creation of an ‘Indianised’ English, a language inaccessible to the parents. This was another reason to separate themselves from Indian women, which led to British nannies becoming popular caretakers of white children.

The colonisers seemed most at ease with Indians they regarded as peasants,

> Particularly valorised were peasant women (especially from the Punjab), ‘spirited’ Pathan tribeswomen of the North-West Frontier Province and simple hill-girls, tall and fair-skinned. In addition to class, the factor of race and colour too clearly played

> an operative role here as all these women were pale-skinned and markedly ‘Aryan’ in their physiognomy and build” (Sen, 2001, p. 6).

I can relate to the above quote on a personal level being a Punjabi Sikh Indian woman. But what I dispute is the description of this group of women as peasants, they were from an agricultural class, but peasant implies poverty, lack of agency, or even backwardness. I also question the description of these women as ‘markedly ‘Aryan’’ as this for me is a racially charged term, reflecting a racialised hierarchy that still persists in diasporic South Asian communities, particularly among those shaped by colonial and settler environments as in Kenya under British rule. I have often heard my mother use this term to describe herself, reinforcing her racial alignment with white people and distancing herself from the Africans she grew up with in Kenya. Her racist politics are often displayed through the choice of her words.

Purdah and the fight to control the Indian female body

Another practice that attracted the opprobrium of the colonisers was that of purdah, which the colonisers used to criticise Indian women’s sexuality.

> In most regions of the country upper-caste/class families (regardless of their religion) hid their women inside the zenana, the antahpur or the gosha, as the inner quarters of the home were variously called (Sen, 2001, p. 6).

As Sen (2001) describes, the zenana was a woman only space, barred to white males, though white women, specifically missionaries, had limited access to these private spaces in which Indian

women resided. White missionary women disseminated details about this inner women-only sanctum. They constructed a negative narrative of the purdah as an oppressive system. White males seemed to resent their inaccessibility to the brown woman's body. In their view, Indian men could view white women, therefore felt at a disadvantage as they were denied access to the zenanas.

> The Calcutta Review cautioned in 1861, the Indian in his turn 'resents as an insult or suspects as in insinuation, any enquiry into his domestic affairs'. Thus, while 'native' men evidently sought to control their women's sexuality and bodies by shutting them up inside the zenana away from the colonial gaze, the efforts of the Anglo-Indians were geared towards bringing these very women out into the open through the gradual eradication of the purdah system. The body of the 'native' woman thus became the terrain over which the two groups staked out a struggle for mastery. Indeed, the colonial reform programme was so much undergirded by the psychosexual desire to possess the body of the Indian woman as it were that in the last phase of the controversy which surrounded the Age of Consent Act (1891) Indian journalists attacked the British for harbouring lascivious intentions behind the facade of the law (Sen, 2001, p. 7).

From this, it appears that male colonisers feared their loss of control over their subjects, especially the Indian woman, and sought to administer laws to banish cultural social systems. This was often justified on the grounds that the cultural and religious systems imposed on Indian women by Indian males were oppressive and controlling.

Another of the coloniser's interventions Indian sociocultural systems was the ritual of the Sati, which I discussed in chapter two. Here I want to make the point that the imperial powers assumed that their interference in India was a civilising mission, and part of that mission was the rescue of Indian women from under the heels of patriarchal Indian males.

> [T]he 'native' woman question in fact became a strategic tool of colonial ideology with the 'rescue' of the Indian woman from oppressive social practices feeding into myths of Victorian chivalry, thereby justifying the need for continued colonial presence in India. The social practices that it identified included the problems of female infanticide, child marriage, polygamy, female illiteracy and, of course, purdah (Sen, 2001, p. 14).

Imperial rule was partly justified through the imperative to save Indian women from the debilitating social controls that denied agency over their sexuality and other aspects of their lives.

Educating Indian women

Victorian attitudes towards the education of 'native' Indian women appears twofold. Firstly, they introduced reforms in the early 19th century to remove 'social evils', such as purdah and sati. Secondly, later that century they turned their attention to "recasting and reshaping the minds of Indian women through education" (Sen, 2001, p.15). Educating Indian women would strengthen female morality, and by extension, equipping them to be good wives and mothers. Yet, there was little recognition of the fact that there were many highly educated Indian women, as evidenced by the paucity of documenting and celebrating such women, possibly due to,

> "…feelings of insecurity regarding a category of Indians perceived as potentially subversive politically, culturally as well as socially. With the universities of Madras and Calcutta being opened to women even before the University of London (the first B.A. degree being awarded to a woman in Calcutta University in 1883), Anglo-Indians were in no position to patronise this category of women, their worries and insecurities no doubt increased with the entry of the educated Bengali woman into anti-colonial politics at the turn of the century. Yet, as imperial rulers fought with their own colonial anxieties and insecurities, they needed the reassurance of colonial hierarchies-without fears of the subversion that they increasingly located in the problematic, emerging category of the educated middle-class Indian, both male and female (Sen, 2001, p. 16).

Imperialists supported the moral education of Indians, men and women. Educating women would enable them to be conduits of European civility and cultural values. But educating Indian people on was also controversial, for education could also potentially produce a political revolutionary anti-colonial and anti-imperial force.

Skin colour/colourism, class and caste in the shaping of Indian women's identity

I move from the colonialist period to the late twentieth century, an era in which South Asian women's identity, became entangled with capitalist consumerism. In this era, Indian women begin to be drawn into a nascent western derived capitalism driven by conspicuous consumerism. I argue that this combination attempts to capitalise on her acceptance of the standards of western beauty, pushing Indian women to adopt practices such as skin-lightening, wearing western

clothing, and abandoning their heritage culture, to conform to remain marginalised in India[136] (Fig.114).

[136] *Belonging* by Sharma (2010) illustrates the changing nature of the Indian woman's identity in an advertisement in the 1980s. Available at https://psbt.org/films/belonging/ (Accessed: 05.09.2023).

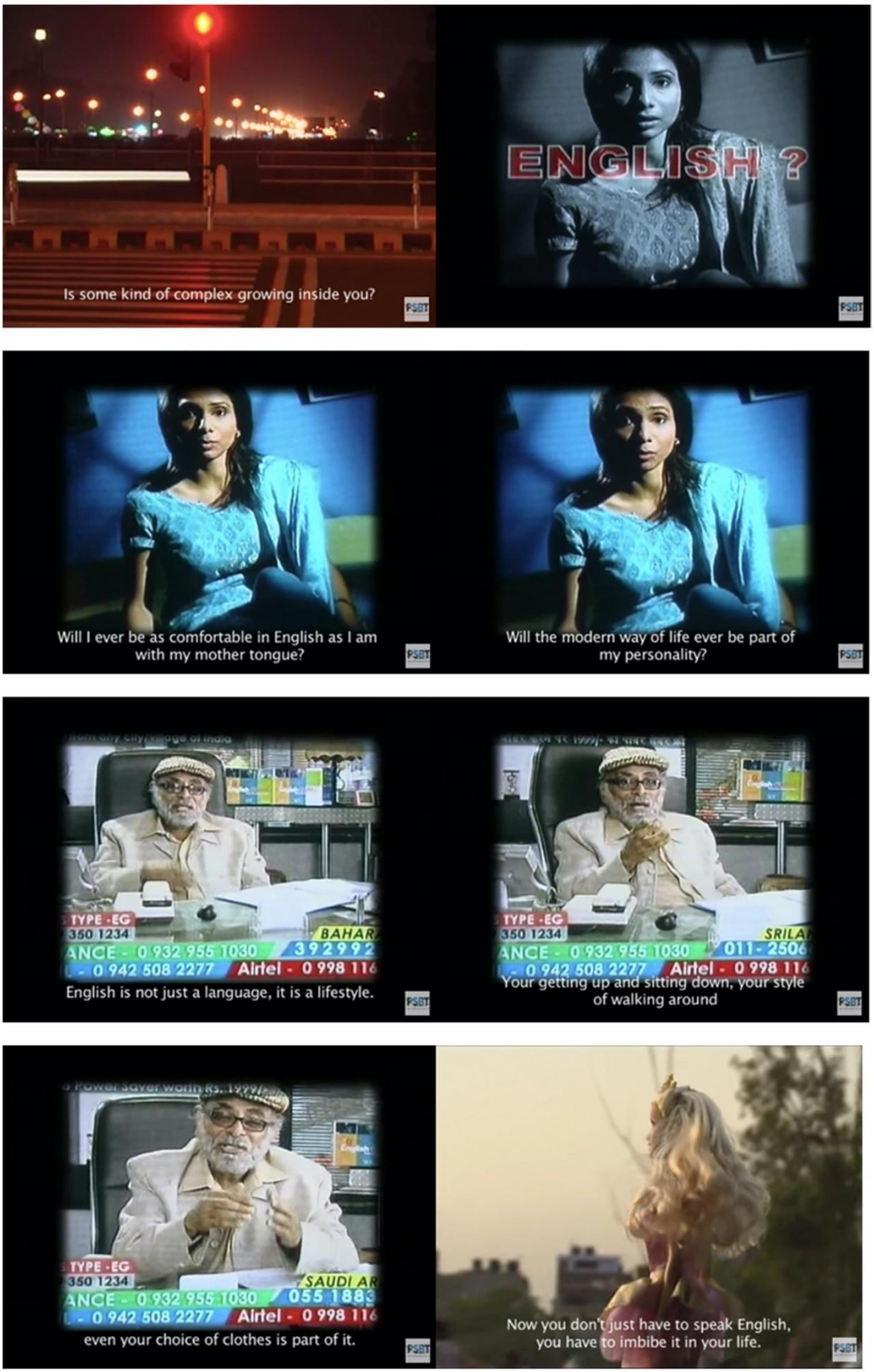


Fig.114. Ranu Sharma. *Belonging*, Film (2010). Screenshot. Copyright © 2019 Public Service Broadcasting Trust.

The commodification of women's self-image is grounded also in a desire to promote westernisation. Women are encouraged to buy products that promise them freedom and which distances them from the 'dated' image of Indian women. Investing in western consumerism helps to mould their identity as educated, bilingual, western clothed, 'whiter', independent (only enough to still adhere to her parental wishes on who she will marry), modern version of the Indian woman. However, Indian women are not a monolithic group and their identities are shaped by class, among other variables. Hence, the push towards adopting western modes of behaviour and image e.g. by skin lightening etc is possible for the 'middle' class Indian woman; however, the societal restrictions imposed on a 'lower' class or caste Indian woman would prevent her from passing as the desired western aesthetic of the Indian woman.

Colourism in Indian society plays a role in defining class membership; lighter skinned people are generally perceived as 'middle' class, educated, modern and beautiful.

> Colourism refers to prejudice in which people are penalised the darker their skin is and the further their features are from those associated with whiteness. Intrinsically related to, and yet distinct from racism (i.e., prejudice and discrimination based on racialised), colourism occurs both within and across racialised. When colourism is experienced from a different racialised group, it can intensify experiences of racism, such that those with darker skin are more likely to experience racialised. In this way, colourism and racism operate together. However, within a racialised group, the prejudice operates in the absence of racism as a skin shade (and features) hierarchy in favour of those with lighter skin and phenotypical features that are associated with whiteness (Phoenix and Craddock, 2004, pp. 1-2).

Invariably, lighter skinned is associated with the ideal Indian woman, and serves to locate individuals into a high-status place in the socioracial/colour hierarchy.

The message to Indian women appears to be that by adopting appropriate manners, behaviour and social values and norms, and consuming the ‘right’ products, they too can better fit the colonial model of the ‘good’ or ‘ideal’ Indian, as Macaulay thought,

> …a class of persons Indian in blood and colour, but English in tastes, in opinions, in morals and in intellect” ….and no longer “ignorant and barbarous” (Macaulay, 1835, n.p).

Interaction between the colonisers and the colonised in the contact zone was forged on ideological beliefs among the colonisers of their inherent superiority of intellect, culture, morality and aesthetic beauty. These self-serving racist beliefs at the same time constructed colonised peoples as inferior in every way, as made visible in their warped representations of the colonised. They set out to 'civilise' the colonised through forcing them to adopt western modes of behaviour and values. Some colonised people came to accept these western representations of themselves, and gradually, did away with some of their own traditions, and adopted the colonisers’ practices and views of themselves as inferior. Some colonised people imbibed the notion that blackness made them ugly or impure.

During my teenage years I was very conscious of going to school, making sure my clothes or breath did not smell of Indian cooking. Constantly making sure that my Indian homelife remained a very private space, that it would not be a cause of embarrassment at school. It would not be allowed to appear visible in my public space of white peers. It was during these early teenage years that I learned how to separate my identity from the Indian female to the girl who wanted to be a part of white culture, although even at that age I knew I would never be English. The political climate of Thatcherism was ripe with racist attitudes; skinheads in the sixth form often called out the 'paki', heaping on verbal and physical abuse. I felt the only way to stay safe was to try and hide amongst my white female friends and perhaps then the National Front would not notice me. Unfortunately, this did not work, and I was bullied, beaten and spat on by teenagers at least five years older. Because of fear and innocence, I did not at the time recognise that this was as Ahmed states "the politics of racism as a form of social violence" (Ahmed (1997), cited in Mirza, 1998, p.155).

Puberty, becoming an Indian woman

The next part of this chapter discusses Indian girls' experiences of puberty. In many cultures, puberty, signalled by the start of menstruation marks young girls' entry into womanhood and is celebrated. However, I argue below that this event that marks a young girls' coming of age is not a time of celebration. It is in fact a time that is not considered precious, but a time that becomes shameful. I will discuss why these young girls grow up with preconceived ideas of the relationship

to blood ‘khoon’, and periods. I question why this relationship to blood is perceived as being ‘dirty’.[137]

It was during the 1980s that I entered puberty. My experience of puberty was different from some of the other girls, they were proud to develop breasts and show them off. It was a competition among them as to who had started their periods.[138]

I was not told verbally that when I started my periods that I was ‘dirty’ but the instructions to not do certain things around the home, made me wonder why, at the age of fourteen. My parents started to further restrict my freedom from playing with friends, especially the male friends of my brother who I had grown up with. I was no longer allowed to do sports which I loved and instructed to start acting like a girl, become more lady like and wear clothing that was appropriate and not tight, that was respectable and formless, therefore hiding how my body was changing. This at the time and still today had/has an impact on my self-esteem and confidence, I experienced a sense of shame associated to my brown female body.

[137] The purity and pollution associated with blood is further highlighted by the “lengths people go to, to reproduce these notions.” (Chakravati. *Blood on My Hands*. 2008). In Kumaon region of Uttranchal women bathe three days after their menstrual cycle. They are given cow’s urine to drink and to purify their clothes. After this they are allowed to enter the house but not the kitchen or a temple. It is considered that the women are polluted during their period and therefore are locked up separately so that they will not pollute the purity of men.

[138] At first, I wasn’t sure if it was just my family that felt uncomfortable talking about the basics of growing up and coming of age. I realise that it is common amongst South Asian families to dismiss what is happening to their daughter as she enters puberty. Conversations in both India and Britain among women as they share their stories through film, text or discussion groups reveal similar experiences.

"This form of "Girling is enacted not only through being explicitly addressed to as a girl, but in the style or mode of address: because you are a girl, we can do this to you. [...] Being girl is a way of being taught what it is to have a body: you are being told; you will receive my advances; you are object; thing, nothing. To become girl is to learn to expect such advances, to modify your behaviour in accordance; [...] becoming wary of being in public space; becoming wary of being at all." (Ahmed. 2017, p. 26).

This is how it felt growing up. A fear is instilled in you if you do not modify your dress, speech and behaviour, then you put yourself in danger in the future.

Chakravati (2008) suggests that there is regulation of the young Indian girl's body when puberty begins for girls. Her voiceover from Saral et al.'s film explains how the Indian female body is subjugated.

> Moral regulation around a woman increases in intensity once she enters puberty, starts menstruating, there is a moral panic that exists around the area of a woman's active sexuality or her capacity to be sexual and this is the reason why it is extremely important to control the female body thereafter (Chakravati, *Blood on My Hands*, 2008).

In the next clip of the film an advert for *Whisper* sanitary towels exhorts young girls to appreciate

> [The] security of never being alone, four walls more comfortable than your own home. What more could a girl ask for? Hop, skip, jump and prance, you yourself will be unaware of the mayhem between your legs (Chakravati, *Blood on My Hands*, 2008).

The language used within this advert regarding home comfort, creates a fear of the outside world during menstruation. With *Whisper* you are safe and guarded. The name of the product reinforces the secretiveness that young girls should maintain about menstruation; it is not to be openly spoken of, and neither should they admit to having a period. Menstruation is to be covert and discrete.

The phrase "mayhem between your legs" evokes a certain madness that occurs while menstruating that must be controlled and restricted. She will be able to perform movements openly within the safety of her home, and thus avoid any shame of menstruation. The Indian woman is expected to remain "spotless, clean, pristine" (Chakravati*. Blood on my Hands*, 2008). No red spots of blood to announce she is menstruating.[139] The taboo around puberty and menstruation in South Asian societies is deeply rooted in historical, religious, patriarchal, and sociocultural systems that have long policed women's bodies and controlled female sexuality. Menstruation

[139]This is a dichotomy, as the colour red has such symbolism in Indian culture. The importance of this colour and its significance in South Asian culture ranges from:

Red the colour of Khoon (blood). Khoon meaning family, 'mera khoon a' – you are my blood. Red is associated with celebration, worn by the bride on her wedding day. Also associated with the third eye, the kum kum or bindi. Red is attached to fertility, strength and sacredness. Red earth relating to Mother Earth, sacred land, fertile for growth. Red oil – lala tela (Punjabi) laal tel (Hindi) is sprinkled on the ground on either side of the front door, when inviting in a new bride or other celebrated guest into your home. This is an act of blessing them with good fortune. Lala tela is also sold under the guise of strengthening bones if used frequently during massage.

marks the onset of fertility, and patriarchal cultures have sought to control reproduction and female bodies. The idea that a menstruating girl is now sexually mature triggers anxiety around honour, chastity, and marriageability. Therefore, menstruation is kept hidden and moved into the private, domestic realm.

The impact of the Indian male gaze upon the developing pubescent Indian girl

In understanding the effects that enforced cultural codes have on pubescent Indian women, it is necessary to interrogate the Indian male gaze, in relation to her developing body. The affect this gaze has on young women's self-image in relation to her developing breasts is linked directly to a perceived 'right of ownership' of Indian women's bodies. This gaze is cultural, familial, and a form of social policing. There exists a perceived 'collective ownership' of the girl's body, where male relatives, strangers, and society at large feel entitled to comment on, control, or discipline her appearance and behaviour. A girl's body becomes a symbol of family honour, and her breasts, literal signs of growing autonomy, become threats that must be neutralised through modesty or silence. Puberty for girls in Indian society is often linked not to celebration, but to heightened discipline through restrictions on clothing, movement, speech and warnings about how to behave in the presence of boys or men. This association is pivotal in the conception and inspiration for my artwork *1947* (2017).

1947 critiques the abuse of the colonised Indian woman's body during the Independence and partition of India during a period of division and struggles for autonomy. India's 'freedom' from British rule in 1947 resulted in the deaths of up to 3 million people and the displacement of a further 20 million. Religious warfare, incited by the British, turned Sikhs and Hindus against Muslims and led to a rise in violence and mutilation against women.

But some Indian women considered themselves to be British Indian as with Spivak's[140] description of her own identity as that of a British Indian woman is due to the socio historical geography of her birthplace – she was born under the colonial rule of India. This means that the horrific atrocities enacted on the bodies of Indian women leading up to and during August 1947, was in fact happening to British Indian women. Or as the colonialists labelled them, British subjects who were now no longer their problem.

An account from an eyewitness who was flown by an Englishman reiterates that the 'problem' of the partition was not of the imperialist's making, as one person commented, "Look, what you people are doing to each other" (Ahmed,2017, p.365) How quickly it turned from 'our' subjects to 'you' people, to the 'other', in the eyes of the colonialist.

Leading up to and during the partition, Indian women's bodies were terrorised and assaulted as a weapon of war, a result of ethnic conflict between Sikhs, Hindus and Muslims. This is my point of departure in the creation of *1947*.

One important narrative that also inspired *1947*, was regarding a form of violence towards women of differing religious groups. As Rani (2015) recounts Muslim men entered Sikh and Hindu villages, tortured and raped many women, some jumped into wells to avoid the basti and sharam to retain their family's izzat. Other women had their breasts sliced off, these were packed into bags and

[140] Some women born in India under colonial rule consider themselves to be British Indian, as Spivak points out "Perhaps the accident of my birth and my production – being born British-Indian." (Spivak. 2014, p.6) This is important to my research as this is rare, for an Indian national to describe themselves as British Indian due to being born during colonial rule. Furthermore, as discussed in the introduction, being British or Indian is based on national status – the passport you hold, therefore that would make Spivak Indian. The status of British Indian allows for the individual to be British due to national status but Indian by cultural heritage.

sent to the Sikhs and Hindus. In retaliation the same torture and mutilation was administered to Muslim women by Sikh and Hindu men.[141] This story was recounted by Anita Rani in the BBC series of Who Do You Think You Are? where she traced her family history to the Partition of India in 1947. (Anita Rani on *Who Do You Think You Are?* 2015. BBC.)

> In one version of the epic Ramayana[142], Surpanakha, demon princess has not just her nose, but her breasts too chopped off by Lukshmana[143] by Rama's bidding… this was a violent attack on her by men to castrate her of her power and sexuality, some women face it every day, we call it sexual harassment. (Sachar, *A Short film About…,* 2010).

I discovered Sachar's film when creating my self-brief for *1947,* I found the film beneficial in identifying evidence that correlated with my personal experiences during puberty. The film covers ground both visually and with testimonial documentative voiceover that I felt I could relate to, especially as discussing breasts is considered taboo in South Asian society.

Indian women are in constant threat of sexual harassment, the Indian male's attitude to her breasts is shown through the following,

[141] A parallel comparison exists within the Catholic church, where St. Agatha of Sicily is the early Christian martyr who had her breasts cut off with pincers or shears after refusing the advances of a Roman prefect, Quintianus, in the 3rd century.

[142] Ramayana, an epic Sanskrit text of ancient India.

[143] Lakshmana, younger brother of the God Rama.

> I have been constantly reminded that I am some sort of aberration because of my breasts, they certainly don't make me feel empowered, in fact I'm made to feel vulnerable again and again (Anonymous, Sachar, *A Short Film About…*, 2010).

For some Indian men, small breasted "girls [are] considered good looking, sexy, intelligent…" (Sachar, *A Short Film About…*, 2010). There is a sense of shame associated with having larger breasts, that larger breasts invite male gazes, that there has been a loss of innocence.

> I was a little girl with big breasts, and it was embarrassing to look so different from everyone else, there was a great sense of shame, also I started to get sexual attention at the age of eight, so I had to deal with predatory adults (Sachar, *A Short film About…,* 2010).

Indian women are compelled to feel that they must appear respectable in society, and especially in front of family, by covering the breasts.

> I don't live with my parents, but when I visit them, I repeatedly change my clothes, thinking I should look decent […] decent in the sense that my breasts are not visible (Sachar, *A Short film About…,* 2010).

There is a high prevalence of sexual abuse and harassment in India.[144] To deal with sexual harassment South Asian women often avoid eye contact with males. They conceal their breasts through binding, loose clothing or holding their arms in front of their breasts. Women droop their shoulders, slouch, or sit in a hunched position, or walk with one hand out in front of them to avoid sexual abuse.

I felt this way when embarking on puberty, but not so much out of fear of sexual abuse, because at that time I had not really understood what it meant. The only images of brown male sexual abuse of the female, that I was exposed to, were the Hindi Bollywood films that my parents would hire for the weekend. These films often depicted the woman who exposed her body sexually through a lack of appropriate clothing, therefore opening herself to sexual assault, she was 'asking for it'. It was not the male character's fault if he could not control his urges. The reason I tried to hide my changing body was because I did not want to attract attention or the male gaze to that part of my body. I had at one point caught my father looking at my growing breasts and it evoked a feeling of shame and disgust in me, not directed at him, but internalised towards myself. Perhaps I felt that I had done something to attract his attention and that was wrong of me.

[144] "Attacks peaked at nearly 39,000 in 2016. In 2018, on average one woman reported a rape every 15 minutes across the country, according to a government report." Available at https://www.reuters.com/world/india/indias-struggles-with-high-rape-cases-low-conviction-rates-2024-08-15/ (Accessed: 18.04.2025).

These attitudes to breasts is universal among South Asian families. Breasts are a taboo subject and discussion about breasts is out of bounds, from when they first start to appear on a pubescent girl, to full womanhood, breastfeeding and finally menopause.

The Partition and *1947*

My aim with *1947* (2017) was to expose the narratives of violence faced by Indian women during Independence and the Partition of India in 1947, along with unfolding the pollution and shame associated with the presentation of self within the coded cultural climate that makes up South Asian society. Whether this be in India or Britain, I feel that *1947* can represent the image of both the Indian and the British Indian female identity.

For installation, the silk print is mounted onto a white curtain rail and a second rail at the base stretches the fabric taut (Fig.115). The base rail is held in place by two Yoni Linga stone sculptures. Yoni is the symbol for procreative energy and from its Sanskrit origins has been interpreted literally to mean womb and connotes the female sexual organs. The Yoni is an abstract representation of the Hindu god Shakti. The graphic symbol for a yoni is an inverted triangle. A lingam (phallus) sometimes referred to as linga or Shiva linga, a representation of the Hindu deity Shiva. Lingam and yoni often appear simultaneously, symbolizing the eternal process of “creation and regeneration as well as the indivisibility of masculine and feminine, Shiva and Shakti, consciousness and action, immanence and transcendence.” (*Hridaya Yoga*, 2022).

Fig.116 is a natural stone found on a beach in Wales. For me, it represented a Yoni Linga and inspired the use of the manmade (Fig.117) Yoni Linga in my installation *1947*. The sacred stone sculpture uniting energies.



Fig.115. Remi Rana Allen.*1947* (2017). Installation, Camberwell Space Gallery (2020).



Fig.116. Natural Stone Yoni Linga. Photographer Rana Allen (2019).



Fig.117. Manmade Stone Yoni Linga, Photographer Rana Allen (2019).

My Great Grandfather, Grandfather and Father (at the age of five), left the Punjab in Pakistan to travel to Indian Punjab. My father lost two brothers on the journey. My Great Grandfather had to leave behind his personal possessions, his land and his community. My mother had been born three months before, in Kenya, when my father and his forefathers made their journey from Pakistan to India Punjab.

During the enforced migration of my family my paternal grandmother had avoided being raped, assaulted, or murdered during the journey from Pakistani Punjab to Indian Punjab. My maternal great grandmother had left behind Punjab in the early 1900's when it was still under white British rule, to join her husband who worked for the British in Kenya. Therefore, she would not have experienced or witnessed the brutal violence administered to Indian women in the Punjab in 1947. In some ways, how ironic it is that Indian women were dying in India, being murdered by Indian men, as the result of violence incited by the colonisers before exiting the country. In Kenya however, Indian women were being educated in colonial white Catholic schools. These women accepted British colonialism and aspired to have British national status, because of their position within the three-tier hierarchical system, they aligned themselves with white values. Here, it is possible to see women striving for autonomy during a period of division. A migrant Indian Sikh woman in Africa hoping to remain a British Indian subject, and the religiously divided Indian women in the Independent homeland liberated from the British.

There are many accounts of the brutality Indian women faced during the Partition. They are mostly oral interviews from eyewitnesses. These stories have been retrieved by writers such as Aman Zakaria in *The Footprints of Partition* (2012) and Ahmed in *The Punjab Bloodied, Partitioned and Cleansed* (2015). Although both authors are of Muslim heritage, it could be argued that the

accounts they have selected are partial to Pakistan Punjab. For the authors to collate stories of the experience from a Hindu or Sikh perspective in Indian Punjab would be difficult, because it is not always possible to travel across the border to the Punjab in India as a Pakistani national.

In terms of *1947* my focus was on unification and not the religious and geographic divisions between women. Ahmed and Zakaria's books do display an impartiality to the stories; some interviewees of the generation who experienced Partition, acknowledged their sympathies for the opposing religious groups. Zakaria admits to having had a biased view of the Hindus and Sikhs because of the stories her grandmother had recounted. It is the later generations that uphold the aggression of sectarian violence.

> It seemed like not everyone in the younger generation was able to move on from the bitterness of Partition: many were clinging on to the past they had reinterpreted and digested as their own (Zakaria, 2015, p.218).

She goes on to quote from Ashis Nandy's research:

> Those who had actually faced the violence, those who are direct victims, those who have been subject to the violence, those who have seen it first hand, mostly were those who had lesser prejudice and lesser bitterness about their experience than their own children and their grandchildren because they had lived in communities where the other was the majority… they have lived with them and they have very warm memories of that experience […] whereas the children have a packaged view

> mostly of those violent days and how the family survived …so they carry more bitterness, more hostility. (Nandy (2009), cited in Zakaria, 2015, p.218).

From my research and through limited discussions I learned about Partition from my father; I am left feeling that I carry intergenerational trauma because of what my paternal family experienced. That aside, my father's generation do not discuss the Partition, perhaps because of a deep wound, trauma, or grief at their enforced displacement and loss of possessions, land and family.

1947 has been discussed in chapter two, under Studio Methods, in relation to its use of profanity and the layout of the text. Its meaning, the seen yet unseen as applicable to the identities in translation of the Indian woman during 1947 in the Punjab. In this chapter I want to discuss the materials and the making of *1947*, and significantly what was happening to my thoughts as I discovered the stories of Partition.

1947 could have been an artwork that was obvious in its intentions in imparting the story of Partition. When commencing research on the Partition, it was mostly in a silent mental space, that allowed my mind to empty of external noise, so that I could visualise the brown woman's body being attacked, mutilated, violated. There was an anger that built and Audre Lorde's *Uses of Anger: Women Responding to Racism* (1981) came to mind,

> I have lived with that anger, ignoring it, feeding upon it, learning to use it before it laid my visions to waste, for most of my life." (Lorde, 1981, p.22).

The importance of Lorde's words resonated when contemplating *1947* as an artwork. Pre-production, I was guided by my intuition in the studio. The only real knowing was that the anger I felt had to be channelled productively, visually, representationally.

> Once I did it in silence, afraid of the weight. My fear of anger taught me nothing. Your fear of that anger will teach you nothing also (Lorde, 1981, p.22).

1947 had to engage the political with the personal and the knowledge of the incomprehensible.



It was 2017, seventy years after Independence and Partition, I wondered why the stories of Partition had not been heard? This fear of speaking up, of voicing what is unjust and the closeting of truths was where my anger was ignited. As an Indian woman, I was well versed in what the repercussions would be if I spoke up or had an opinion or even dare to reveal the truth of female subjugation within Indian society and culture. I would be told that I was being over-sensitive, a liar, misinterpreting the colonial history. It transpired for me that to be a mute woman in Indian culture is to be a good woman.

1947 would not be obvious, red was not an option in this artwork. The piece demanded grace, serenity, peace, reflection and a soul. My intention was to represent the 'uniting' of Indian womanhood, previously divided by male domination in their quest for majority rule and power.

Having collated the text and digitally set the layout,[145] I selected the white silk. White is associated in Indian Sikh culture with death (worn at funerals as a chunni by the females, as a mark of respect), but here it would re-present as an artistic material, a blank canvas where I could mark my visual interpretation of the violent history of the Indian woman, which crucially contributes to the formation of my British Indian female identity. I selected the silk for its tactile and visual qualities. This cloth is often used as a Sari, Punjabi Salwar Kameez[146] suits and Lehengas.[147]

The print was produced on a digital sublimation[148] printer. I asked the technician to test various shades of the black ink for the text, the text was to be only just legible. Through the testing, brown lines emerged at the top of the print, these were markers of the strength of black in the printing process. At first, I was going to crop the print and remove the brown test lines as they were accidental.

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[145] Detailed in chapter 1 Introduction (Studio Methods).

[146] Punjabi Salwar Kameez, long tunic and baggy trousers.

[147] Lehenga, long skirt.

[148] In psychoanalytic theory: divert or modify (an instinctual impulse) into a culturally higher or socially more acceptable activity: *libido must be sublimated into productive work activities*.

Transform (something) into a purer or idealized form: *attractive rhythms are sublimated into a much larger context*. (Online Dictionary).

Sublimate verb *work can serve as a means of sublimating rage:* channel, control, divert, transfer, redirect, convert, refine, purify, transmute. (Online Dictionary).

As the three metres of silk ran through the machine, printing the phrases, which I had only previously viewed on screen or on test paper prints, a new definition of the artwork emerged. Watching the machine birth the text on the diaphanous fabric, the sound of the ink slider like a weaving machine. I realised that the machine was performing women's work. Also, women voicing/birthing/creating. The material was embodying a 'wilfulness', obstinance, determination and intervention. A suspension, a moment to stop and pause for clarity.

When researching the women's narratives of Partition, I felt it necessary to delve deeper, so that I could begin to understand the construction of my British Indian female identity. This in turn led to the seriousness and responsibility of unfolding the unacknowledged stories. The stories of their suffering and violent physical abuse. A being which had been owned and violated by both the British white and the Indian brown male. It was at this point the artwork was stored in 2017, incomplete.[149]

I revisited *1947* in 2019, it was presented to peers during a Think Teaching course at The London College of Fashion, as part of the PhD programme. It was in presentation of the printed silk material, that I was given an insight in to the importance and relevance of the brown test strips (brownness) at the top of the silk. This insight came through my peers discussing and interpreting the brown strips as a necessary visual device, representing the Indian woman. This was a turning point as it led me to resume an interest in the artwork, this time with less anger, and more a desire to exhibit what I felt was a very personal political history. The gravity in the installation of the

[149] In the making of *1947* was I displaying signs of Alice Walker's 'womanist'? "A black or feminist of colour...usually referring to audacious, courageous, or *willful* behaviour. Wanting to know more and in greater depth than is considered "good" for one...responsible. In charge. *Serious*." (Walker. 2005, p.xi).

artwork lay in the re-presentation of domesticity, home. A reconciliation of energies, both male and female as contained within one and all of us. Tantra energies, this is where the Yoni Linga became the element that visually amalgamated the energies.

The curtain rails are a metaphor for home, a fixture, a fitting, a belonging. The silk was pulled taut creating the tension, hopefully the tension emanated to the viewer, on their closer inspection of the text. There was so much to say through this artwork, probably too much. *1947* felt complete but the historical events were vast, and perhaps for that reason a part of me feels the need to explore further. It could be that the exploration takes place through other materials, such as stone and engraving, as I discussed in the introduction to this chapter.

I feel there is room for further exploration through making. The narrative is too extensive to house in this one piece, as Sara Ahmed writes, wilfulness acquires a different power when understood,

> …as a black feminist and feminist of colour inheritance. The violence that we have to survive is not only gender-based violence, or violence that might take place at home; […] It is the violence of enslavement, of colonisation, of empire. It is the requirement to give up kin, culture, memory, language, land. We reclaim wilfulness in refusing to give up; […] to persevere embodies that refusal […] In the United Kingdom today, brown and black children of the (formerly) colonised are still managed by exercising the figure of the willful child. That figure functions to justify violence: the administration of sovereign will as the elimination of wilfulness (Ahmed, 2017, p.80).

If we are having the same conversations in 2023 that have been had time and again previously, if we are still figuring out decolonising, if we cannot move past patriarchal capitalism, how is it possible to move from the violence? Surely a post-colonial feminist can shine light on the fragility of white society, and encourage white women to acknowledge their complicity in the brutality and degradation of black and brown bodies. The refusal to accept their role and complicity in the violation of the black and brown woman's body implies no forward movement.

Culture, faith, ceremony and *The Golden Temple*

The next part of this chapter will focus on *The Golden Temple* (2017-19). The inspiration for the artwork arrived from stories of enforced marriage that exploited the South Asian woman's body. My original aim in creating *The Golden Temple* was to explore and represent religion, culture, life and birth in relation to the construction of my British Indian female identity. It transpired through the making of *The Golden Temple* that I was artistically unfolding my identity through an exploration of social issues that would enable me to reconstruct my emerging contemporary British Indian female identity.

Through the construction of *The Golden Temple*, I felt I had to question the social phenomena of my culture, faith and associated ceremonies and how these related to the ownership of the Indian woman's body. This became the focus for identifying the importance of these issues in the construction of my British Indian female identity.

Marriage is another tool plucked from that heavy duty maintenance box of oppression, utilised to enforce a sense of duty upon Indian women. Around ninety percent of marriages in India are

arranged, fifty five percent are arranged globally, and in the United Kingdom on average fifteen hundred marriages annually. It is argued that there is a difference between arranged marriage (it is assumed that both families consent to the marriage) and forced marriage (where there is coercion and no free will). The Forced Marriage Act (2014) may blur the lines between arranged and forced, but the motives behind the marriage overall remain the same, that is, honouring the parent's wishes.[150]

Although the Act may have been passed for the 'right' reasons, how sickening that the language used within the policy to protect brown women from brown patriarchy and misogyny "uses violence, threats, or any other form of coercion […] without free and full consent", the very tactics deployed on over eighty women arriving in Britain in the late 1970s. These women were forced to take virginity tests at Heathrow airport as they arrived from South Asia. (Fig.118 and Fig.119). The Social Services Correspondent Melanie Phillips (1979) exposed this sexual and racist violation of the brown woman's body in her article written for The Guardian newspaper on the 1 February 1979.

The immigration rules in Britain at the time stated that if a bride arrived in the UK to be married, she could do so within three months of arrival without a visa. But if an immigration officer suspected that she was lying or already married, previously been pregnant or not virgo intacto[151]

[150] The Forced Marriage Act was revised and passed in parliament in 2014, set up to prevent persons who:

(a) uses violence, threats, or any other form of coercion for the purpose of causing another person to enter into the marriage, and

(b) believes, or ought to reasonably believe, that the conduct may cause the other person to enter into the marriage without free and full consent. (www.gov.uk, 2014).

[151] Virgo intacto meaning a girl or woman whose hymen has not been broken.

(how this decision is based purely on sight, is unknown), she would be asked to sign a consent form enabling a port medical officer the authority to internally examine her. This examination was to determine whether an Indian woman was a virgin, therefore,

> …she would be believed to be unmarried; and that if she was found to be not a virgin she would be believed to be married (Phillips, 1979, p.1).

This procedure was based on the stereotypical presumption that South Asian women were always virgins before marriage. Though the women were denied a female doctor to perform the examination, they consented through fear of being sent back and bringing shame on the family. This procedure was stopped when *The Guardian* printed the story. As Mirza expands,

> Women emerged in the official patriarchal, neo-imperialist discourse only as subjects for sexual and racist humiliation. In the construction of women as objects of male ownership the British Government invoked a twisted cultural legitimacy to harass and deter male migrants. They used the ultimate transgression of power, the forcible and violent entering and defiling of the bodies of the invisible (Mirza, 1997, p.7).[152]

What does come to light is, as Mirza writes, that by performing this procedure of "violent entering and defiling of the bodies of the invisible", the British Immigration Office made very visible the brown body and the injustices, violation and racial stereotyping of Indian women. One of the

[152] This narrative is a very clear reminder of the British interfering with the 'law' of the sati in colonial India.

victims of this internal interrogation describes how her body was violated by a male Immigration Officer,

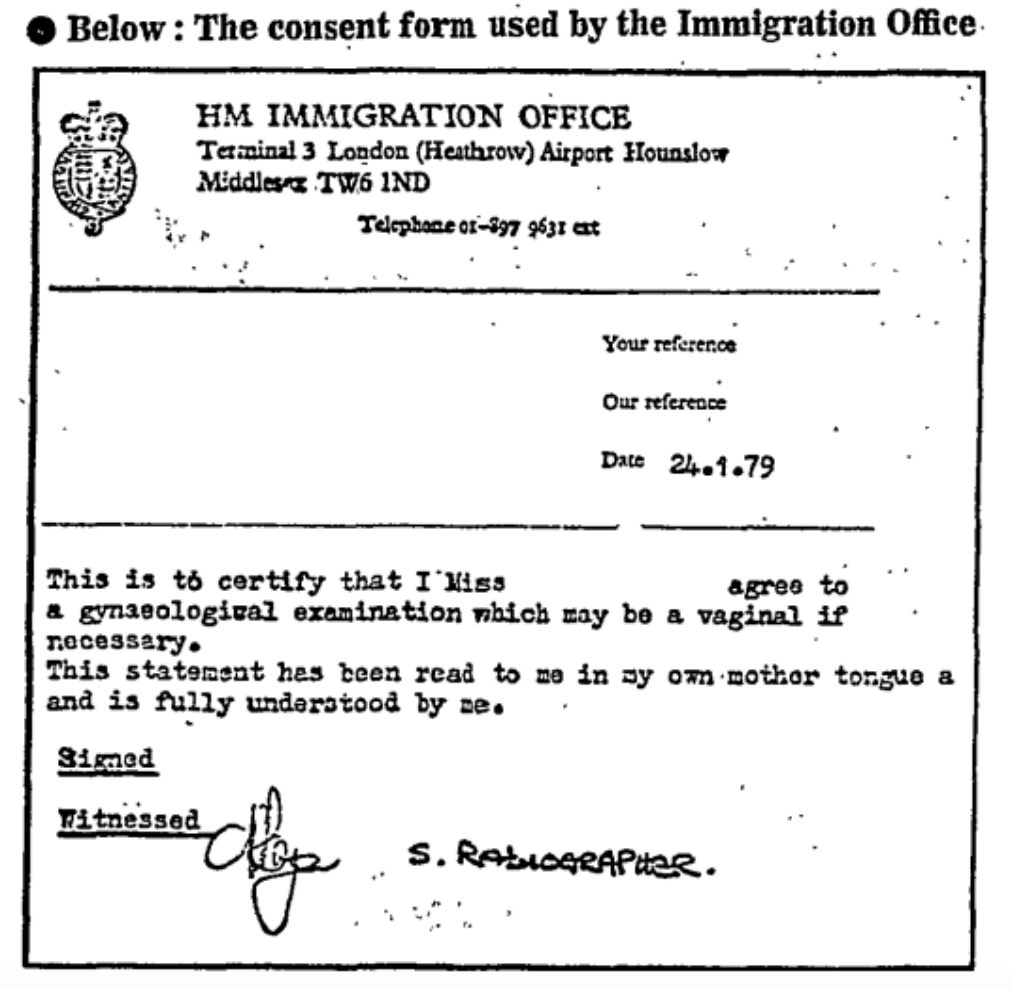
> He was wearing rubber gloves and took some medicine out of a tube and put it on some cotton and inserted it into me. He said he was deciding whether I was pregnant now or had been pregnant before. I said that he could see that without doing anything to me, but he said there was no need to get shy (cited in Phillips, 1979, p.1).[153]

The fear of being refused to enter the UK, and thus unable to marry the groom the families had arranged, probably played a part in Indian women agreeing to the procedure. If she did not comply and was extradited back to India, the sharam, basti and izzat of the family would be placed upon her. The Indian woman crossing geographical borders for marriage only to potentially be returned to India, due to the restrictive constrictions of her visual image, that of a brown woman.

The pressure of sharam, basti and izzat are more severe in the land she inhabits that her parents still find foreign, for example as a British Indian woman whose parents migrated to the UK. The British Indian bride adheres to the same rules as the bride in India when an arranged marriage takes place. There are several stages to the marriage. Firstly, finding a suitable match, a partner from the same religion, caste, education, social status and the geographical region of India. Second, negotiating the dowry. And thirdly, honouring the marriage. What happens to the female

[153] Zarina Bhimji's artwork *She loved to breathe – pure silence* (1987) references virginity testing and the politics placed upon the Indian female body due to geographic borders.

once she is married is of little concern to her parents. She is now the responsibility or 'property' of the in-laws. If the marriage works, this is affirmation of the system working, and if the marriage fails it is the bride's fault, she has shamed herself, embarrassed both families, and it is her respect that is lost. She is more than likely disowned by all parties and a stigmatised divorcee.



● **Below : The consent form used by the Immigration Office**

HM IMMIGRATION OFFICE
Terminal 3 London (Heathrow) Airport Hounslow
Middlesex TW6 1ND
Telephone 01-897 9631 ext

Your reference

Our reference

Date 24.1.79

This is to certify that I Miss agree to a gynaecological examination which may be a vaginal if necessary.
This statement has been read to me in my own mother tongue a and is fully understood by me.

Signed

Witnessed S. Rabiographer.

Fig.118. Detail from The Guardian Newspaper (1979). Open Licence terms apply https://www.theguardian.com/info/2022/nov/01/open-licence-terms Screenshot.[154]

Available at https://warwick.ac.uk/fac/arts/history/students/modules/hi3h7/seminars/week20/virginty_tests_on_immigrants_a.pdf (Accessed: 05.09.2023). The Guardian Open Licence: Please find below the terms and conditions under which you may use Guardian and Observer content free of charge.

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Virginity tests on immigrants at Heathrow
Melanie Phillips Social Services Correspondent
The Guardian (1959-2003); Feb 1, 1979; ProQuest Historical Newspapers: The Guardian and The Observer
pg. 1

MP to query gynaecological examinations

Virginity tests on immigrants at Heathrow

By Melanie Phillips,
Social Services Correspondent

Immigrant women are being subjected to intimate gynaecological examination on entry to Britain. The Home Office claims that this helps them to identify women attempting to enter the country illegally.

It says that medical evidence produced by such examinations enable the immigration authorities to decide whether the women are bona fide fiancees, entitled to enter without going through lengthy clearance procedure, or whether they are married. In that case they would need special clearance—an entry certificate granted in their country of origin.

The Home Office admits that in a specific case, of which the Guardian has details, an examination was conducted to "determine whether the woman was a fiancee."

The clear implication is that if a Hindu woman was found to be a virgin—which in this case she was—she would be believed to be unmarried; and that if she was found to be not a virgin she would be believed to be married.

The Home Office confirmed last night that an examination was conducted by a part medical officer on a 35-year-old Indian schoolteacher who arrived at Heathrow last week. The woman, who was brought from India by her fiancee, signed a form which gave her consent to "a gynaecological examination, which may be vaginal if necessary."

The woman, who has asked not to be named, told the Guardian she only signed because she was not familiar with British law and was frightened that she would be sent back to Delhi.

Miss Jo Richardson, Labour MP for Barking, who has said she is "appalled by this monstrous practice," is to raise the matter in the Commons. A gynaecologist said last night that the case sounded "obscene."

The woman teacher said that soon after arrival she was sent for a medical examination by immigration officials. A woman who spoke Hindi told her to take off all her clothes. "Then a man doctor came in. I asked to be seen by a lady doctor, but they said no."

She was given nothing with which to cover herself. "I asked for a dressing gown but it was not provided. I was most reluctant to have the examination, but I didn't know whether it was normal practice here. The doctor said, through the nurse interpreter, that he thought I had been pregnant before, and I said that before marriage no Indian lady would do that sort of thing."

The interpreter then translated the consent form for her, and she signed it. "I was frightened that otherwise they would send me back." The doctor then began to examine her.

"He was wearing rubber gloves and took some medicine out of a tube and put it on some cotton and inserted it into me. He said he was deciding whether I was pregnant now or had been pregnant before. I said that he could see that without doing anything to me, but he said there was no need to get shy.

"I have been feeling very bad mentally ever since. I was very embarrassed and upset. I had never had a gynaecological examination before."

The Home Office disputes some facts. A spokesman said last night that the woman had been given only a cursory examination that was not internal. She had not been required to remove all her clothes. Under immigration rules, potential immigrants could be examined by medical officers at the ports.

"An immigration officer may not be satisfied that a passenger is who he or she says they are and may think they are seeking admission by deception," the spokesman said. "In this case the officer referred this passenger to the part medical officer to see whether she was, in fact, a bona fide virgin, or fiancee. After a cursory examination the medical officer said that these suspicions could be removed.

"The medical officer concerned has informed us that there was no internal examination and that he very quickly and decently established that she was virgo intacto. If a woman refused such an examination," he said, "this would be taken into account" but she would not be refused entry solely on that account.

The part medical officers, he said, send the examination results back to the immigration officials, and the records would probably be maintained in a confidential way. "It is not standard practice for all immigrant women. It depends on the immigration officer and whether or not he is satisfied that the passenger is all he or she claims to be." Passengers were not normally asked for their consent to such examinations and he had not been able

Turn to back page, col. 5

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Witnessed S. Rathbone

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[155] Available at https://warwick.ac.uk/fac/arts/history/students/modules/hi3h7/seminars/week20/virginty_tests_on_immigrants_a.pdf (Accessed: 05.09.2023).

As I returned to the studio and engaged with my research material, It became apparent that what I aimed to create needed to visually represent the British Indian female body. The representation would be abstract with the intention of achieving the encapsulation of marriage, religion and the maternal. But most importantly, the celebration of the Indian woman's body in the face of the many invasions and desecrations it had historically faced and overcome.

By utilising abstraction as an artistic tool, I have found that I can open discourses on taboo topics relating to South Asian culture and heritage. One of the features of *The Golden Temple* for me is about the central core and strength of the British Indian woman. As with *10cm Holes*, I decided on a continuation of incorporating the 10cm steel ring (Fig.120). This was possibly because both artworks were being made in conjunction. The steel ring visually representing the cervix, slowly over time forced to stretch to 10cm, to allow birthing. This central core is tough enough to eject a human head. The 10cm steel ring I have realised is my metaphor for the maternal. In my artworks where the steel ring has been presented, is where my art practice and theory entwine in unfolding the role of the maternal in the construction of my British Indian female identity.

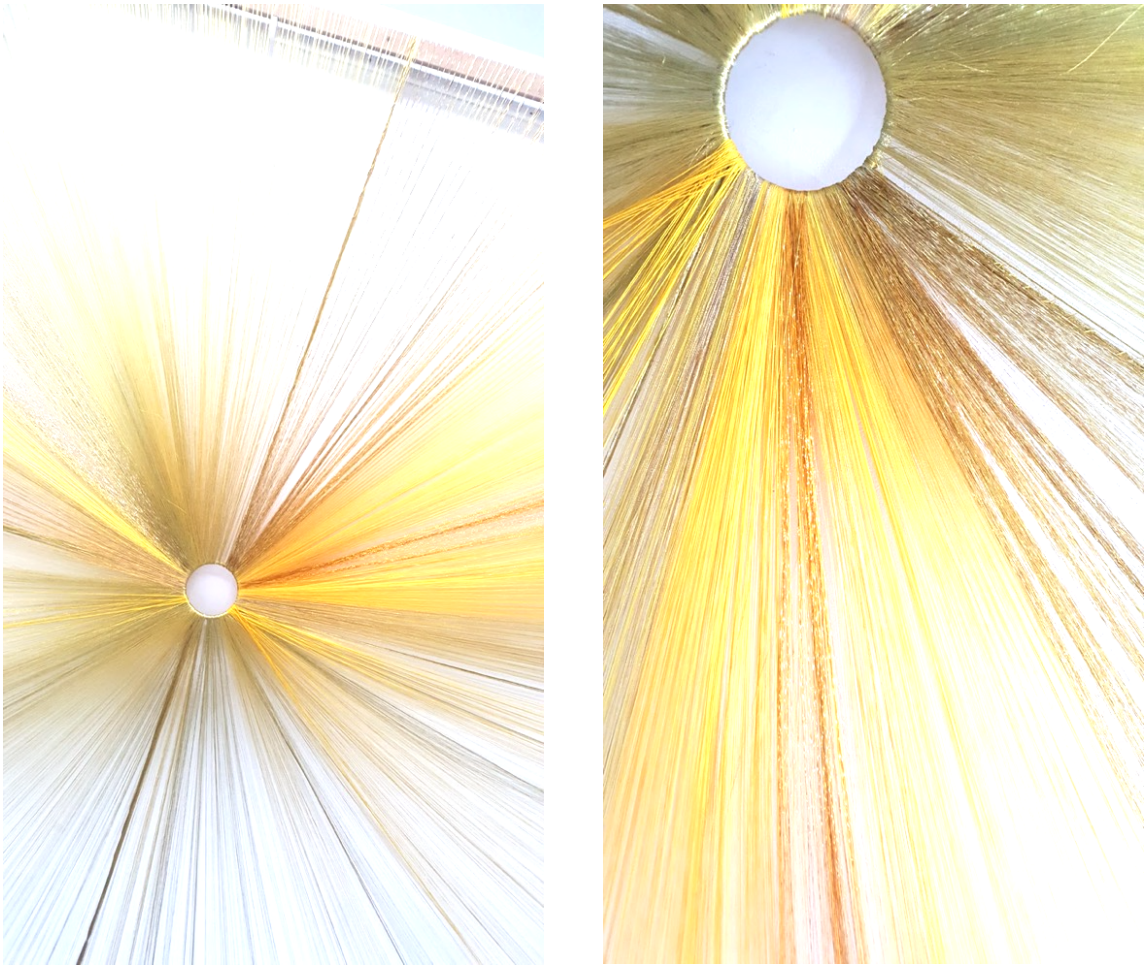


Fig.120. Remi Rana Allen. *The Golden Temple* (2017-19). Detail. Installation

The making started with searching for steel rods that were pliable enough to curve into a circle. The rods measured 5mm in circumference. These were shaped by a fabricator into circles measuring 10cm in diameter, once curved to the correct dimensions the rings were soldered. I envisioned one of the rings as the central opening. As with many of my artworks, I utilise found objects. In this case I found a wooden frame which measured 215cm x 215cm. Large enough to create an installation which could be hung from above and viewed as a roof, shelter, ceiling, habitat or even home. With an opening to external or eternal light.

The piece was to emulate the sheen of Indian gold, 24ct gold, soft and pliable, easily melted and reformed. The materials used were gold braids some from an Asian haberdashery and others such as the Zari[156] or Jari thread sent from India. Zari thread is often used in embroidering the borders of a sari or lehenga (Fig.121) to make detailed patterns. The thread originally made of fine gold or silver is used in the designs of Indian, Bangladeshi and Pakistani outfits. Buying real Zari gold was too expensive, so I used metallic Zari, a contemporary alternative to the original. Had money been no object I would have made *The Golden Temple* in authentic gold Zari and a frame consisting of gold leaf.



Fig.121. Zari embroidery. Photographer Rana Allen (2021).

[156] Zari or Jari metallic thread for embroidery.

The central steel ring was held into place via the gold braid (Fig.122). Firstly, wrapping the braid around the rings to cover the steel. The braid was long enough to stretch to the four central points on each end of the frame. The braid was pulled tightly and tied to the frame. Once the steel ring had been positioned centrally, I started to weave golden thread around the frame from one corner into the central ring and back around the frame. This took many attempts as I soon realised that when the frame was positioned upright the threads slipped out of place and downwards, causing disappointment and frustration. The threads would not remain in place, there was a feeling of failure as the materials were resisting. I had a visualisation of the piece in my mind. To achieve this, I experimented many times with the thread, it often broke as I interrogated its limitations. Eventually, I devised a system whereby after weaving the thread seven or eight times around the steel ring and the frame the threads would be stapled into place onto the frame. This held them securely and I could now start to work my way around the frame (Fig.123). As I continued to weave, time would slip by and the materials would reveal the passing of time, through the sun highlighting certain angles of the glistening gold fibres. (Fig.124).



Fig.122. Remi Rana Allen. *The Golden Temple* (2017-19). Detail. Installation.



Fig.123. Remi Rana Allen. *The Golden Temple* (2017-19). Studio.

The Zari thread was used in conjunction Gutermann Yellow Sulky Cotton Thread 30 Weight 300m (4002). I discovered that the thread was not reflecting the dynamism of bright gold, the texture was appearing flat, and the gold was not vibrant enough to have the appearance of Indian gold. Various shades and weights of gold and yellow threads were introduced. These included Gutermann Gold Sulky Metallic Thread 200m (7007), Gutermann Gold Sulky Rayon 40 Weight Thread 200m (1137), Gutermann Gold Metallic Effect Thread 50m (24), Gutermann Gold Sulky Rayon 40 Weight Thread 200m (1055), Gutermann Gold Metallic Sliver Embroidery Thread 200m (8003), Gutermann Gold Sulky Metallic Thread 200m (7004). The variety of materials revealed a 3D quality to the piece. Depending on the angle the piece was viewed, the light shone on different areas, casting a visual depth and richness imitating Indian gold (Fig.122).



Fig.124. Remi Rana Allen. *The Golden Temple* (2017-19). Detail. Installation.

By using the gold threads, I felt that I could visually represent the Gurdwara.[157] The Golden Temple in Amritsar and the gurdwara where my parents were married in Southall. The first temple to open in the UK in 1964, Gurdwara Sri Guru Singh Sabha was situated on The Green in Southall (Fig.125). This gurdwara became the leading temple outside of India. It relocated to Park Avenue in 1997, whilst the flagship gurdwara was constructed on Havelock Road, (later renamed Guru Nanak Road), Southall (Fig.126). As part of my teaching, I organised a walking tour of Southall. Followed by a trip to the Sri Guru Singh Subha, this project focused on how locality informs an artist, and how they bring their cultural heritage to their practice (Fig.127). Twenty-five students from Fine Art courses across UAL signed up. We were given a tour of the gurdwara and were served langar.[158]



Fig.125 Gurdwara Sri Guru Singh Sabha (1964). © 2021 – SGSSS. Screenshot.[159]

[157] Gurdwara, A Sikh temple.

[158] The langar (the free kitchen) hall provides food to all citizens of the community seven days a week and will be able to serve as many as 20,000 meals a week, in the continuous and unique Sikh tradition, where all are welcome, (race, sex, colour and creed do not matter) the food is always free and always strictly vegetarian. (https://sgsss.org/about_us/ (Accessed: 14.06.2023).

[159] Available at Available at https://sgsss.org/about_us/ (Accessed: 14.06.2023).



Fig.126. Gurdwara Sri Guru Singh Subha. Photographer Remi Rana Allen.

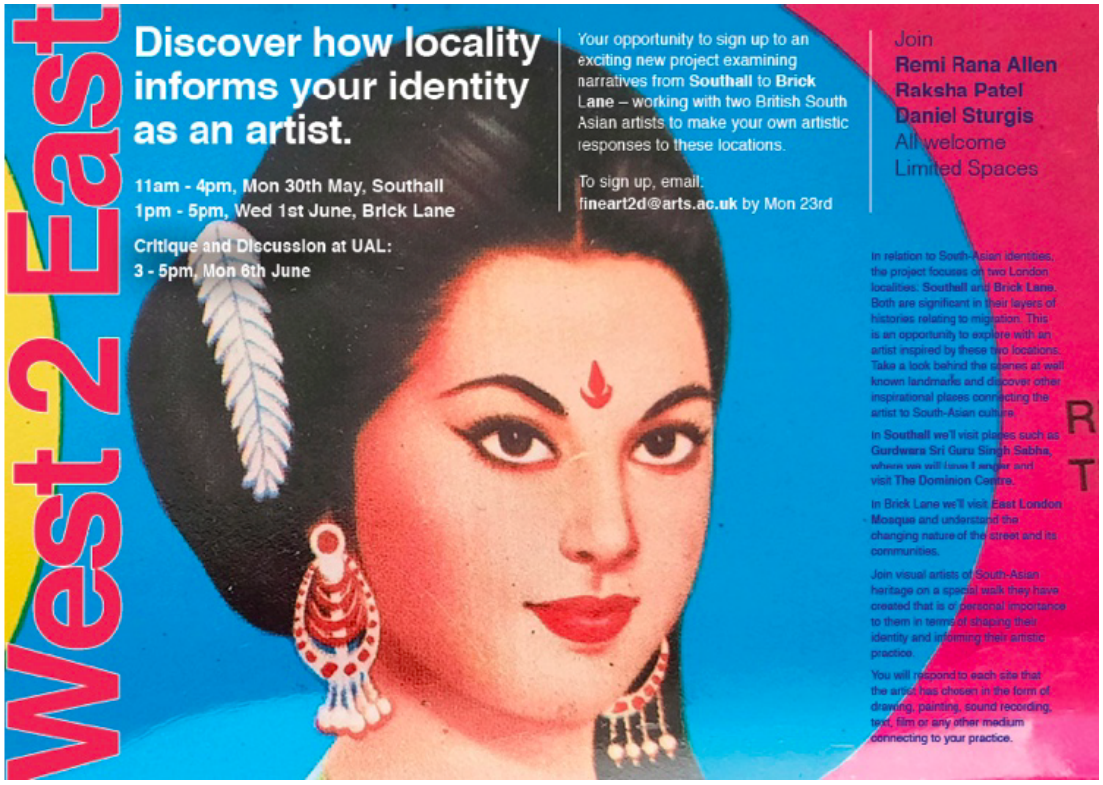


Fig.127. *West to East*. Graphic Design Remi Rana Allen. Poster (2022).

I did not get married in a gurdwara; I was married at the registry office at Uxbridge Civic Centre. I felt disappointed at not having the traditional four Laava[160] hymns performed, as bride and groom we would have taken the four nuptial rounds around the Guru Granth Sahib. My parents made the decision on a registry office wedding. Religion plays such a large part in the Punjabi woman's life, from childhood to womanhood. The rules and codes of being a Sikh woman are to be adhered to, and yet when I asked for a Sikh wedding, I was denied one. Sharam for marrying outside? Or perhaps in 1994 the Gurdwara would not have agreed to the ceremony due to us being a mixed-race couple. The possibility of the Gurdwara refusing the ceremony to be held there, would have brought sharam and basti to my parents.

The gold threads for *The Golden Temple* also symbolises the practice of dowry.[161] The dowry consists of money and household goods, clothing and Indian gold jewellery. The commercialisation of this marital ceremony allows for a transaction of the Indian woman. As Pragna Patel Director of Southall Black Sisters explains in the voiceover to the educational film *My Second Name is Dowry*, created by Meena Patel for Southall Black Sisters,

[160] The verses of the Lavan are from the scripture of Guru Granth Sahib. (https://www.learnreligions.com/sikhism-wedding-hymn-the-four-laav-2993551 Accessed: 14 June 2023).

[161] A custom that allowed a woman to be burnt to death every hour in 2011 in India (National Crime Records Bureau India), "they are bought by her husband like an animal from her parents" states Dr. Dan Kaye (*My Second Name is Dowry*, 2015).

> the giving and taking of dowries closely relate to violence, abuse and harassment of women. […] Either because families want to extort more money from the bride's family, or as a way of keeping her in her place and punishing her for not bringing a sufficient dowry. […] She is subject to emotional, financial, psychological, physical and sexual abuse. […] Often, they are murdered in such a way that it is recorded as accident (Patel cited in Patel, *My Second Name is Dowry*, 2015).

Patel goes on to explain that:

> Marriage has become a commercial transaction and women have been commodified, a way of buying and selling women and women's sexuality, continuing patriarchal structures that don't regard women as equal human beings (Patel cited in Patel, *My Second Name is Dowry*, 2015).

The commercialisation of marriage applies to both Indian women on the sub-continent and British Indian women in the UK. What I wanted to further explore was the exploitation of the British Indian woman's visual appearance to extort dowry, and her subsequent degradation. This aim was intended to address my research question that asked how have different geographic and historical contexts contributed to the development of a distinctly British Indian female identity amongst women in my family?

The stereotypical Indian bride is dressed in a red sari or lehenga, draped in gold jewellery and wearing henna (Figs.128 and 129). This is how she is presented at traditional Indian weddings, but

what is not seen is the history leading up to this presentation of the ‘perfect’, pure innocent British Indian bride. A woman whose visual image is presented as Indian, but who knows that internally the conflict of being British and western exists. A woman who may or may not have had autonomy over the decision making leading to the arrangement of the marriage.

Beginning with honour or izzat, Indian women are expected to honour their parents, then their husband and in laws. The izzat of a family “rests on the conduct of women, they are expected to be obedient and submissive to their husbands and families.” (Anonymous, cited in Southall Black Sisters, *My Second Name is Honour*, 2015).

Whether a marriage is arranged in the United Kingdom between two British South Asian families, or a match is made where an Indian bride will travel from India to Britain, or an Indian woman is sent to India to be matched and married, the underlying message is always reinforced. The woman must retain the honour of the family, by doing what is expected of her.



Fig.128. Rana Allen Wedding. Photographer J. Kaler (1994).



Fig.129. Rana Allen. Henna or Mendhi ceremony. Photographer J. Kaler (1994).

Personal experience of the weight of honour has been a part of my life. Although I had a love marriage, to an English man, I was asked many times if, I was sure. I was warned that

if the marriage did not last, I would bring basti on the family and they would lose their izzat. My parents were advised by 'well meaning' relatives to lock me in a room, to prevent me returning to university. It was suggested by some individual members they beat me to make me adhere to their rules.

The pressure to make a marriage last can be burdensome. The pressure to try harder is instilled and more so if you marry outside. If problems emerge you are told 'it was your decision' the sub text being 'it is your problem, do not let us down.'

Both Southall Black Sisters and Jasvinder Sangherra (founder of Karma Nirvana also a charity set up to help South Asian women suffering abuse) have led extensive research into what honour or izzat means to an Indian woman. Sanghera publicly talks about her personal experience of domestic violence through telling the story of her sister, who was taken out of school and forced to travel to India for an arranged marriage to a man she had only seen in a photograph. At the age of twenty-four she committed suicide by setting herself on fire:

> …being right, proper and honourable, […] it was conditioning, we were ruled by fear these were the rules of engagement and if we breeched them, we put ourselves at risk it could be a trigger for significant harm physical abuse a forced marriage and even murder (Sanghera, *Fighting forced marriage and honour-based abuse*. 2013, 03.42).

Similar stories are told by different voices.

As Hannana Siddiqui explains,

> The violence can be from the whole extended family not just the husband, the parents, cousins, aunts, her uncles, brothers and sisters, it can also come from the wider community, including community religious leaders. Even if the community is not involved in the violence they may be colluding in the violence, they may think it is acceptable because the girl has brought shame onto the family. The consequences for the woman can be quite severe from social ostracism, sexual harassment, threats to kill, imprisonment, assault, abduction. Women who are driven to kill themselves or killed in what's known as honour-based violence or honour-based killings (Southall Black Sisters, *My Second Name is Honour*, 2015).

Izzat plays a large part in the conditioning of an Indian woman. It is a burden placed upon her from birth. It still exists today in Britain among the younger generation of British Indian girls and women.[162]

[162] I mentored for Forward Culture in 2022. The company assists in empowering young South Asian girls, with a safe space to gain confidence and grow. My mentee discussed the burdens of sharam, izzat and basti during one of our sessions.

The final part of this chapter will address the chura[163] a significant visual and cultural symbol of a recently married bride. The chura is a set of bangles[164] worn by the bride prior to her wedding day. The ceremony involves the maternal uncles adorning the bangles on her arms (Fig.130). My interpretation of this ceremony was that the bride is being 'given away' by all the male members of the family, and not just the father. It was my father who told my father-in-law on my wedding day "she is your daughter now." I felt saddened by this remark, it made me think that the ceremonies that took place in preparing me as a bride, reduced my value as a woman to that of a commodity. I became an exchange, a transfer. A relinquishing of one patriarch and an acquisition by another.

> A Punjabi bride is traditionally given slender plastic choodas (bangles) in white and red. […] In the northern India, red glass bangles suggest promising for the married women. After the wedding, the woman has to wear her bangles as an amulet of protection and good luck for her husband. […] All rituals in an Indian wedding have special significance, so is the chooda ceremony, which is an essential feature of Punjabi wedding. The small family ceremony happens on the morning of the wedding day or sometimes the previous evening. […] The red colour chooda symbolizes fertility and prosperity, and bangles are worn for a year or minimum of 40 days after the wedding. By the end of 40 days, the bride is settled in a new house and ready to take the responsibility of kitchen and other household works (Zalfiqar, 2022, p.1054).

[163] Chura or Churiya, bridal wedding bangles usually consisting of twenty-one bangles in a set. The word is also used to describe a person from the Dalit caste.

[164] The word bangle comes from the Hindi/ Bengali word bangri which literally means a ring for the arm or coloured glass bracelet or anklet. Bangles are also known as churain Nepali, churi in Bengali, choodi in Hindi, and churiyan in Urdu. Bangles are also known as chudi, kangan, bangdi, Valaya, Kada, Gajulu, and Choodla. (Zulfiqar. 2022, pp.1049-51).

The Chura is usually bought two sizes smaller than the actual size of the woman's hand. This is so that it will be tight on the arm, appearing 'thin and attractive'. This is painful as the bangles scrape the hands raw as they are adorned. For my ceremony I had a double chura, forty-two bangles. These had been soaked in a solution of milk and water to soften the bangles and prevent them from breaking as they were placed on my wrists. The chura symbolises the bride's wedded life. It is worn for either one month or until the last bangle breaks. The pain subjected through the adornment of the chura is of no consequence to either the uncles or other onlookers.

I relate the ceremony of the chura with the making of *The Golden Temple*, in terms of the repetition of forcing my hand through the 10cm steel ring hundreds of times. The constant rubbing of the threads and braids would cause my knuckles to bleed. What intrigued me was the relationship between bangles and energy and how spiritual beliefs through adornment can potentially ward of negativity. This relationship to adornments and clothing plays an important role in the Indian or British Indian woman's life. It speaks to the role of the sartorial in how Indian women's identity is constructed.

> Bangles are also conspicuous for their symbolic representation of energy in women. The word Shakti which means strength is materialized by wearing bangles known as Kankan. Hindu mythology ascribes spiritual energy to bangles which manifests itself in the form of waves carried by a Devi. These waves are activated more strongly by green and red colour than by the others. The waves are received by the wrists and

transmitted to the hand. Negative energies are obstructed by the sattvik[165] which produces a security circle around the wrists and fingers (Zalfiqar, 2022, p.1055).

I have preserved my wedding chura (Fig.131); the bangles are twenty-nine years old, there seems to be an attachment to the bangles that I cannot explain. Each year on the date of my anniversary I open my 'wedding box' and unfold the tissue paper, take out my chura and hold it for a while. These plastic bangles do seem to have preserved the energy of my wedding day, and the days that the chura remained on my arms. Perhaps I am being sentimental, but whilst making *The Golden Temple*, the repetition in inserting my hand through the steel ring felt connected to the chura in the form of a blessing, or an offering.

I will navigate further the areas of energy, shakti and mythology which are explored in Chapter six, *Ika Kilo, Killer Queen,* and how they inspired the making of both artworks.

[165] Sattvik Sanskrit for light, goodness, or purity.



Fig.130. Rana Allen Chura ceremony. Photographer J. Kaler (1994).



Fig.131. Chura. Photographer Rana Allen (1994).

This chapter has been a critical artistic investigation of what constitutes the construction of my British Indian female identity. Through *1947* (2017) it has been possible to trace the history of the British Indian woman to that of the Independence and Partition of India. The trauma and effects of the events in 1947 in India are felt today. The identity of the British Indian woman would not exist as it currently does without the influence of those events.

Interestingly, had my British Indian female identity been based solely on the history of my maternal family in Kenya, or if my mother had married a fellow Kenyan Sikh, I wonder how that would influence my identity today? One fact is for certain, I would be unaware of the intergenerational trauma embodied by British Indian and British Pakistani Punjabi women in Britain today, as history shows, they were forcibly separated and violated because of sectarian wars. For my artwork *1947* to exist, it is dictated by my paternal heritage and the violence administered on the Indian women in 1947 during partition. That violence can be felt by proceeding generations of British Indian and British Pakistani Punjabi women as a form of generational trauma. The aim of my artwork *1947* was to represent the unification of the Indian woman despite religious differences.

This version of *1947* is complete, but the narratives that have inspired the artwork have the potential for further investigation through my artistic practice in the future. Through *1947,* I have been able to obtain knowledge on how historical events have influenced the construction of my British Indian female identity. I have also been able to answer my research question which asked how my multi-media art practice can unearth and piece together the constituting factors in the development of that identity within my family.

The Golden Temple (2017-19) is my representation of an awakening due to my trip to the Golden Temple in 2010. This was just prior to my becoming an artist. Looking back, the visit not only renewed my faith but it enhanced the unification of what I perceived as conflicting elements of my identity – the British and the Indian. The making of *The Golden Temple* was a gateway to exploring how religion, cultural ceremonies and heritage interplay in the construction of my British Indian female identity. If the awakening had not occurred, I perhaps would not be an artist today, questioning my identity.

What I feel I have learnt through creating *The Golden Temple* and *1947* is that a removal of a language or a faith are devices that aid the success of colonialism. However, the division of India, and subsequent autonomy granted to India in 1947 served to create schisms between South Asian women. *1947* and *The Golden Temple* have been crucial in understanding that no matter what ideologies and practices are used to subjugate South Asian women, they have a 'will' that counters these measures. I have had to unfold the nuanced South Asian woman's identity to then revaluate and understand how my British Indian female identity is constructed.

The next chapter *10cm Holes* and the body of work *Seven Years of This* are artworks I created for the purpose of examining the maternal. These artworks situate motherhood as their focus. *10cm Holes* (2017-18) specifically probes how discourses shaped the respective histories of my Great Grandmother (Manji), Grandmother (Mama/Uttam) and Mother. Whereas *Seven Years of This* (2015-18) is a portrayal of myself as mother in contemporary society as a British Indian woman. *Seven Years of This,* tests and assesses the evolution of Indian motherhood in Britain through my personal experiences.

Chapter 5

10cm Holes. Seven Years of This.

Chapter 4 scrutinized the colonial and patriarchal control, violation and forced division of Indian women for the first time along religious lines in 1947. There are continuities between the two artworks *1947* (2017) and *The Golden Temple* (2017-19), where the first set the historical foundation for the upsurge in female mutilation and violence during the partition of India in 1947. The second artwork expanded upon the ongoing impact of religious male dominance over women, specifically in relation to marriage and ceremony.

This chapter will concentrate on the two artworks: *10cm Holes* (2017-2018), (Fig.132), and the body of work *Seven Years of This* (2015-2018) (Fig.133). I will discuss the conceptualisation of the artworks, through to the making and installation for exhibition. Making these artworks allowed me to express my experiences of motherhood. The two artworks document and encapsulate the trauma of childbirth, the mother/child bond, the loss of a self, the suspension of my identity through that loss, and the ever-evolving newer identity of becoming/being a mother.[166] During the making of the artworks, I realised that the process instigated a healing from the pain and heartbreak of my feelings of failure, of not being a 'good enough' mother. Importantly the artworks address the following research questions:

1. How have different geographic and historical contexts contributed to the development of a distinctly British Indian female identity amongst women in my family?

[166] These themes have also been explored by Mary Kelly in *Post Partum* (1973-79) and Sutapa Biswas's film installation *Birdsong* (2004).

2. How have maternal roles impacted the formation of that identity in my family?

10cm Holes and *Seven Years of This* are based on my memories, family history, oral dialogues and dreams. The artworks will unravel what motherhood means to me. I examine the complex relationship between my mother and my maternal grandmother (Mama). Further, relationships between myself, my mother and my mother-in-law are examined to gain an understanding of my style of mothering. These entanglements weave together three generations of mothers and their styles of mothering. My aim is to shed light on how my art practice can unearth and piece together the constituting factors in the development of a distinctly British Indian identity within my family.

While this Chapter is mostly based on my personal experiences and reflections, it is informed by theoretical perspectives on motherhood and oral histories. These ideas converge, allowing for the personal to be enveloped within the communal narrative of motherhood. My interest in race, sociology, family history, identity and maternity all form contexts to the two artworks. But ultimately as the artist, I write through my reflection on my artworks.



Fig.132. Remi Rana Allen. *10cm Holes* (2017-18), Chiffon/chunni, steel, wood, dupatta, wire, staple. Installation, 2 x 2m. The Triangle Space, Chelsea (2019).

I have drawn on Adrienne Rich's *'Of Woman Born, Experience and Institution of Motherhood'* (1986) in some parts of the chapter.[167] I read this text whilst making the two artworks. I found this book important as it gave me insights and a reflective space to air some of what I was feeling and thinking during the outpour of artistic practice. I realised that my feelings of a loss of self, loss of my relationship with my mother, and the formation of a newer version of myself as I navigated my way to early motherhood, were valid and common amongst other mothers. It was through artist talks and the presentation of my practice that there was a veil of silence shrouding these feelings, and so they were not discussed in public domains.

[167] Amrit Wilson's book *Finding a Voice – Asian Women in Britain (2018),* contains short oral histories, but lacks an in-depth account of motherhood.

We as mothers are conditioned to be mute about our feelings, thoughts and emotions, because society shames us if we voice our perceived failures as mothers; we cannot be seen to have failed to meet social expectations of the ideal woman, which by extension means to be a good mother. For instance, new mothers are often made to feel ashamed of not being able to cope with her new situation, not being able to cope with the demands of a young baby. This sense of shame and guilt that new mothers might have in not managing her new situation may force her to retreat from others, leading to isolation and loneliness, and eventually, for many, as happened in my case, to post-natal depression.[168] These feelings and emotions are internalised, leading to anger and rage.

Although not written from an artistic viewpoint, Rich's book is a powerful basis for understanding the intersections of motherhood, race, religion, sexuality, patriarchy and colonialism. These themes are addressed through *10cm Holes* and *Seven Years of This*.

My aim in the making of the two artworks was to bond with other mothers from various backgrounds, who could relate to the ideas the artworks presented.

I feel my two artworks have opened discourses about issues that affect us. I view them as opportunities for British Indian women artists to engage in conversations surrounding taboo subjects, sexuality, gender, religion, patriarchy and the matriarchy. These important discussions allow some insights into the Indian community and its societal expectations of Indian womanhood.

[168] Post-natal also known as post-partum.

I argue that these dictate the limited roles for South Asian woman beyond those of daughter and mother.



Fig.133. Remi Rana Allen. *Seven Years of This* (2015-18), Mixed media. Installation, 1 x 1m. The Triangle Space, Chelsea (2019).

Materials and their re-presentation

With *10cm Holes* for example, my materials forefront ideas of intimacy. I employ a variety of colours from the deep red to pale pink, firstly, to celebrate the intimacy of the female body and its capabilities. Through the experience of my first birth, I felt that I had been denied the celebratory process. Making *10cm Holes* was that celebration, a release from the past. Secondly, my aim with *10cm Holes* was to emphasise the individual variations and differences between each woman's unique vagina. To initiate a discussion on the individuality of the female vagina and reassure women that there was in fact no perfect or 'designer vagina'. The anxiety caused by the need for a 'perfect' vagina is very real. *10cm Holes* function on this level, the 'imperfections' of the vagina pre

childbirth and post childbirth. Through the subtleties of *10cm Holes*, I tried to represent the individuality of the vagina, by incorporating tension, slits, tears, staples and shades of colour. As with most of my artworks, my purpose is to discuss taboo subjects. This occurred with *10cm Holes* through an online *'In Conversation'* with Raksha Patel on the 19 January 2021, where we discussed my materials and their representations, and how they interpret the internal intimacy of the female body, and the evolving image of the sexual British Indian female identity.

Seven Years of This is a body of work spanning four years (2015-2018) reliving my experience of motherhood, the emotions, failings, decisions, nursing, frustrations, expectations, trauma, medical interventions and finally surgery. This work is my personal account of the seven-year timeline of my son's struggle with Inflammatory Bowel Disease (IBD) during his childhood.

The subject of *Seven Years of This* was vast, which meant that it became necessity to explore and make several artworks from the narrative. The one similarity between the artworks is that they have repetitive actions in the making. The artworks draw too from the physical body's interaction with medical equipment, and finally from the history and conversations between myself, my son and the medics (in line with ethics). Through researching and reviewing these interactions and experiences, past events were brought to life through the making process. This was my chance to create work at a highly emotional period, that I hoped would capture the immediacy of the end of a journey of seven years.

Reflecting through writing

I write my thesis at the stage in my life when I am experiencing the Menopause, and not as a younger woman, or a new mother. As I reflect upon my physical being and the changes it has

experienced from birthing through to menopause, I believe that what I have experienced physically is viscerally embodied within my artistic practice. During the making of *Seven Years of This* I felt an evolving of self, caused by the trauma of my son's illness leading to an emotional and psychological change. With *10cm Holes* I was experiencing the 'change' leading to menopause. Strangely upon this reflection, perhaps my body has dictated the making of my artworks.

The two artworks also reveal how I managed my feelings that my body had failed in its womanly functions – that of enduring a 'natural' childbirth and of producing a healthy child. These 'failures' of my body will be discussed in depth. *10cm Holes* and *Seven Years of This* are complex artworks, they are not figurative, they are not paintings, they are abstract installations,[169] which I think are an echo of the abstractness of motherhood.

Chapter five is structured thus:

The genealogy of my matrilineal heritage forms the historical context to *10cm Holes,* I reflect on my relationship to my mother, pre-pregnancy, during pregnancy and after childbirth, when I had to learn what it was to be a mother

Seven Years of This encompasses several artworks documenting my emotional journey during my Son's chronic disease and early motherhood. *10cm Holes* and *Seven Years of This* are reanalysed

[169] I contextualise my artworks within the field of contemporary South Asian female artists such as: Arpita Shah's *Nalini* 2018 (ongoing project), Divya Sharma's *Bending of Time* 2019 and Niema Khan Qureshi's *Reflection of Time* 2010. They have all made contemporary artworks sitting within the ongoing debates of motherhood and the mother daughter bond.

from a reflective present, as it is now many years after having completed the artworks that I write about them for the aim of my research enquiry.

I find the following statement by Trinh (1989) pertinent in summing up my intentions for this chapter,

> This is the world in which I move uninvited, profane on a sacred land, neither me nor mine, but me nonetheless. The story began long ago ... it is old. Older than my body, my mother's, my grandmother's. As old as my me, Old Spontaneous me, the world. For years we have been passing it on, so that our daughters and granddaughters may continue to pass it on. So that it may become larger than its proper measure, always larger than its own in-significance. The story never really begins nor ends, even though there is a beginning and an end to every story, just as there is a beginning and an end to every teller. (Trinh, 1989, p. 1).[170]

I start by relaying two important dreams:[171] The dreams were twenty years apart. These dreams feature because they relate to my personal experience of motherhood; perhaps these dreams encapsulated my hopes, fears and expectations of motherhood, and what it could or would be.

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[170] Further suggested reading Trinh T. M. *Elsewhere, Within Here: Immigration Refugeeism and the Boundary Event* (2010).

[171] The relevance of dreams in the East is an alternative to Western interpretations.

> The main concept of dreams and dreaming is closely linked to Hindu philosophy, mythology, and ancient writings such as the Puranas, Vedas, Upanishads, and so on. The major essence of the eternal self (atman), the seven-fold classification of dreams and dreaming, dreams associated with the sex of the unborn child and human nature ("prakriti") as based on the ayurvedic personality temperament theory ("tridosha") form the major Hindu concepts of dreams. (Eranimos B, & Funkhouser A. 2017, p.108).

The relevance of the dreams is in context to my artworks, dream one is in relation to *10cm Holes,* this was a recent experience whilst preparing for this chapter. This vivid dream could have been in relation to how I felt when I became a mother and how the relationship with my mother deteriorated. As if, in my becoming a mother, I lost a mother.

I experienced Dream two in 2000 when I was pregnant with my first born. For me it resonates with *Seven Years of This*. This lucid dream was three months prior to the imminence of motherhood, I can only interpret it as a very intimate recollection of the mind imagining what the body would produce. A deep unexplained knowledge of what my body was experiencing, my body psychically messaging to my awakened being, of what future motherhood would present. Or perhaps as Irigaray writes, “One body, two beings, soon to be separated, the cutting of the umbilical cord. The unavoidable and irreparable wound is the cutting of the umbilical cord.” (Irrigaray, 1991, pp.40-41).

These dreams have not previously been recorded. Their relevance is a part of my methodology: I feel the dreams help in the reflection and reinterpretation of my artworks. The narratives and the memories have existed in my subconscious, they have aided the making process, but their appropriation occurs in the relocation of my practice into the present.

Dream One.

My mother and my eldest sister are in a house, they are denying my thoughts and opinions on our topic of conversation. I could not express myself verbally or they could not

understand my language. My mother was adamant that I was a stranger, someone who she could not understand or allow into her family. I then phoned my mother and told her that I needed to escape and have a safe space. Could I come to stay with her? She made an excuse and said 'No'. This is a recent version of a reoccurring dream, which I have experienced in several variations for many years since the birth of my sons. I have been told that I speak incoherently in my sleep.

Dream Two.

At six months pregnant, I was showering and then drying my 'bump' which was quite large. I stood in front of a full-length mirror as I stroked my bump, moving my hand down to my pubis, where I felt a protrusion. I touched it gently and it felt like a small erect penis. I tried to view the phallus over my bump, but it kept disappearing and when touched reappeared. I did not know the sex of my first born. The hospital in North London did not allow sexing of the foetus. But I did know at that moment that my baby was a male.

My awakening to feminism

The following recollection is what I always considered a past event filled with sharam and basti, it is in fact on many levels the encapsulation of my PhD within a memory. This story awakened me to the realisation that I had no autonomy over my body, and that there were external patriarchal controls placed over my body as a woman. This would be the start of my feminist journey.

I was nineteen years old and studying for my Foundation Diploma in Art and Design. I suffered from irregular heavy periods; after a discussion with my mother, we decided that I should start on the Pill. An appointment had been made to see our GP. My mother was working that day, so my father was to drive me to the surgery. Without asking me he decided to come to the reception, where I checked in for my appointment. When the Doctor called my name, I realised it was not our usual Indian female GP, but an Indian male GP. Again, without asking my permission, my father decided to attend the appointment. As we sat down in the consultation room the GP and my father conversed in Punjabi, they obviously knew each other. The GP finally turned to me and asked what the reason was for my attendance. I told him about my periods and the decision my mother and I had made. This was humiliating in front of my father. The GP turned to my father and they exchanged glances, the GP announced that he thought it wasn't the right choice for me and without hesitation my father agreed. I felt myself becoming hot and ashamed, the humiliation continued. They agreed between themselves as men, that I should wait until marriage. Astounded with this decision I felt teary and embarrassed, as though I had been wrong in asking for the Pill to help control my menstrual cycle. This was my body, which was now under the control of my father and a male GP, whom I had never met before. We returned home in silence. My mother came home from work that evening and my father had obviously recounted his version of the story. I spoke to her later but felt that there was no point in discussing the matter further.

At the age of twenty I left home to attend university at Norwich School of Art. I enrolled with a GP practice in the Autumn term. The white male Doctor, on my request, issued me with a prescription for the Pill instantly. I decided that I would never again discuss my body with my father or unless necessary an Indian male doctor.[172]

I haven't thought of this episode in nearly thirty-two years. Thinking back on this incident, it is incomprehensible how I was placed in this situation. My mother had made the appointment, she knew what my father's viewpoint would have been on contraception. Why was there the need for him to attend the appointment? They would both have known which GP was going to treat me. I felt sabotaged from the moment I got into the car to travel to the surgery. Even recalling the moment now after all these years, I still burn with a sense of sharam and basti.

I suspect this episode may well relate to Dream One, involving my mother and sister. My older sister had left for university the previous year. She started to smoke, drink and was in a relationship, a 'besharam'.[173] She was astute enough to start on the Pill without my father's knowledge. Our mother was aware of my sister's lifestyle. The situation I had faced was painful, as I realised, there was the need for my father to retain his izzat in front of his Indian male peers. My

[172] My refusal to discuss my body with my father or an Indian male doctor highlights the pervasive influence of *izzat* (honour) and *sharam* (shame) within South Asian patriarchal structures. In this cultural context, a woman's body is often treated as the primary repository of family and communal honour; any perceived deviation from traditional moral or sexual norms, such as seeking contraception, is viewed as a direct threat to her father's reputation and the family's standing. By choosing a "white male doctor," I actively subvert the "panoptic surveillance" often found in South Asian communities, where information sharing can lead to social sanctions or domestic control. This decision represents a strategic reclamation of bodily autonomy and privacy in a system where women are frequently socialized to prioritize collective reputation over individual health needs.

[173] "Hindi word Besharam meaning 'without shame', shameless, often used for women who refuse to live by patriarchal rules." (Menon, 2012, p.138).

mother was fully aware of the lack of izzat she was condoning with my sister's behaviour. I was made to feel like an outsider. I felt that I inhabited the body of an 'outsider', the body that had been controlled both publicly and privately.

My body's autonomy was gained from the incident, I would never allow someone else to decide what would or would not happen to it. The paradox is that as I have experienced pregnancy, birth and now menopause, my body has accentuated that autonomy. This 'lack' of control over the body is one idea addressed through the making of *10cm Holes*, my desire to demystify, and in part enter debates surrounding the 'need' to control, rather than allow the body self-governance. By reflecting on my artworks, I have realised that a lack of control is not necessarily conjunct to failure.

It is the control of the female body by patriarchal society, medical intervention and most importantly the control of the Indian woman's body by parents, in this case the mother, are questions posed in making *10cm Holes*. Through *10cm Holes* I address these areas of control, that created thoughts of lack of autonomy and failure during my experiences of birthing.

10cm Holes (2017-18)

For an in-depth analysis of what *10cm Holes* (2017-18) represents – I present a history of my matrilineal background, because as Irigaray states below, this history is not to be forgotten or denied for us to acknowledge our identity,

> There is genealogy of women within our family: on the mothers' side we have mothers, grandmothers and great grandmothers, and daughters. Given our exile in

the family of the father-husband, we tend to forget this genealogy of women, and we are often persuaded to deny it. Let us try to situate ourselves within this female genealogy so as to conquer and keep our identity. Nor let us forget that we already have a history, that certain women have, even if it was culturally difficult, left their mark on history and that all too often we do not know them. (Irigaray. 1991, p.44).



Fig.134. U.N Patel & Sons Ltd. Nairobi. *Dhillon Group*. Photograph (1956).

Fig.134, a photograph from 1956 of the Dhillon family. This is the only photograph of the whole family to have survived. A significant historical document, together with the making of *Khoon* (2012-20), expediting my research into my matrilineal background. The image from left to right- back row: A. Kaur, P. Singh, K. Kaur, Nirmaljeet Kaur (mother), and from left to right - front row: J.

Singh, Gurbux Singh, Bir Kaur (Manji/great grandmother), Uttam Kaur (Mama/grandmother) and M. Singh.

It is common among Indian families for the bride to live with the bridegroom's parents once married. "Women have to live under the authority of the father in childhood, under the husband in her youth and under the son in her old age." (Menon. 2017, p.xxiii). This would explain the family structure of the Dhillon family, whereby my great grandmother is my grandfather's responsibility, he is her eldest son and she is a widow.

> The three key interlinked features of this 'Indian' family are – patriarchy (power distributed along gender and age hierarchies, but with adult men trumping older women); patriliny (property and name passing from father to son); and virilocality (wife moving to the husband's home). In this configuration, patrilineal virilocality is the key, isolating women from all previous support systems and leaving them entirely at the mercy of their husbands' families (Menon, 2017, p.32).

The background to this chapter is gathered from the history of the three women as follows - my great grandmother (Manji), Uttam (Mama) and Nirmal (Mother) Fig. 134a.

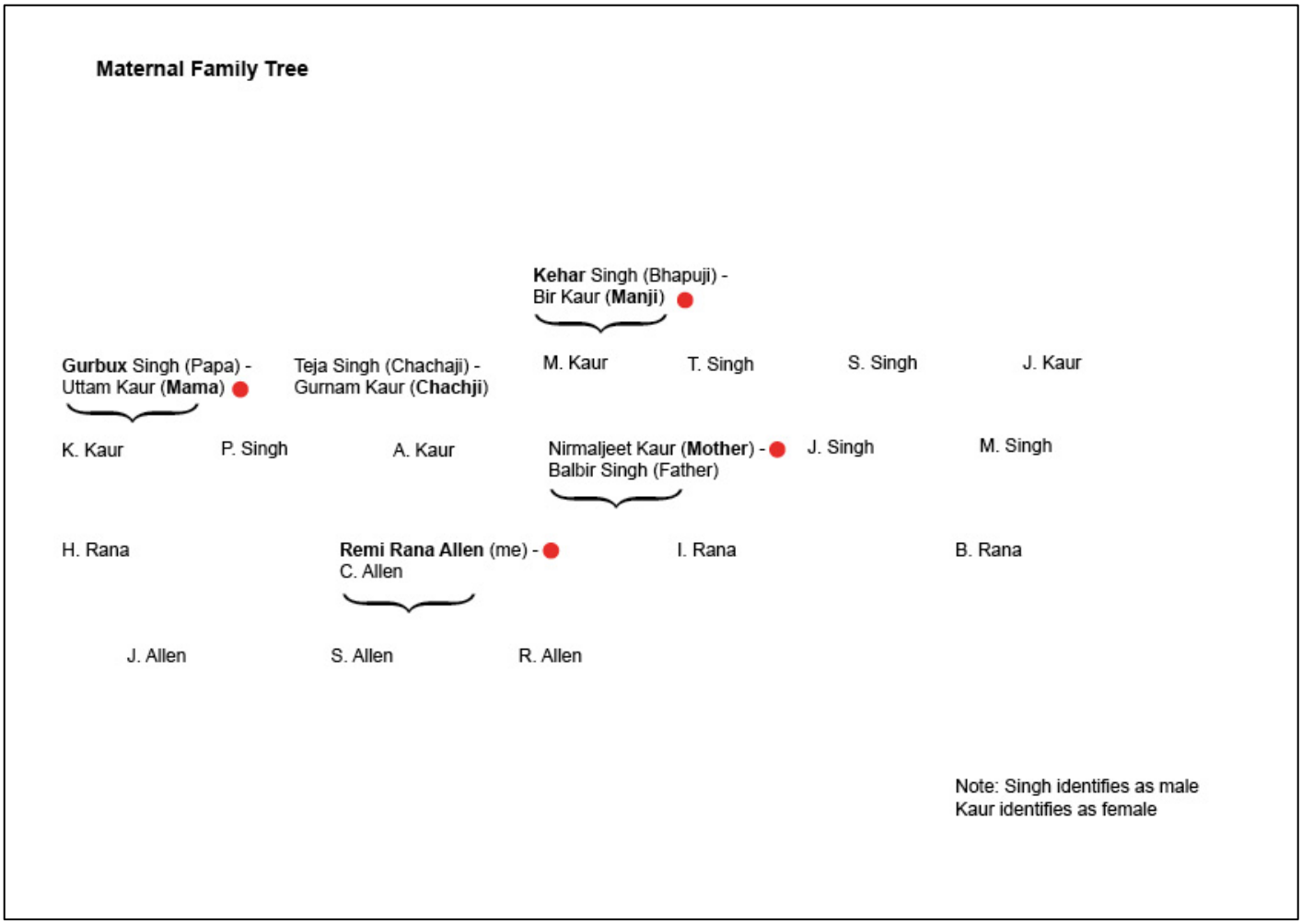


Fig.134a. Remi Rana Allen. Maternal family tree (2023).

Experimental mark making and the chunni

Through my technique of self autodriving, the family photograph began the conceptual thinking for *10cm Holes*. It was the adornments of the women that was my focus, the three older women wearing salwar kameez with chunni. I started initially by mark making (Figs.135 and 136) with Indian ink on 300gms Langton watercolour paper. These black marks fading to sepia were the beginnings of representing the vagina. The chunni with its semi translucent quality, became central to the two-dimensional mark making. As I enlarged the image on a photocopier (Fig.137) the quality deteriorated, so I attempted to imitate this deterioration. I soaked the water colour paper

and then applied the gentle stroke of ink, I tried to capture the abstract deterioration. I could not control how the ink expanded on the paper, but I felt that my lack of control over the material was the material's autonomy. I was trying to decode an identity from the photograph, at this point it was through a mark, but eventually this identity would be realised through an abstract installation. The ink 'holes' became the link between the original photographic documentation of the East African Indian women in my family and what would be my representation of our British Indian woman's identity, which I would interpret through *10cm Holes* (Figs.138 and 139).

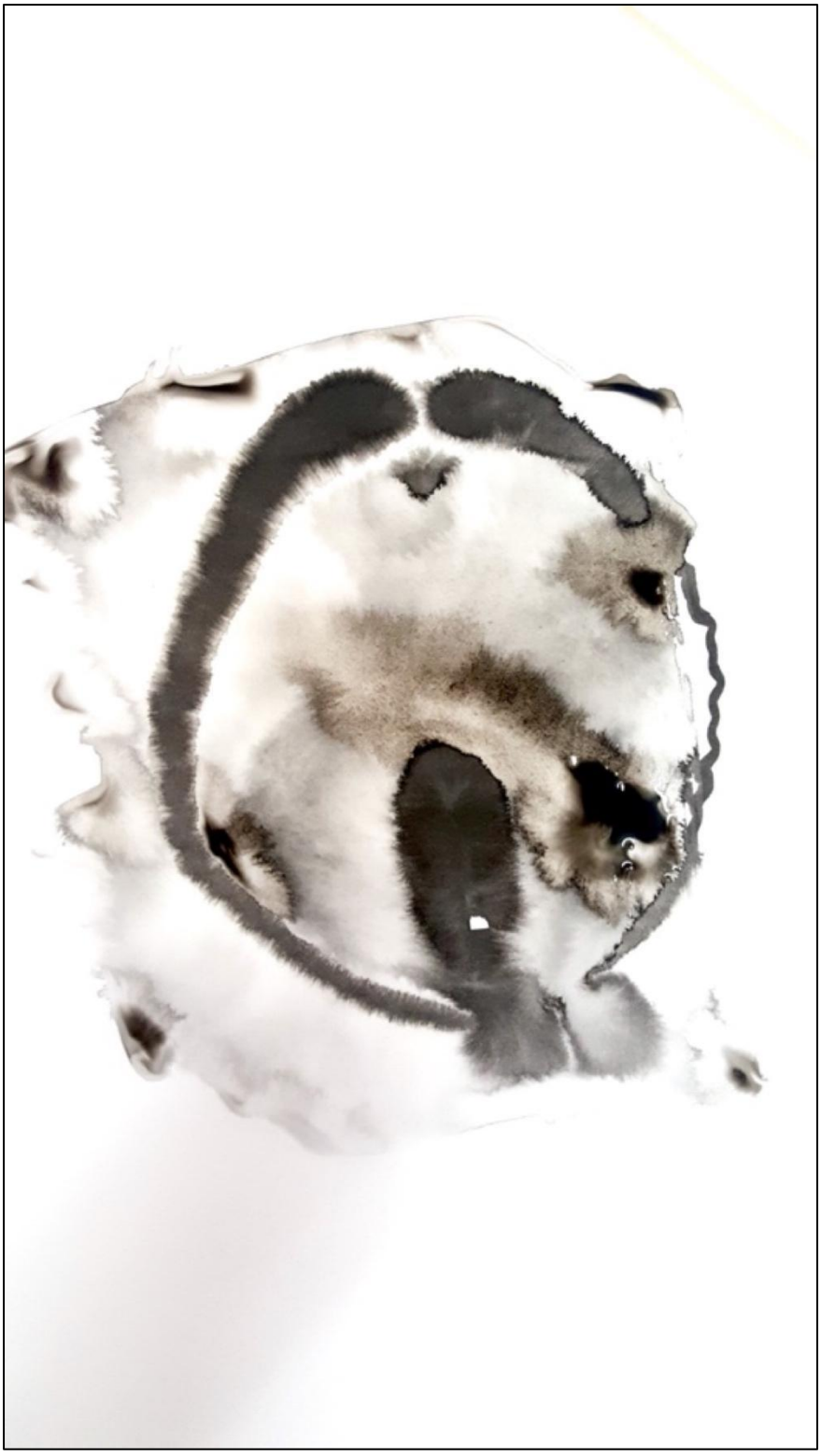


Fig.135. Remi Rana Allen. *10cm Holes* (2017-18). Indian ink on watercolour paper.



Fig.136. Remi Rana Allen. *10cm Holes* (2017-18). Indian ink on watercolour paper.



Fig.137. U.N Patel & Sons Ltd. Nairobi. *Dhillon Group*. Photograph. Detail (1956).

Manji has her head covered with a white chunni, symbolic of both modesty and of widowhood. Mama, sitting beside Manji, also wears a white chunni which matches her Indian suit. She has draped the chunni across her chest and over both shoulders. Her eldest daughter K. Kaur wears a younger style of salwar kameez, and drapes her chunni similarly to her mother, the chunni across the breasts, denoting modesty. All the women retain uncut long hair, one of the five Ks of Sikhism.



Fig.138. Remi Rana Allen. *10cm Holes* (2017-18). Indian ink on watercolour paper. Studio.



Fig.139. Remi Rana Allen. *10cm Holes* (2017-18). Detail.

The sartorial style of male members of the family have similarly been influenced by colonialism. My grandfather's turban has transformed into a smaller starched and neatly creased version of the traditional pagri worn in the Punjab (Figs.140 and 141). This style of turban was later to be known as the East African pug. In Fig. 134 Gurbux Singh (grandfather) is dressed in a western suit and tie, as is his eldest son. P. Dhillon (P. Singh) has not grown his hair or adopted the top knot ready for a Patka (boy's turban). This image is of historical importance as it documents the initial influence of Britishness on the Indian Sikh migrants in East Africa.





Fig.140. Gurbux Singh Dhillon (maternal grandfather). Nairobi. Photographer unknown (1958).
Fig.141. Ramlal Singh Rana (paternal grandfather). Punjab. Photographer Chris Allen (2010).

The matriarchy

Manji (great grandmother) was born in 1898 in Ladhe, Amritsar, in the Punjab. The only ‘family’ she had in Kenya was Kehar’s (great grandfather) closest friend and his wife. Manji must have experienced a double isolation, separated firstly from her natal family and her patrilocal residence. This form of isolation is not experienced by Indian women who are born indigenous to a nation and marry in that country, for example, Mama (grandmother) in Nairobi and second generation South Asian women born in the UK. Interestingly, my mother also had no patrilocal residence, since my father’s family remained in India. So, it could be argued that the direct migrant Sikh men arriving in Britain had broken the custom of patrilocality by arriving alone. This is an important break from a cultural custom, the isolation and lack of a familial support system would have affected the women’s lives, and impacted on their identities as independent British Indian women.

In this photograph, Manji epitomises the matriarch (Fig.134), as she proudly takes centre stage surrounded by her family. She was aged 16 when she gave birth in 1914 in Kijabe, Kenya, to her first-born, Gurbux Singh (grandfather). Manji went on to have another five children, and raised them without much support from Kehar Singh or an extended family.

Mama (grandmother) was born in Nyeri, Kenya in 1924. As with the previous generation, Mama married Gurbux (ten years her senior) in 1938, aged just fourteen years old. Mama had her first child at aged fifteen, and her relationship to her eldest daughter K. Kaur was more of a sibling one. Mama birthed another five children.

Breaking the codes of patriarchy

Mama was a strong independent, determined woman. She decided that she would work with my grandfather to build the Dhillon Bros businesses, rather than stay at home to raise her children. Her choice was not disputed by my grandfather, It was social reproductive labour—unsalaried and largely invisible—that underpinned the functioning of both domestic life and the family's public business ventures. The Dhillon men were understood to be the ones who 'made' the money, yet their financial success was fundamentally contingent upon the hidden labour of the women around them. Mama's 'employment' appears revolutionary as the Indian family as institution is based on patriarchy (as is the family structure in Western society)[174], and the sexual / gender division of labour is extreme. The role of the mother is largely domestic, with most remaining within the private sphere, staying home to raise the children under the watchful eye of the mother-in-law.

Mama's working role in the public sphere was subversive, because she did not adhere to two codes of Indian society. The first was her venture into the public sphere as an entrepreneur, and in doing so, she contravened the norms, whereby:

> the social structure in villages was based on patriarchal families, where the daughter is invariably given away in marriage, and where, because a woman's chief economic role is as a producer of labour power (her sons) she is not considered of any real economic value (Wilson, 2018, p.7).

[174] I will pick up on this later in the chapter, in relation to my experience of motherhood in the West.

Mama did produce ‘labour power’ but she also produced economic value through her role in the businesses, I am unsure if she was recognised or respected for her decisions, but with the support of the matriarch (Manji) helping to raise her children, Mama was enabled to test the boundaries of traditional patriarchy. The second code she broke,

> This system, with its total sexual division of work, is mirrored (not caused) by religion by the religious prescriptions for male and female roles […] the woman’s role is domestic and decreed to be so. Manu the lawgiver recommended to Hindu society more than twelve centuries ago that ‘the chief function of a woman is to give birth, nurse those who are born and attend daily duties’: or ‘A girl must be married before she attains puberty and after she is married, she must be kept busy looking after elders, cooking, cleaning, keeping accounts and saving money and of course doing Dharma.[175] (Wilson. 2018, p.7)

By working outside of the home, Mama managed to avoid some of the rigid patriarchal roles for women ascribed by religion and society. She did not nurse, she did not look after the elder family members, and avoided cooking, cleaning and other household chores. What was defined as ‘woman’s work’ was avoided by employing African male housekeepers and cooks. As Frank Wilderson (2017) writes in *Afro-Pessimism: An Introduction:*

> The master is everyone else, whites and their junior partners, which in my book are colored immigrants. It’s just that colored immigrants exist in an intra-human status of

[175] In Hinduism the concept of Dharma is connected to one’s purpose and duty.

> degradation in relation to white people. They are degraded as humans, but they still exist paradigmatically in that position of the human.” (Wilderson, 2017, p.21).

This is an important and paradoxical point, as it highlights much of the family’s behaviour towards the Africans, as I have pointed out in my discussion of *Khoon* (2012-20) in chapter three. Interestingly this also reveals the inconsistency of patriarchy: not all males have power, some women exercise power over males: it also shows how what may be considered woman's work can be inverted in certain situations as this, whereby women's role can be devolved to certain men, in this case African males - not Indian males, never white males.

The raising of Mama’s children was left to Manji. I recall many times my mother saying that “Manji was our mother when we were small, anything we needed she would see to.” (Nirmaljeet Kaur Dhillon in conversation with Rana-Allen. 2012, p.24).



Fig.142, an image of Mama’s business card announcing her as Director of the Dhillon Lodge Resort. Maker unknown (1963).



Fig.143. Photographer unknown (1965).

Fig.143, is a photograph of Mama's Mercedes Benz 220s, her personal car, though she also used it to run tourists from Arusha to Ngorongoro when she travelled on business. Mama was known to have been the first Indian woman in Kenya to have driven a truck in Nairobi – more out of necessity as the Dhillon Bros businesses were in various parts of Nairobi and Mombasa.

Mama gave birth to her fourth child, my mother, in April 1947. Mama's life was dictated by her need for freedom and independence. She was not a hands-on mother. Through my research I have only discovered one photograph of her holding or engaging in physical contact with her children.

Fig.144 is an extremely rare image of Mama and her children, in her arms is my newly born mother. The following images show her either standing to one side or holding her handbag in front of her, there are no displays of affection towards her children.

Fig.145, Mama with her eldest daughter K. Kaur to her left and Nirmal (mother) to the right. In Figs.146 and 147, Mama is with her immediate and extended families. Once again, she stands on the edge of the frame (far right) arms folded, hardly engaging, just observing. There appears to be a distance between mother and children, she seems isolated and alone even when surrounded by family.

Mama had an aloofness; this was to be the domineering factor in her relationship with her children. There may be a connection made between the private aloofness towards her children and the public aloofness and lack of empathy towards the African employees within the household. There seems no appreciation or comprehension of how the employees would have inadvertently facilitated her elevated status from the normative patriarchal subjugation of women by confinement to the domestic sphere. Mama had been a girl bride and child herself when she first became pregnant, perhaps not ready for motherhood. Therefore, this would allow for Manji, the matriarch of the family, the older woman who had previously raised a family, to take on the role of mother.

Mama started working within the family businesses which allowed her autonomy outside of the usual role of mother within the home and household. In fact, images taken of her with the tourists visiting the Dhillon Lodge portray a different aspect of her personality. She appears socially confident and engages in dining and chatting with the guests, as in Fig.148.

The western influence on the East African girl's clothing

Figs.145 and 146, from 1964 and 1957 respectively, also depict my mother and her siblings in western dress, though it appears that the older generation retained the wearing of salwar kameez, or, in the case of Mama, a sari. The younger generation - apart from K. Kaur the eldest daughter (first left Fig.145), who perhaps felt she was part of her mother's generation because of the closeness in age- acquired a taste for traditional clothing. My mother would have been seventeen in Fig.145 (third from left) and aged eleven in Fig.146 (far left). Had the family been raised in India during this time, they would not have replaced traditional clothing for western garments. That they did so in Africa provides evidence of how Sikhs in Kenya were beginning to distance themselves from the vestiges of tradition. The wearing of western clothing was a public and visible declaration of their open embrace of westernisation.



Fig.144. Mama and Nirmal (my mother in her arms). Photographer unknown (1947).



Fig.145. Dhillon Group, Ngorongoro. Photographer unknown (1964).



Fig.146. Dhillon Group Hunting Expedition. Photographer unknown (1957).



Fig.147. Dhillon Women, Ngorongoro. Photographer unknown (1964).



Fig.148. Indian High Commissioner Mr. Rao visits Tanzania. Photographer unknown (1966).

The sari, salwar kameez and the chunni

One of the material features of *10cm Holes* is the connection of the Indian woman's relationship to the symbolic chunni. On closer inspection of the previous images, Mama chooses to wear a sari rather than the traditional Punjabi salwar kameez.[176] This is fascinating as it represents her conscious decision to remove herself from tradition, and to put distance between herself and the 'working woman' of the fields of the Punjab. The salwar kameez is worn by Punjabi women in the Punjab because of the labour they perform in the fields. A sari would be impractical in harvesting the crops, collecting water or cooking on a low tandoor clay oven frequently used in the Punjab. I also wonder whether the sari worn by the women in East Africa is in keeping with their ideas of westernisation. The original garment was updated by,

[176] "Salwar Kameez is like a national dress of the Punjab, worn both by the Muslims of Pakistan and Hindus and Sikhs of East Punjab in India (Wilson, 2018, p.48).

> the dress reform movement, which became an intrinsic part of the social reform programme in Bengal around the 1860s and 1870s, and spearheaded by the Westernised Bengali intelligentsia, quite possibly had some of its roots in this English notion of 'decency' […] which sited the body of the 'native' woman as its terrain, was a very Victorian concept of female modesty. And the reformed dress, clearly far less suited to the climate and obviously designed on an English sartorial model, aimed at concealing and covering the 'native' female's body. It consisted of a blouse, an under-petticoat worn beneath the sari, along with shoes […] Clearly based on the feminine role-model provided by the English woman, it demonstrated how the colonisers and their Indian allies participated in a strategy to conceal and suppress the supposed libidinousness of their subject women, and the body of the 'native' woman became the site of a contest between 'tradition' and 'modernity' (Sen, 2001, p. 11).

Further images have also revealed that Mama retained her preference for saris, even after she migrated to Britain, where she also adopted the wearing of western long tops and slacks.

My mother has worn saris on special occasions, and interestingly, on her visits to my paternal ancestral village in the Punjab. She is the only woman in the village and of the family who does not wear a salwar kameez, as "wearing saris is considered rather modern for Sikhs" (Wilson, 2018, p.174). Mama and my mother appear to have politicised their sartorial dress, perhaps a visible display of their belief that they have elevated themselves from the working-class Indian woman in the Punjab. This could only have happened because of their migration to Kenya under British colonialism.

I remember as a child that the relationship between my mother and her mother was always fraught with tension. There was an underlying energy of explosive anger ready to erupt at any point. Through my eyes as a child, viewing them together, they never embraced each other, didn't really share much conversation unless other people were present. My mother had said many times that her mother had rejected her as a child. She was the only one to mention this.

However, they did reminisce about their time in Kenya. One Saturday every month my Grandparents would appear at our house, Super8 projector and films under arm, for home cooked food and an evening of visual memories. I remember sitting on the floor watching the black and white footage, their voices a soundscape to the short silent films. When the film ended, we heard the whir of the projector and there was a rush to catch the end of the film reel, so as not to damage the precious documented memories of their happy lives in East Africa.

It seemed that during those evenings there was a suspension to any animosity between the two women, they connected on the level of nostalgia and a longing for the life they had left behind - a life without the complications of being an immigrant, of struggling against racism, and the penury of working-class life. These experiences thrust upon them by migration to the colonial centre were realities they found hard to accept, especially because they had formerly enjoyed the esteemed status and privileged lives of independent, middle class, business proprietors, who were socially and politically connected. To put their lives into perspective,

> I have known such a life…the days seemed to be longer, the air sweeter than it can ever be in England…I had servants. Here it is we who are servants.' For some of them their changed lives had brought a realisation of what their roles as women had been in the past (Wilson, 2018, p.56).

As one East African Asian woman explains,

> In many homes even, the children were left with African 'boys'. The women had nothing to do but flaunt their prosperity. The house was left to servants. The ladies would visit one another […] Here, in Britain too, some people do that, though for most of us it isn't easy since we have no prosperity […] If you go to Wembley on Saturday morning you will see women with wide zari bordered saris with gold embroidery, with necklaces and bangles-all-gold […] They are not bothered about the weather or the customs of the country they are in. Their personalities and identities? The question does not arise. They are possessions and their husbands think that is how it should be. That is how it was in East Africa, after all (Wilson, 2018, p.56).

East African Sikh women are no longer possessions, but "status bearers of the nuclear family, a role common enough among English women" (Wilson, 2018, p.57). For migrant Sikhs, the extended family structure of India has been replaced by the nuclear family, and their previous social capital dissipated with their relegation to the British working-class.

My mother and grandmother rebelled against traditional codes of dress and the associated symbolisms. The two women made no attempt to uphold the symbolism of the chunni. They appear to oppose the perceived symbolisms of respect, modesty, patriarchy, male dominance and the powerful role of the mother-in-law by not wearing the chunni as expected. Ironically, there is a contradiction: by going against the grain and refusing to dress in a salwar kameez and chunni, they inadvertently play into the western stereotype of the Indian woman in a sari.

My 'failure' to deliver naturally

With *10cm Holes* I aimed to mirror their rebellion, by disregarding the conventional use of the chunni. The stretching of the head cover around a 10cm steel ring formed the centre, the hole, the metaphoric birthing chamber. This allows for the taboos associated with discussing labour, birth and sexuality in Indian society to be broken.

The construction process of *10cm Holes* not only helped to heal the trauma I experienced through birthing my first son. The installation also references birth or natural childbirth, by using specific measurements and the stretching to create a taut membrane. My mother and grandmother delivered all their infants 'naturally' without pain control and complications, their bodies achieved that magic 10cms, which I replicate in *10cm Holes*.

> …glib romanticizing surrounds the notion of the 'primitive' woman giving birth without pain or fuss and then getting on with the day's work. However, certain physical facts do suggest that women in a homogeneous elementary culture might have shorter and easier *normal* labours than women of a heterogenous and urbanised culture. (Rich, 1986, p.131)

This may help explain the ‘normal’ labours my mother and grandmother had, they were not giving birth to a bi-racial child in a busy built-up hospital environment, staffed by people who had racist attitudes.

Unlike my mother and grandmother, my cervix did not stretch to 10cms, it reached nine and a half centimetres. This may not seem traumatic, but in conjunction with a forty-eight-hour labour, without much pain relief, it had a psychological effect on me. My pre-written birth plan requesting pain relief was ignored by the midwives, until I reached five centimetres. The protocol is three centimetres when labour is established. Yet some nursing staff preferred to keep me waiting for hours in pain, almost as if they assumed a Brown woman were more capable of a higher level of pain, compared to a white counterpart. Those five millimetres made the difference between my having a natural delivery, assisted delivery or an emergency Caesarean section.[177]

Labour for most women is hard work, precisely why it is called labour. But when this is combined with the assumptions made by my maternal family of what my body obviously was not capable of doing (giving birth naturally), the pressure during the labour intensified. Their assumptions became a reality. This led me to feel a sense of failure in both my body and my ability to cope with the pain. The irony being, my family’s assumption of my lack of strength because I could not or would not endure the ‘right’ amount of pain opposed the midwives’ restrictive actions of administering an

[177] From 2016 onwards **MBRRACE-UK** has been releasing reports on the maternal morbidity rates, shedding light on the racial disparities that exist in maternal healthcare. The 2020 report ‘Enquiries into Maternal deaths and morbidity’ revealed that Black women are statistically four times more likely to die during childbirth than white women in the UK [...] The report also showed how women from Asian ethnic backgrounds were still three times more likely to die due to complications than white women [...] MBRRACE-UK pointed out the disparities in maternal outcome statistics across a number of demographic factors, such as race, geography and socio-economic positioning. However, there appears to be a clear racial barrier between suitable healthcare and Black women, with reports of Black women being ignored or told they were overreacting when complaining of pain. https://www.openaccessgovernment.org/childbirth-black-women-uk/117437/ (Accessed: 03/07/2023).

epidural, because of their belief that more pain could be endured. Apparently the ‘right’ level of pain had not yet been reached.

The shame associated with having an emergency C-section was evidenced by my family’s silence and refusal to discuss my experience of labour and delivery. My unborn child had started to become distressed, and the moment the consultant mentioned the C-section, I asked my husband to phone my mother for advice, her words were “if you have to, then do it.”

My mother had wanted to attend the delivery, but we had decided against that. I knew if she was there during the labour and delivery, I would have been forced to perform under her instruction, with a disregard of my body’s capability.

There was a repetition of history in the lacking mother/daughter bond, first experienced by my mother and Mama and now between my mother and myself. The close connection I wanted with my mother on becoming a mother myself, could well be the reparation I sought, when making *10cm Holes*. Both older women struggled to produce a firstborn son and heir, so they continued getting pregnant until the hoped for male child was produced. My mother birthed four infants; I was apparently the most difficult for my mother as I delivered with my hand upon my head (a recollection often recited if I was being ‘difficult’ in childhood). I birthed three sons, perhaps this played a part in the breakdown of our relationship. In her eyes ‘I had it all’ – while she had struggled to achieve what she was conditioned to think was, ‘all of it.’ These feelings and thoughts are contextualised within Rich’s words, because the similarity and familiarity are astounding, “…my mother had failed […] she had not produced a son” (Rich. 1986, p.222). My mother had

‘failed’ twice at producing a son. The following extract hits at the heart of my relationship with my mother post-delivery,

> …my body bruised and sutured, and, in a cot beside my bed, slept the perfect […] male child I had brought forth. How could I have interpreted her feelings when I could not begin to decipher my own? My body had spoken all too eloquently, but it was, medically, just my body. I wanted her to mother me again, to hold my baby in her arms as she had once held me; but that baby was also a gauntlet flung down: *my son*. Part of me longed to offer him for her blessing; part of me wanted to hold him up as a badge of victory in our tragic, unnecessary rivalry as women. (Rich, 1986, pp.222-223).

I blamed myself for years for the way my son was delivered, because according to my mother, I was a weak child and I had always had a low pain threshold. She even mentioned post-delivery “I didn’t think you would be able to give birth naturally, the pain held you back.” This was devastating to hear. In my mind’s eye having visualised that 10cm diameter for many years, it was this disappointing image played on repeat that the conception and construction of *10cm Holes* began. My artwork would drown out the painful words spoken in 2001 by my mother. *10cm Holes* became my way of restoring my faith in my body.

Re-presenting the chunni as a form of empowerment

10cm Holes began with a basic sketch [Fig.149]. I envisioned a passageway, tunnel, canal, or a vortex.

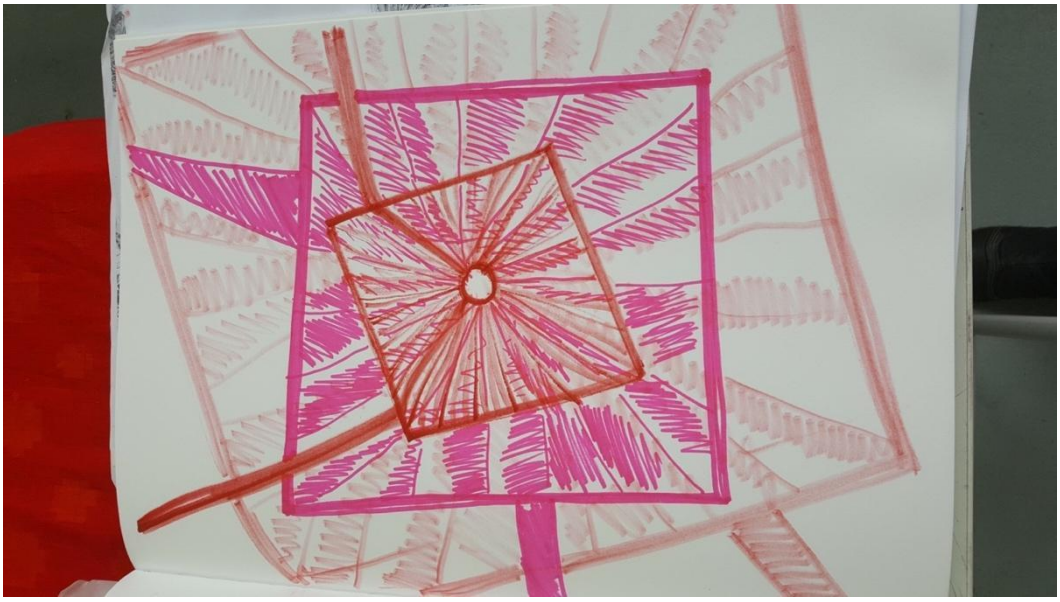


Figure.149. Remi Rana Allen Sketchbook. Photograph (2017).



Figure.150. Pantone Swatch. Photograph (2017).

Fig.150 is a Pantone swatch of the variety of colours I would request from India. This reference image was sent via WhatsApp to my aunt in the Punjab. She went to the local market to locate a

textile merchant. The chunni chiffon fabrics are mostly available in white,[178] ready to be hand dyed to match the exact colour specifications. Using the visual reference material my aunt had the fabrics dyed.

The range of coloured chunnis were packaged and posted to the UK. Fig.151. Whilst waiting for the chunnis to arrive, I briefed the woodwork technician to begin fabrication of the frames. In total ten frames were to be produced in a 4cm x 2cm wood. The frames would range from 20cm x 20cm, increasing by 20 cm increments, with the largest frame at 2m x 2m. The 4cm edge was to be flat, allowing me the flexibility to wrap the chunni material around the frame, see Fig.152.

[178] White is associated with death and widowhood. I refer to Manji in the Dhillon Group Photograph. She is stating her marital status through the visual symbolism of the white chunni.



Figure.151. Remi Rana Allen. Colour selection of chunnis. Photograph (2017).



Figure.152. Remi Rana Allen. Studio Documentation, Frames and first wrapping of fabric. Photograph (2017).

The repetition of folding and entwining the chiffon fabrics through the steel ring became meditative. This occurs in the making of many of my artworks. There is a repetition in the physical motion of making, performed for hours at a time, leading to a transcendental meditative state of mind. A spiritual emptying of mind, non-thinking, suspended in time, yoga like.

10cm steel ring

The previously fabricated steel rings for *The Golden Temple* (2017-19), were also utilised in the construction of *10cm Holes* (2017-18). Later the remaining rings would form part of the sculpture *Killer Queen* (2019). It is on looking back at the artworks as a whole body of work that the importance of the steel ring has emerged. This 10cm ring has morphed and adapted to become the central location of emerging light and spirituality, *The Golden Temple*. The 10cm rings have aligned to reproduce the passage of birth, *10cm Holes*. Finally, for *Killer Queen* the 10cm rings were placed upon the colonial stone head of my Medusa, the central fixture creating her headdress of serpent-like hair. There is a versatility and symbolism I associate to the 10cm ring, which regenerates and appears in several of my artworks. This powerful metaphor alters to represent a facet or a visualisation of a certain aspect of the British Indian female identity among women in my family and the maternal.

The performance of pulling the fabrics taut and interrogating their ability to stretch without tearing was rewarding. My body had reached nine and a half centimetres without tearing, it had stretched ready to birth the head of my son. The stitching and stapling of the fabrics to the wooden frames, mirrors the stitching of my pubis post-surgery. This particular action I performed repeatedly hundreds of times, exorcised the disappointment of having had medical intervention. For me this

initiated an acceptance of the scars my body bore through surgery, absurdly the scar of the C-sections is 10cm in length.

Figure.153 is an example of the various chunnis on their frames. On the larger frames two variations of pink chunni were utilised to create a visual division and separation, so that the slim slits between the fabrics appeared. The tension of the stretched fabric and the separation of one chunni from the other, reiterated the function of the 10cm ring as the symbol of the cervix. The cervix stretched to maximum, the uncertainty of tearing or preparation for an episiotomy.

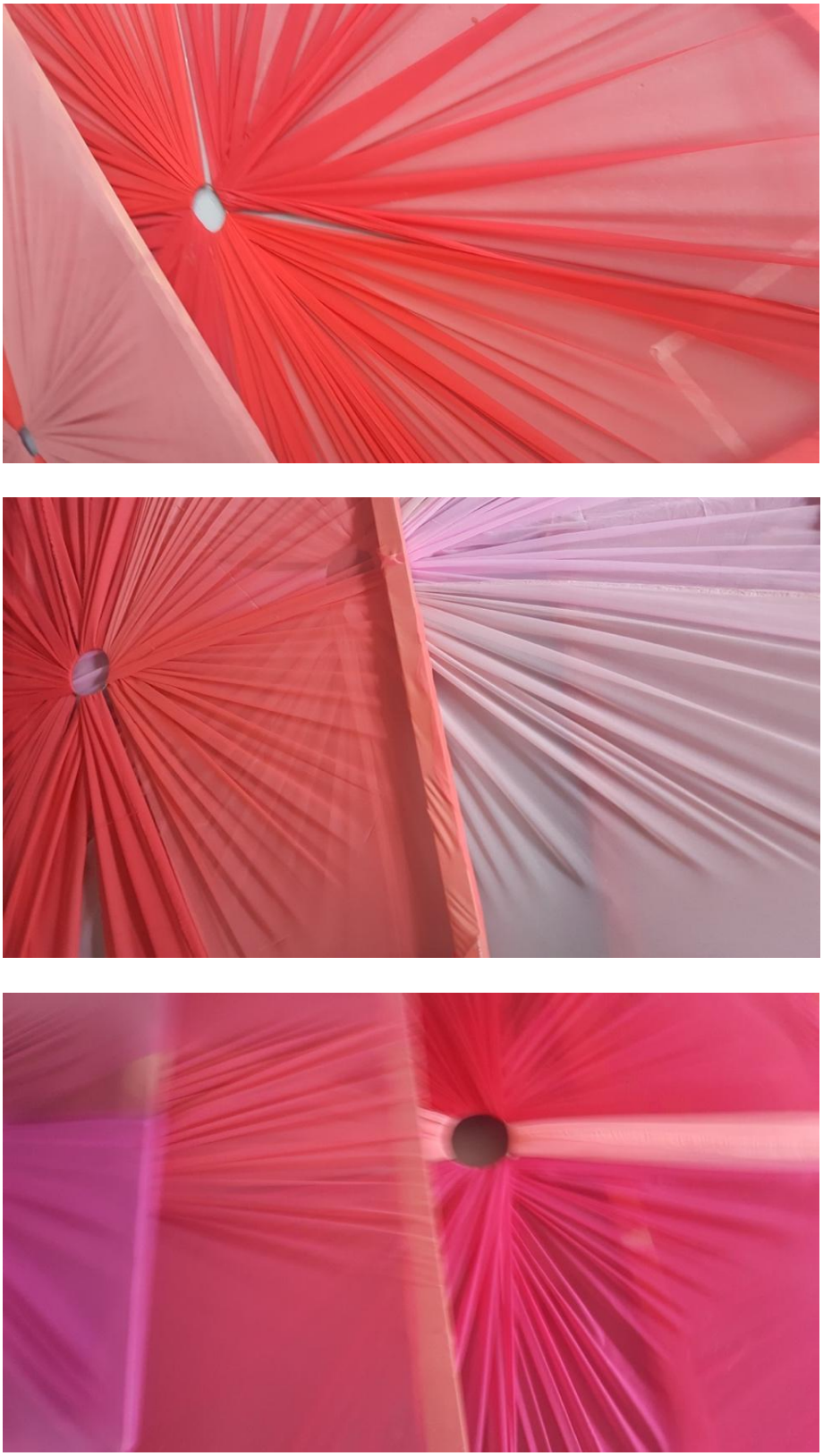


Fig.153. Remi Rana Allen. Studio Documentation, Interrogating the chunni fabric Photograph (2018).

My story of the trauma of childbirth is reiterated by the words of Adrienne Rich when she states,

> First, in the earliest human groups, all human beings were smaller; and a small fetus is easier to deliver. Moreover, the fetus and the mother were of the same body-type. A small-boned woman from the Mediterranean did not meet or mate with a tall, heavy-boned man from the north; consequently, she did not deliver a large-boned, large-skulled child through a narrow pelvis. She began bearing children in the second decade of life, soon after menstruation; she did not wait till some age of consent to mate, and youth gave her a muscular tone and flexibility already diminished in a woman of thirty (Rich, 1986, pp.130-131).

For my narrative, the breakdown of the facts are as follows: both my grandmother and mother were married to Indian men and birthed children of Indian heritage. Both had smaller-headed, smaller-boned babies. Both had their first child at an early age, my grandmother at fifteen and my mother at twenty-one. I spent years explaining this to them. My facts were, I was thirty-one when I birthed my first child, he was large-skulled and large-boned, I had a narrow pelvis, the foetus was of dual heritage etc. My son was 9lbs, a large baby for an Indian woman to birth. Upon delivery the Consultant announced, “look at his head”, meaning it would have been impossible for me to deliver him, as his head circumference was too large for my pelvis.

These were the medical facts: my body had achieved what it could under the circumstances. My son had also endured the labour process, his head pushing until his eyes were swollen, his nose flattened and his own body starting to distress, causing his heartbeat to drop. There was no option but to have a C-section. Ironically the superstition, mythology and fear surrounding delivery of a

child through medical intervention, that older Indian women impose on younger women is hypocritical. As Rich explains, “Caesarean section-removal of the child from the mother’s abdomen through an incision-was apparently performed by Hindus and by Hippocrates […] It was reinvented in Western Europe in 1500, having been a lost art for centuries…” (Rich. 1986, p.133).

10cm Holes aims to explicate and contextualise my experience of birthing and motherhood as a British Indian woman.

> …a woman who has experienced her own mother as a destructive force-however justified or unjustified the charge-may dread the possibility that in becoming a mother she too will become somehow destructive. The mother of the labouring woman is, in any case, for better or worse, living, or dead, a powerful ghost in the birth-chamber.” (Rich. 1986, p.162).

It could be assumed, the ghost of my mother and her positive, natural experiences of birth were haunting me in the lead up to labour and delivery, this was partly the reason I did not allow her to attend. The possibility that on becoming a mother, I may become like my mother caused fear. This stemmed from my fears of becoming the stereotypical controlling Indian mother. This complex relationship with my mother is encapsulated by Irigaray,

> In a sense we need to say goodbye to maternal omnipotence and establish a woman-to-woman relationship of reciprocity with our mothers, in which they might possibly also feel themselves to be our daughters […] liberate ourselves along with

> our mothers […] In our societies, the mother/daughter, daughter/mother relationship constitutes a highly explosive nucleus. Thinking it, and changing it, is equivalent to shaking the foundations of the patriarchal order. (Irigaray. 1991, p.50).[179]

Acknowledging motherhood leads to the loss of my mother

On becoming a mother, I acknowledged the loss of my mother's control over me. It seemed that the power and secrets associated with motherhood were demystified. Her previously elevated status of the matriarch and her mystery had vanished. I return to Dream One, if there was to be no control, could there only be rejection?

Some Indian families practice taking in their daughter towards the end of her pregnancy to take care of her. The pregnancy, birth and naming ceremony are a time of familial celebration (Wilson, 2018, p.30). Having reflected on the making of *10cm Holes*, now without pain or anger, perhaps my mother's attempts at mothering me post-delivery, were rooted in the notion that 'it takes a village to raise a child',

> Throughout history women have helped birth and nurture each other's children […] Tribal life, the village, the extended family, the female networks of some cultures, have included the very young, very old, unmarried, and infertile women in the process of "mothering" (Rich, 1986, p.12).

[179] Also dealing with this subject matter - Sutapa Biswas's diptych *As I Stood, Listened and Watched, My Feeling Were This Woman is Not For Burning...* (1986). Collection of Cartwright Hall Museums, Bradford Museums.

In my mother's eyes, she tried to play a part she herself had not experienced with her own mother. She had given birth alone in hospital. She had raised her children in working class, poverty driven circumstances of the late 1960s in Southall. Her history has dictated her mothering.

Breastfeeding my sons and the power of the chunni

Both Mama and my mother also revoked breast feeding, neither nursed their children. Mama was too busy with her work to settle with a child at her breast. My mother had an aversion to breastfeeding, which only became evident on the birth of my first son. She complained the milk made him smell. She often looked away embarrassed if I nursed in front of her. Perhaps, their attitude to breastfeeding can be attributed to their middle-class status in Kenya – whereby they relegated breastfeeding to rural, working-class Indian women and tribal African women.

In the early 2000s, the pressure on new mums to breastfeed was immense The copy line "Breast is Best", appeared on posters and was verbalised by midwives and health visitors upon delivery of the baby.[180] The pressure mounted to get that baby latched on as quickly as possible, no matter how much suffering and anxiety it may cause the mother.

> The supreme symbol of mother love is, of course, the breast, which reappears in modern discussions of motherhood […] Western ideologies of motherhood, argues that the position of mothers is getting worse. In response to an economic crisis, and

[180] A campaign launched by the then Public Health Minister Tessa Jowell, cost the taxpayer one million pounds to promote the message, "A mother's breast milk is the ultimate designer food for babies. If each mother's breast milk came in a bottle it would have a designer label." (Jowell, BBC News Online.1999 (Accessed: 03/07/2023).

> what she sees as a crisis of identity between the sexes, a new eco-maternalism […] driving women back into the home […] a ‘sacred alliance’ of reactionaries and a new ‘essentialist feminism’ with Mother Nature at its core (Rose, 2018, p.84).

Rose claims that breast feeding is central to this project. The phrase “I AM THE MILK OF YOUR BREASTS. YOU SHALL HAVE NO OTHER FORM OF INFANT NUTRITION IN YOUR HOUSE.” (Rose, 2018, p.85) was used by websites such as Alternamoms, which adhered to the ‘ten commandments’ of the La Leche League founded in 1956 by American mothers. I can vouch for this modernity of motherhood through the exhortation that mothers ‘have’ to breastfeed or be deemed to have ‘failed’ as a mother. This mission statement has been impressed upon me on all three occasions of my motherhood journey from 2001, 2003 and finally 2008.

These feelings of failure existed, the failure was reinforced if you did not produce enough milk or if your baby did not latch on. For me personally, both were compounded by my mother’s attitude towards breastfeeding. I fed my first son for one month, though in the end he defeated me; he was a hungry baby, and I was not producing enough milk. This together with raw bleeding nipples, forced my decision to put him on formula. When the structured routine of feeding had been established, my mother became more comfortable with resuming the power politics of her established experience of mothering. Her knowledge of feeding by bottle outweighed mine, and now she could start to advise me on bringing up a ‘healthy’ child.

I had a better experience of birthing the second time round. I felt more in control and sure of what I was doing. Breastfeeding was also a success this time. He was being fed on demand, allowing for non-structured timings for feeds. On one occasion he was crying, and my milk rising, my mother

stated, “if you have to do that, then just go ahead.” This was announced in front of my entire family. I was used to feeding in private or under a chunni, I felt sharam and basti, so I went into the garden to feed him in privacy.

I used a chunni for a covering when breastfeeding, it was functional and comfortable. The semi opacity of the fabric allowed me to maintain intimate eye contact when feeding. The chunni also covered my breasts and gave me the privacy and self -respect as an Indian woman to feed in a relaxed state.

When reflecting upon *10cm Holes* it occurred to me that I had underestimated the qualities of the chunni. I had viewed this adornment as a restrictive, oppressive, controlling device used to keep the Indian woman subdued. The intimate memory I have recounted, regarding the very precious peaceful time spent staring into the eyes of my son, feeding at my breast, has led to a reassessment of the chunni. It has transformed this item of clothing into a liberating expression of motherhood. For the first time in my life, I felt no need to avoid the male gaze, as an Indian woman. The construction of my identity, conditioned by the fears and experiences of my mother, was unfolding. Reconstructing via the mother-son bond. As a mother of dual heritage males, I embarked on unlearning my identity. This led to relearning and attempting to understand the construction of the newer version of self. In turn updating my contemporary identity as a British Indian woman and mother.

Post natal depression and the suspension of my identity

During potty training my older son, my mother encouraged my older sister to take over the training, and then congratulated her on her methods and success. My sister did not have children, she did not have my experience of motherhood.[181] Between the two of them, they had made me feel like an excluded outsider, only this time it involved my sons. I found this difficult and confronted my mother. Our relationship was non-existent after this episode. She refused to talk to me and accused me of letting motherhood inflate my ego. The hurtful words, the stress and feelings of exclusion,[182] I know, triggered what was later diagnosed as Post Natal Depression. My identity was suspended. I felt a loss of my bearings, freewheeling into a void, hole, vortex, a dark cave, with nothing to hold onto apart from my two sons. The period of darkness felt like an impasse, did I remain static or allow the suffering to guide me forward? The suspension cannot last forever, the change occurs.

I realise now that this experience was very necessary for me to grow and evolve as a woman and mother. The journey through the suspended *10cm Holes*, the passageway to a rebirth of identity. Indian culture does not discuss depression, or mental health in general, another taboo topic.[183] The only people aware of my postnatal depression were my husband, GP and an elderly neighbour (she would check on me and my sons most days). In fact, post recovery my mother blamed the depression for the breakdown in our relationship, shifting any accountability. I was the

[181] I refer to "it takes a village to raise a child." Perhaps in their eyes they were helping to raise my children. For me what surfaced was that the mother daughter bond they shared was unbreakable – whereas the bond between all three of us was dispensable and exchangeable for a grandmother-grandson bond – my son trumped me on that. The first-born male.

[182] https://patient.info/mental-health/postnatal-depression-leaflet (Accessed: 03/07/2023).

[183] The stigmas attached to ill health are common in Indian society, as I have proven with the attitude over the C-section. *Seven Years of This* will return to the topic of Indian culture and ill health.

cause for what had changed our bond. There was no discussion of what I had been through, but there was acknowledgement of the change of my mothering capabilities, a confidence and self-assuredness, which led to a freedom from seeking her approval of getting it 'right'. As my identity was transforming, I noticed her regressing and reluctantly relinquishing her hold over me.

The realisation and discovery that my mothering is heavily dictated by my westernisation, occurred through the writing of this chapter. Britishness (not Englishness) had impacted my early years as a mother in the 2000s. I realised that I had more in common with white mothers than Indian mothers. Many of my friends at 'new mum' events were white. We were the dominant representation of the new middle-class mother as portrayed by the media. We believed we could do it all, breastfeed, night feeds, clean, cook, laundry, shop, coffee mornings, school runs, oversee homework, bathe the children, bedtime routines, playdates, parent's evenings, extra-curricular activities, weekend sports fixtures, attend school related social functions, the list is endless.

The reality was that it was exhausting unpaid labour, whilst the other parent was at work – doing a 'real' job. So many hours were spent alone in the company of the children, within four walls – no adult conversation, perhaps a quick hello at the school gates. All this for the sake of appearances, to earn the label of a 'good mother'. Internally, there dwelled anxiety, frustration and exhaustion, a wanting to stop 'groundhog-day'.[184] My experience of being a British Indian mother was caught

[184] "...the backyard swarming with children, the repetitive cycles of laundry, the night wakings [...] the ludicrous dinner parties at which young wives, some with advanced degrees, all seriously and intelligently dedicated to their children's welfare and their husband's careers [...] I *knew* I had to remake my own life [...] as in so many middle class communities of the period – were expected to fill both the part of the Victorian Lady of Leisure, the Angel in the House, and also of the Victorian cook, scullery maid, laundress, governess, and nurse [...] I wanted desperately to strip my life down to what was essential." (Rich 1986. P.g. 27).

between the Indian mother, who verged on megalomania, and the Britishness of keeping calm and carrying on.

I could not do it all. This came to light when I suffered from postnatal depression. In hindsight, the depression clarified the madness of society's need for the high expectations and relentless list of requirements of the new mother. At this point I removed myself from the expectations of my role as mother. Instead, I engulfed myself in a state of coping and doing the necessary without judgement. There was relief in this stasis.

Installation of *10cm Holes*

I have so far discussed the trauma of childbearing, early motherhood and to some degree the suspension of identity. These experiences informed the making of *10cm Holes*. The work is symbolic and abstract enough to allow for many interpretations related more generally to maternal iconography within the context of a hybrid identity. Finally, in relation to the personal life experiences that suspend and renegotiate a newer, evolved version of the self, it is necessary to recount the installation of *10cm Holes.* An analysis of the process may aid in an objective reflection of the artwork's successes and failings.

10cm Holes was installed for the first time at The Triangle Space at Chelsea College of Art (October 2019). The artwork had been completed in 2018 and packaged for storage. The opportunity to exhibit came from a supervisory meeting requesting a studio visit. I did not have a studio at that time and was instead working from home. *HOLES* was a solo exhibition that brought together five years of practice. Artworks made during my PhD.

I had always envisaged *10cm Holes* being suspended from a railing, using a visually unobtrusive thread or wire. Fishing wire had the strength to lift the larger frames without breaking. Fladen Vantage wire with a strength of 55ibs/25kg (No: 354-55) was selected to hang the frames Fig.154.



Fig.154. Remi Rana Allen.*10cm Holes* (2017-18). Installation.

I was advised that I could only hang *10cm Holes* from existing beams that were already assembled from the ceiling. This dictated the positioning of *10cm Holes* and the direction in which the artwork was to be hung. The longest row of beams that would allow for the correct distance ratio between the frames, were set centrally in the Triangle Space. The beams were directly facing the entrance. To aid the ‘passageway’ being formed the three largest frames were to be set at

least eighty centimetres apart, the following three frames sixty centimetres and the next three at forty centimetres, the final frame at twenty centimetres [Fig.155].



Fig.155. Remi Rana Allen.*10cm Holes* (2017-18). Installation.

The 2m x 2m frame was hung first, this was to position its height for the average eyeline to view through the 10cm hole. Once suspended the frame remained still facing directly towards the entrance to the gallery. I measured the distance between the frames to ensure the length of fishing

wire was correct in maintaining the view through the passageway. Once all the frames were suspended, they swung gently then became still. This was the realisation of my artwork, the suspension of identity.

The smallest of all the frames was suspended by the longest wire and there was little control over keeping this frame from moving. It would start to rotate, setting off a domino effect on the other nine frames. As it rotated it touched the 40cm x 40cm frame which would then turn towards the 60cm x 60cm frame and so on. I observed the frames during the exhibition and I also physically interacted with the artwork. At first my intention was to try and control the movement of the frames. To have all ten frames face in the same direction, which would allow the holes to form a tunnel, over 5.6 metres. The more I struggled to align the frames the resistance of the unruly smallest frame continued. It amused me that the smallest of the frames had control over its larger counterparts. During the private view I attempted several times to position the frames in alignment and it was a viewer who commented that the installation now also became a performance, whereby the artist was interacting with the artwork. For me the interaction was out of a failure to meet what I had envisioned in my mind was the ‘correct’ installation.

It was only when the frames were approached that they silently moved, usually the 20cm x 20cm frame would start the swaying [Fig.156]. This was a surprise element and I could not have predicted that the artwork would respond in this way once installed. It is at this stage in my process that I try to let go of control, the artwork exerts its autonomy. I find this process fascinating; my creation takes on a life of its own, another form of birthing.

The refusal of the piece to do as I wanted could be seen as a reflection of my body in refusing to acknowledge my birth plan. I had created an artwork that represented my experiences of childbirth.



Fig.156. Remi Rana Allen *10cm Holes* (2017-18), *HOLES* Exhibition. Photographer Henri Affandi (2019).

I observed the behaviour of the visitors to my exhibition. I noticed they would often touch the frames and align them to photograph the passageway Fig.157 and 158. There was a short period between aligning the frames for the photograph and the frames swaying back into their preferred resting position. Mirroring perhaps the female body during the birthing experience, self-governing. The cervix enlarging to a 10cm hole allowing a glimpse of the inside of the body,[185] only for an instant after the foetus is passed through the birth canal and vagina, and before the body eventually returns to its preferred state. During the 'birthing' process *10cm Holes* swayed and

[185] Annie Sprinkle "Public Cervix Announcement" 1988.

pulsed and throbbed, it was not aligned ‘perfectly’ as I had originally intended – prior to the installation. Instead, this realignment was more in keeping with the birth canal, an indirect route from A to B, a journey with twists and turns.

The soft chiffon fabrics, metaphoric membranes parting over time – their time, uncontrolled by the artist experiencing real time. Reflecting the autonomy of the cervix and the suspension of real time, disassociated. The uterus, cervix, vagina and foetus control the female during this period, suspending her in a state, where she relinquishes the control. She is brought back to real time when the announcement is made of the ‘time of birth’. Once the foetus is born, weight, height, apgar score, diameter of head, are all measured.[186] The mathematical measurements resemble the installation of the frames, the weight of each frame and the capacity for the fishing wire to cope. The height of the beams and the drop of each frame. Quick assessments of whether the installation process was succeeding, to allow for the alignment of the steel rings Fig.159 and 160.

Even post birth the sense of time did not exist for me, during the winter of 2001, the days were short and dark. The setting of a routine and bonding with the baby were of utmost importance. I can recall that what I felt at the time and in the subsequent making of *10cm Holes,* was that a part of my identity had been lost in the process of becoming a mother. I knew that both mentally and bodily I would not be as I was pre-pregnancy and childbirth. It was through the birth of my first son that the suspension of my identity occurred, but it would take me another birthing experience two and a half years later to acknowledge that there was a real loss of a part of me that would not or

[186] Maggie Nelson, *The Argonauts* (2015, pp.132-4) one of the most inspiring texts, encapsulating childbirth through the visceral and auto theory.

perhaps could not return. The final realisation and acceptance occurred nearly five years later after my third son was born.

My research objective in the making of *10cm Holes* was to represent the ever-evolving stopping and starting of my suspended identity, due to motherhood. I think *10cm Holes* went further than this one aim, by reflecting on the artwork, it was through the therapeutic making and subsequent pedagogy, that I accepted the facets of my identity that had been lost. Pre-motherhood I was a young carefree independent working woman, financially self-sufficient, with little domestic responsibility. The acceptance encouraged a reassessment, so that I could reconcile the regeneration and renewal of who I was becoming in terms of my identity as a British Indian woman, through motherhood.

In view of what my body had been through under the control of patriarchy and matriarchy before achieving self-governance. I recall a moment at my mother's house, Mama was visiting. She met my youngest son for the first time when he was a month old, the first words from her mouth were "did you have it done?" I wasn't sure what she meant, so she elaborated with "the operation, did you get it done so you don't get pregnant again." This I found astounding; according to the older Indian women, once you have two or three children, you are expected to be sterilised or have a hysterectomy. I know this because my mother divulged that whilst on a trip to India, where she was present at the second C-section my aunt had under general anaesthetic, the consultant asked my mother if he should perform a hysterectomy. Unbelievably my mother said yes and made the decision

for my aunt. From living life as an Indian woman with little autonomy over her body, during puberty and the fertile years, the expectation is that once the womb has served its purpose it should be removed, a surgical intervention medically would instigate early menopause. When I recount this memory, it still incites a sense of rage that the matriarchs, having had four or more children themselves would impart such unfounded cruel and callous ‘advice’.



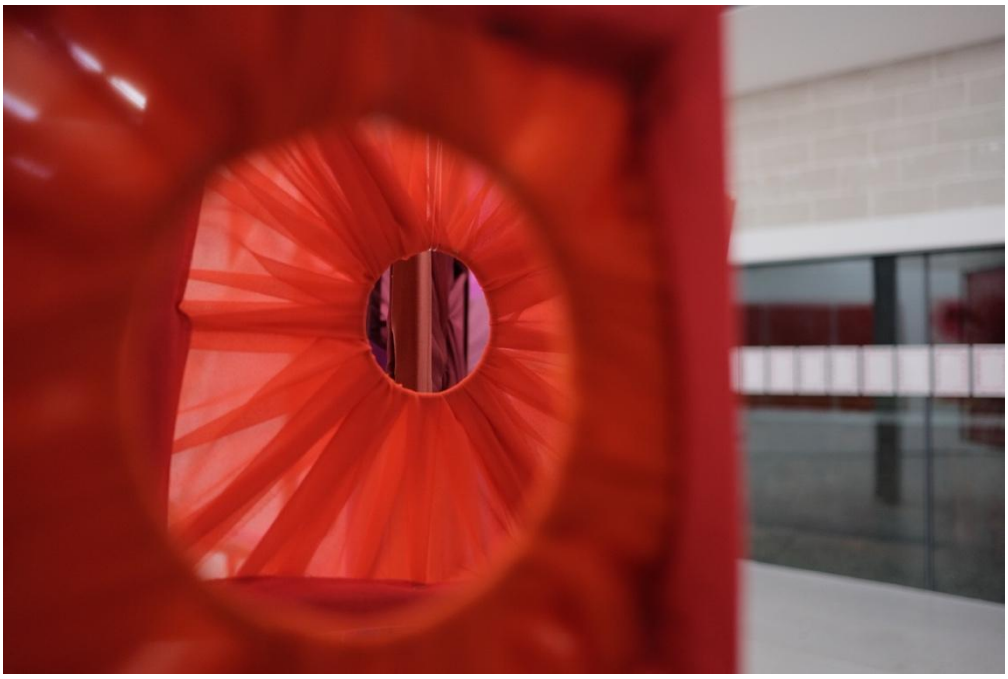


Fig.157 and 158. Remi Rana Allen *10cm Holes* (2017-18), *HOLES* Exhibition. Photographer Henri Affandi (2019).

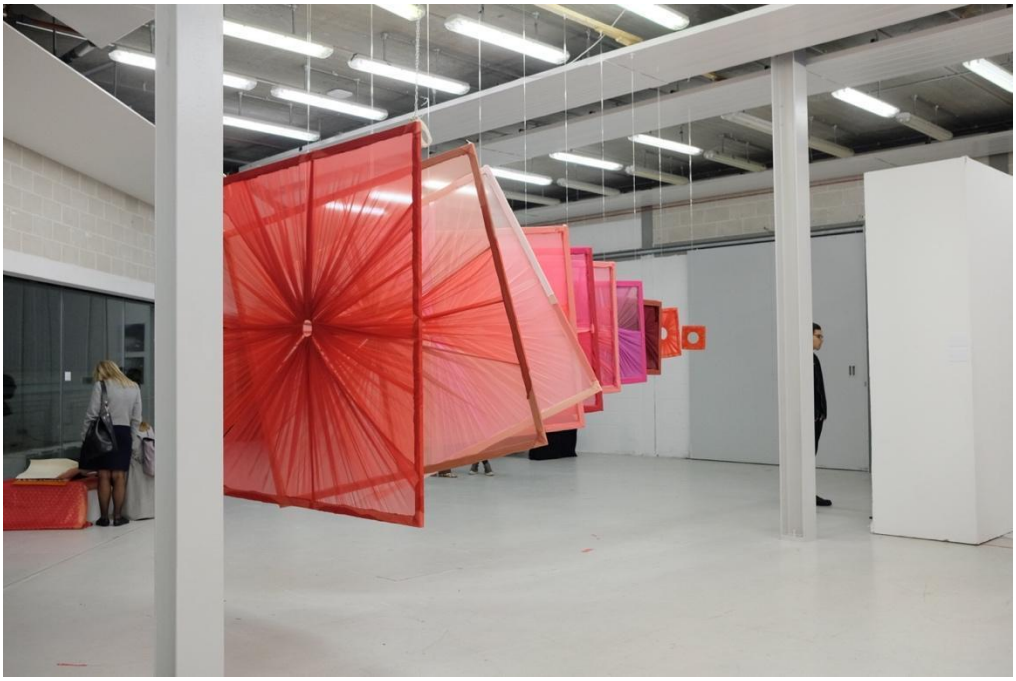




Fig.159 and 160. Remi Rana Allen *10cm Holes* (2017-18), *HOLES* Exhibition. Photographer Henri Affandi (2019).

Seven Years of This (2015-18)

A body of work spanning four years (2015-2018) reliving the experience of motherhood, the emotions, failings, decisions, nursing, frustrations, expectations, trauma, medical interventions and finally surgery. An account of the seven-year timeline of my son's struggle with Inflammatory Bowel Disease during childhood.

The best way to highlight the connected artworks is through the mind-map Fig.161. The use of the mind-map technique helps to clarify my thoughts prior to the making of artworks. The subject of *Seven Years of This* was vast which meant it was necessity to explore and make several artworks from the narrative, some more prominent and others exploring techniques and medical equipment in making. The similarity between the artworks is that they have the repetitive action in the making. The artworks draw too from the physical body's interaction with medical equipment and from the history and oral dialogues between myself, my son and the medics (in line with ethics). Through reviewing these interactions and experiences, past events were brought to life as research through practice. This was my chance to create work at a highly emotional period, that I hoped would capture the immediacy of the end of a journey of seven years.

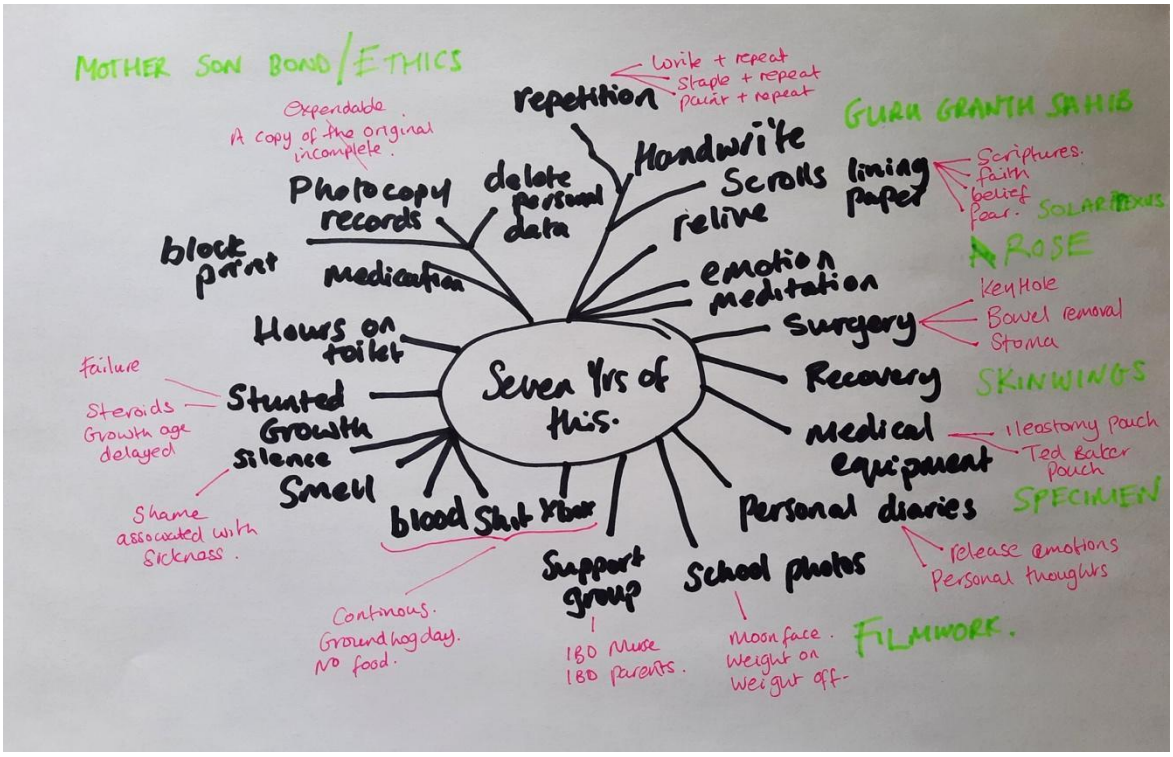


Fig.161. Remi Rana Allen Studio Documentation, *Seven Years of This* Mind Map. Scan (2015).

Documenting the journey

I documented my son's illness, through photography, film, writing and medical records. This 'helped' me to deal with what was pending, that is, major surgery to remove the whole of his large bowel.[187] I filmed during our time at the Royal Free Hospital, pre- and post-surgery. The two weeks in hospital were treated in my mind as a residency to collect research for use in the studio.

I had stored my son's medical records chronologically in two large red box files. I began to read the numerous letters. These documents were significant in detailing the seven-year period. The history of the disease from diagnosis to surgery. Each and every letter had a part to play in the

[187] A sub-total colectomy.

story. The calls to clinics, blood test results, endoscopies, medication, flare ups, all recorded and neatly placed in the red boxes. Before the making of *Seven Years of This* commenced, I relived the years through the documents. I needed to know that the final decision that my son should undergo major surgery had been the only available option. I had initiated this decision, having been the first to suggest surgery. Discussions were had with the Consultant, who felt defeated by the disease, and could no longer control it through medication. The finality of signing the paperwork as his mother and next of kin, for surgery to proceed was not taken lightly.

Over one hundred and fifty letters were photocopied [Fig.162]; it felt important to keep the originals, to not damage them. The photocopies were reproduced on recycled grey paper, a dull colour, drained, ghost unlike the crisp white letter headed paper of the originals. The photocopier was set to automatic and the documents inserted, each letter pulled into the machine, scanned and two sheets exiting, the original and the copy. Two identical texts, on two differing materials. Identical in identity in terms of the story they told, but superior and inferior in their appearance. Thinking back, was this how I felt about my son? Had his original body and identity (superior) been erased by the disease, superseded by the creation of a second body and identity? Almost identical yet substandard, inferior? Perhaps a ghost of his former self. Writing now feels like a reliving of the seven-year period. Reading and copying the letters was extremely emotional in 2015. There is a subtext to what had happened (the story), what had been relieved (the making) and now what it meant (the reflection). A three-stage process to what exists as *Seven Years of This*.

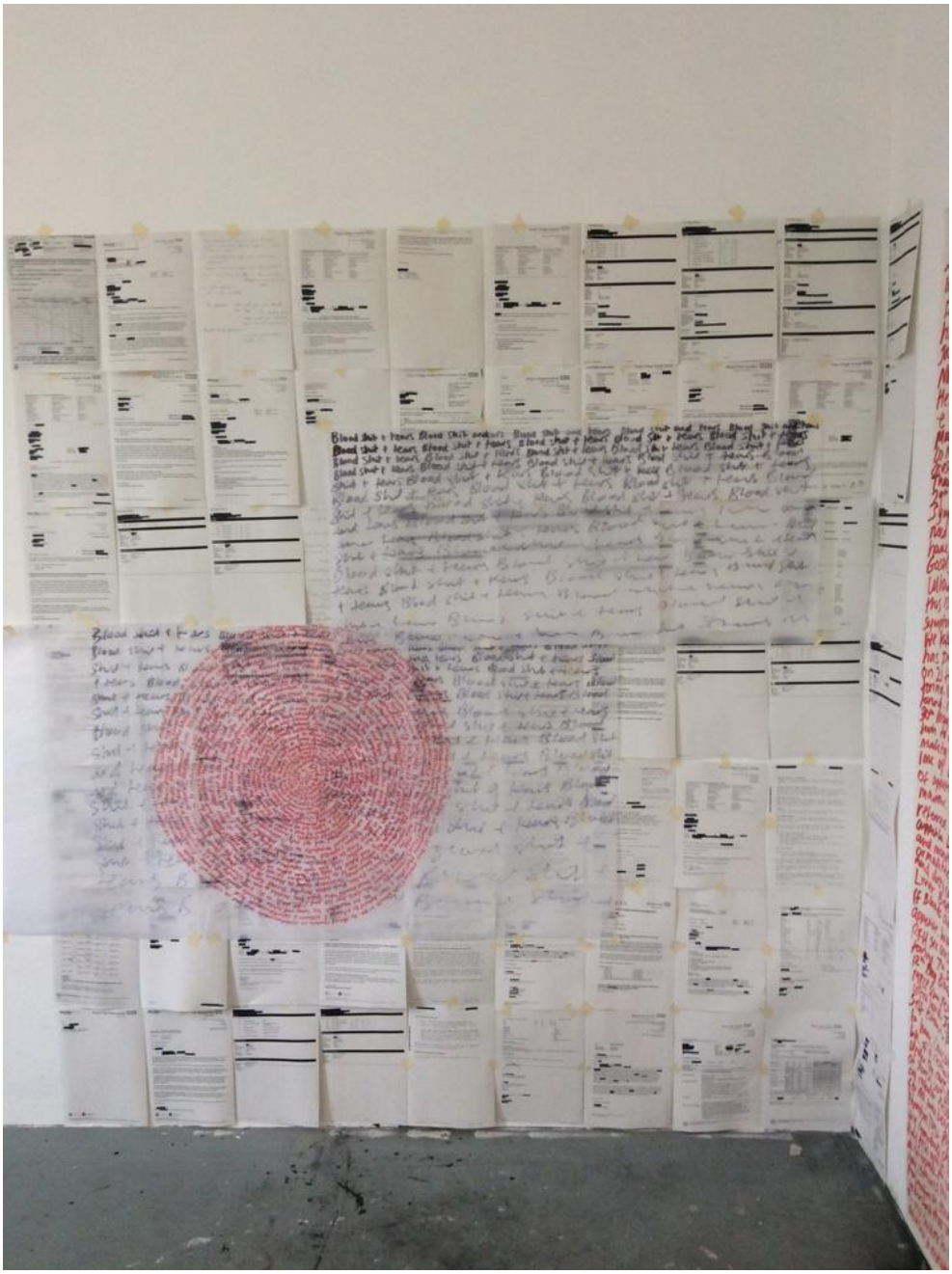


Fig.162. Remi Rana Allen Studio Documentation, *Seven Years of This*. Photograph (2015).

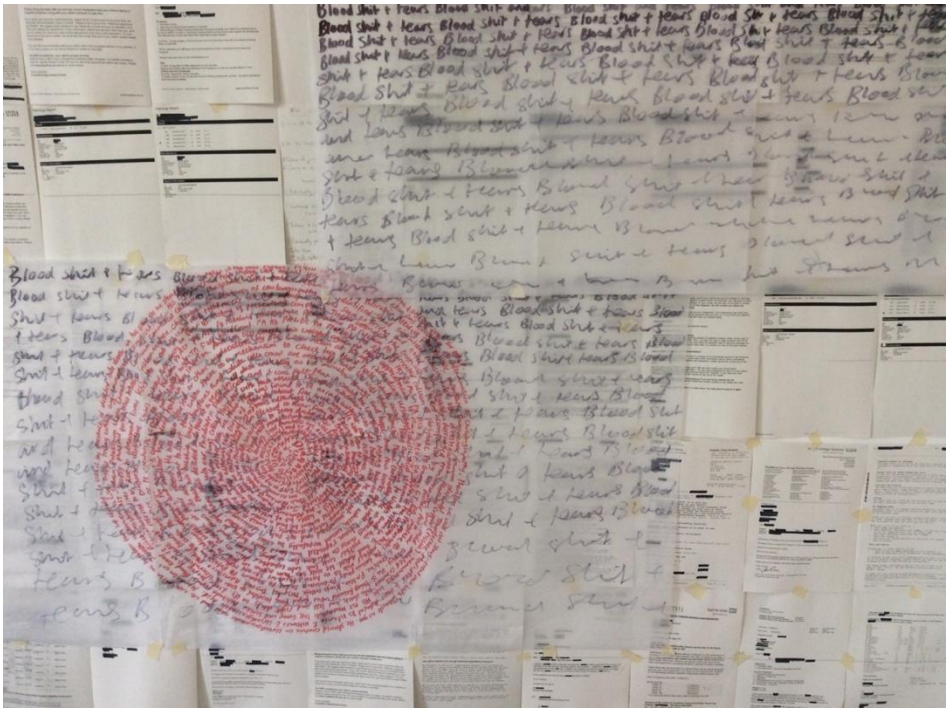


Fig.163. Remi Rana Allen Studio Documentation, *Seven Years of This*. Photograph (2015).

The studio walls were pasted with edited copies of the original documents as shown in Fig.163. These were edited for ethical reasons, the name, address, NHS number, hospital number, date of birth etc were all redacted with a black marker. The next stage was to purchase a paper that was recycled and sturdy. It would be hung from the wall, papering the studio, so that I could hand write the story. Lining paper bought from a hardware store seemed suitable. It resembled the copier paper but was of a heavier weight which resisted tearing easily. As these papers hung, the process of writing began (Fig.164).

I felt a connection to the artist Fiona Banner's[188] handwritten artworks, the personal handwriting detailing the narrative, but also because text is a part of many of my artworks, from the

[188] Fiona Banner Wall Drawings – Blackhawk Down 2010, Don't Look Back 1999, Break Point 1998.

handwritten to the digital. Prior to the writing stage, I attempted block printing text, repeating the phrase “blood, shit and tears” and the number “7”, this felt constricting and a lengthy process. The generic blocks removed the humanness. It felt necessary to narrate from a mother’s perspective, a personalisation of my story would involve direct contact with the selected materials. The individual style of my handwriting meant it was possible to make my mark.



Fig.164. Remi Rana Allen Studio Documentation, *Seven Years of This*. Photograph (2015).



Fig.165. Remi Rana Allen Studio Documentation, *Seven Years of This*. Photograph (2015).

Thirty-five rolls of Diall off white, B&Q value smooth 1000 grade paper, 10m x 90cm were purchased. The paper was torn to roughly 3m lengths. The first sheets were laid on a table and handwritten horizontally. These were pinned to the wall and further sheets hung vertically from ceiling to floor, to allow little interference where the sheets butted together [Fig.165]. Standing on a chair I wrote from top left continuing to the bottom right edge. This process was repeated over a period of four weeks. Holding a black or red marker each day for at least five hours, repetitively writing was sometimes painful. My hand would seize and ache. It was imperative for me to get the story written. The process of repetition calmed my mind and I automatically generated the marks.

The difference with this artwork was that as I read the words, aloud at times to process them and comprehend their meaning whilst putting pen to paper, emotions came flooding to the surface. I

would cry and at times leave the studio to get air and take a break. Some days I would leave the studio, overwhelmed with feelings of regret, pain, failure and uncertainty of my decision-making, as a mother. To safeguard my emotions and feelings, I decided to lock the studio from the outside world. The work at this stage was too personal and not ready for public viewing. I needed the time and space to come to terms with what had happened and was happening in the making process Fig.166.



Fig.166. Remi Rana Allen Studio Documentation, *Seven Years of This*. Photograph (2015).

Untitled Film (2016)

The writing on the scrolls of paper was in conjunction with producing other artworks. One piece progressed from a photo shoot of my son changing his ileostomy pouch at home.[189] The first few

[189] He had been trained by the IBD nurses in hospital on how to organise his medical products for a quick and easy change. I had witnessed all of this and was on standby if he required assistance.

months his stoma was inflamed to 50mm, due to the surgery. We were advised that the size of the stoma would over time shrink to around 35mm. My son was fourteen years old, and it was difficult to watch him change his pouch at the beginning. There was a strange unreal perversity attached to viewing an internal organ positioned externally on the body. This red raw pulsating clump, which if touched gently whilst removing the excrement, would bleed. The stoma glistening bright red, was the shape and texture of a miniature cauliflower. Its function was to keep my son alive, and enable him to live life more fully than he had for seven years.

I set up the photographic equipment and three hundred still shots were taken. The images were transferred on to the Mac and sequenced in QuickTime. A stop frame film was created without sound. The film documents close-up, the cleaning of the stoma and the application of a fresh ileostomy pouch.

This *Untitled film* (2016) was only viewed twice by an audience. The first time at a closed crit in 2016, involving seven MA students and five BAs. The film was projected onto the studio wall at a scale of 30cm x 20cm. A chair was placed in front of the moving image. The viewer sat sixty centimetres from the projection. As the images played out the only sound was the hum of the projector. I observed each person individually view the film, some of the students had declined as they did not feel comfortable with the images. As the viewer took the seat and watched, it became apparent that they felt uncertain and even disgusted by what played out, perhaps because it was a child they were watching. The film had been deliberately set up for the viewer to feel voyeuristic. The students did not want to comment on what they had witnessed. One MA student said he had found the whole experience seriously depressing and repulsive. Notes were taken of the feedback.

The importance of me watching the watching of the film, set me on the path of less literal representation of the narrative.

The artworks were to become in part abstract. Perhaps this could be considered as a compromise of my artistic intention in further work. But to understand my decision making, I questioned my original intentions in making the film. Was I deliberately being obstinate, wanting to show the world the reality of a child's suffering? Thinking back, yes, this was my intention for the film. A part of me wanted to revolt and disgust the viewer, who had no inclination of what having a bowel removal and subsequent stoma meant. It was cruel to witness the reactions of the viewers to the film, but there was a satisfaction in their repulsion, their reactions reinforced my feelings and answers to questions came from the viewers' responses. I was not at the crit as the mother, but as an artist gauging the reactions of an audience on the installation of a film, documenting the performance of a child, responding to life changing surgery.

The film would not exist if the child had not been my son, as the mother responding to the situation through art; the artist was the presenter and communicator of the story through the work. In hindsight this was a key moment, as it required me to separate motherhood, from artistic research. What resulted from this was the reality that ethics were becoming increasingly relevant in what was taking place in the studio.

The second time the film was viewed was at an Art and Design and Health and Safety internal Student Research symposium at Buckinghamshire New University, June 2016. I presented my practice and research via a PowerPoint to the audience of fifty attendees. It was at this

presentation that I was asked to apply to the Ethics committee for approval of my practice.[190] The main ethical issue was the involvement of my son within my practice. I spent eight months working on a proposal to resume my practice and research. My work would need to be reframed from my interpretation and memories of the events during the seven-year journey.

So much was gained from the experience of the film, especially in terms of the direction of future artworks for my PhD. The artworks for *Seven Years of This* from this point relayed the story less directly. They were not based on my son, but from the perspective of the mother and my experience of having witnessed what had happened. I was his mother – but now also the artist/researcher, the narrator of a seven-year journey through my art.

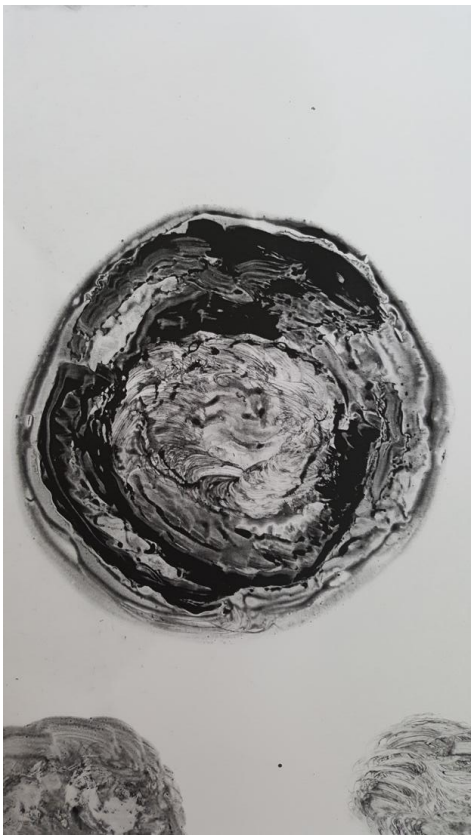
The *Untitled Film* developed into three further pieces, *Arose* (2016-2018), *Specimens* (2016) and *SkinWings* (2016-2017). These three artworks are an integral part of *Seven Years of This,* utilising drawing, painting, sublimation digital print, intravenous drips, silk, fluids, ileostomy pouches, staples and steel. Whilst I was working on these artworks, the lining paper scrolls had been stored. At that time, I felt uncertain how to progress the artwork. The issues regarding the ethics of my work had knocked my self-esteem and I felt it necessary to remove the artwork and remove myself from the artwork. The photocopied documents were also removed and shredded. This was a cathartic experience. A release from the prisoned memories of a dystopian past. It would be a

[190] I was questioned by the committee regarding the involvement of my son in my research. The first application was not granted. I spent a further eight months on a redraft of my ethics application. Following a meeting with Prof. Anita Taylor at Bath Spa University, the application was submitted a second time. The committee approved my practice and research, I was commended on the application. This commendation led to the University referring to the document as a guideline for future practice-based MPhil and PhD candidates.

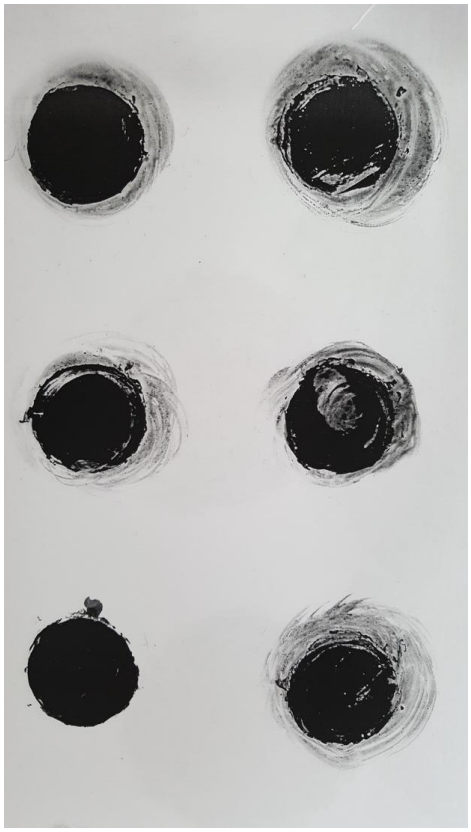
further eighteen months before I would return to this work, in the hope of seeing it with less emotion and a fresh perspective.

Arose (2016-18)

One of the artworks that transpired from the *Untitled* film piece was *ARose*. Having observed the stoma, its reduction in size and how it functioned, led to a series of black and white 35mm drawings (Figs.167, 168, 169 and 170). I wanted to capture on paper the bundle of internal mass, which sat on the left side of the lower abdomen. The bulbous red throbbing flesh (*ARose*) securely enveloped in an ileostomy pouch (*SkinWings*).







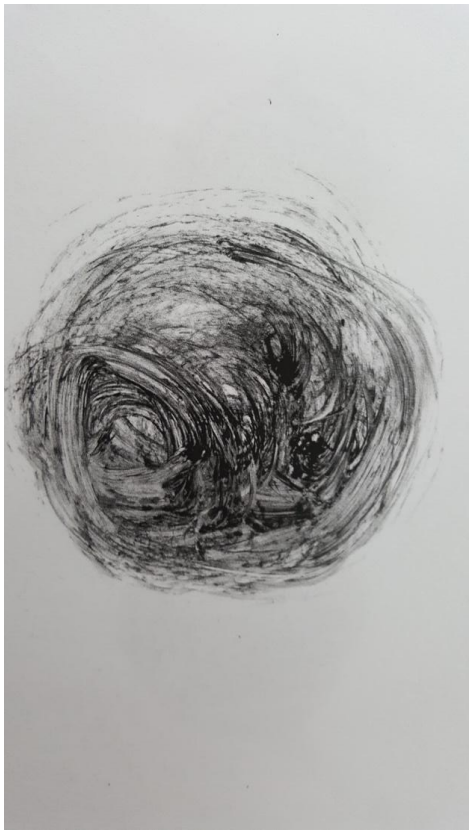


Fig.167, 168, 169. Remi Rana Allen. *Arose*. Black pen on paper. Fig.170 Black pen on acetate. Drawings (2016).

The life size drawings of the stoma, created with black pen on both paper and acetate, were enlarged on the photocopier so that the detail was enhanced. These initial drawings appeared almost scientific; this was the departure point for a series of paintings (Figs.171 and 172). These paintings explored scale through the magnification of miniature detailed paintings to A0 canvas prints. They represent the stunted growth of my son during the seven years, when his body remained in stasis. At the age of fifteen, his bone age was that of a twelve-year old, his growth stunted by steroids.

I experimented with scale with *ARose*, attempting to capture the state of inactivity, where the body's autonomy dictated growth. This resembled my body's governance of its capacities and 'failures' in childbirth. My son's body was in a similar situation, it would 'decide' the way forward. The days passed, before the stoma began to function for the first time. The stillness of the body that could no longer expel discarded nutrients from the anus or even pass wind. The 'small' body of a teenage boy stunted in the era of pre-pubescence.



Fig.171. Remi Rana Allen. *Arose* (2016). Acrylic on paper. Painting.



Fig.172. Remi Rana Allen. *Arose* (2016). Acrylic, gold pen on paper. Painting.

The next stage was to attempt to scale up the paintings by hand (Fig.173). I painted several larger versions of the stoma series. Somehow, they lost the detailing and delicacy the smaller paintings achieved. I applied layers of acrylic on paper, brushing a circular motion and using wire and wooden sticks to engrave the circular motion, the techniques I incorporated to create the detailing. I felt these larger paintings were a poor imitation of the miniatures. What I wanted to convey through the painting was delicacy, fragility, newness, growth, flowering, opening, flesh, organ and invisibility made visible. The internal externalised and the private, public.

I reflected upon the silence surrounding illness and disability among the South Asian community. This led to my determination to voice my story, through film, painting and sculptural artworks. As the British Indian mother of a sick child my practice allowed me to make public what was considered by Indian society to be shameful and private.



Fig.173. Remi Rana Allen. *Arose* (2016). A3 series acrylic, gold pen on paper. Painting.





Fig.174 and 175. Remi Rana Allen. *Arose* (2016). A3 series acrylic, gold pen on paper. Painting.

The larger paintings were side-tracked as I focused on the miniatures. A further sixteen A3 paintings were created. I felt these to be more in keeping with my aims for *Arose* Fig.174 and 175. The reproduction as part of the making process became an integral aspect of the work. There was the desire to take the personal handmade painting to a printing machine. The machine would act as the (medical) intervention that would birth the reimagined identity. From human to machine to human. Seven of the miniatures were scanned and digitally enhanced in Photoshop, the colours, contrast and tones boosted ready for digital production. This enhancement was to create the colour palette of the original paintings through the intervention of the sublimation digital printer. Test strips were run to check the correct colour gradients and finally the high resolution A0 prints were printed.

The machine could print 100 cm in width and an endless length Fig.176, 177 and 178. The prints were printed with the longer side running the length. The chugging of the machine as it consumed the fabric. The machine that reproduced the mark made by hand. The machine that was producing an image that I was unable to create successfully at this scale. These are the re-presentations of the story. The disease had consumed my son's body and was literally eating him alive. He was unable to eat and the detrimental effect was severe weight loss and a lack of nutrients. He was a shrunken, underweight, shadow of his former self. The machine that was reproducing the image was the medical intervention. The keyhole surgery performed allowed the child a return to living. The term 'ghost' comes to mind, in both a ghost of his former self but also in the digital ghosting of an image, where two images are printed and do overlap and appear at once the same yet slightly off set, often regarded as a misprint and discarded. And finally, the machine working to scale up the miniatures to life size, representing the child through the reprinting, where the identity is in place and only fractionally modified through the necessary intervention of the machine.

Once the images were printed, the canvases had to be steamed, fixing the ink. At this point the images were slightly lacklustre, the technician reassured me that the steaming process would enhance the images to the gradients set at the art working stage. The canvases were pierced with metal hooks and hung on a circular steel frame. The frame was hung in the steamer for around forty-five minutes. The suspending of the canvas and steaming process to fix the image, I equate with the process of the stoma successfully functioning, the last stages of waiting. The child in the waiting area before the medics introduce training for the management of the stoma. The recovery time in the hospital, the time to acquaint myself with the newer physical and emotional self. A time to bathe, recoup and present self as the original. Waiting to be released from the care of the institution and back into the world.



Fig.176. Remi Rana Allen. *Arose* (2016). A0 sublimation digital canvas prints.

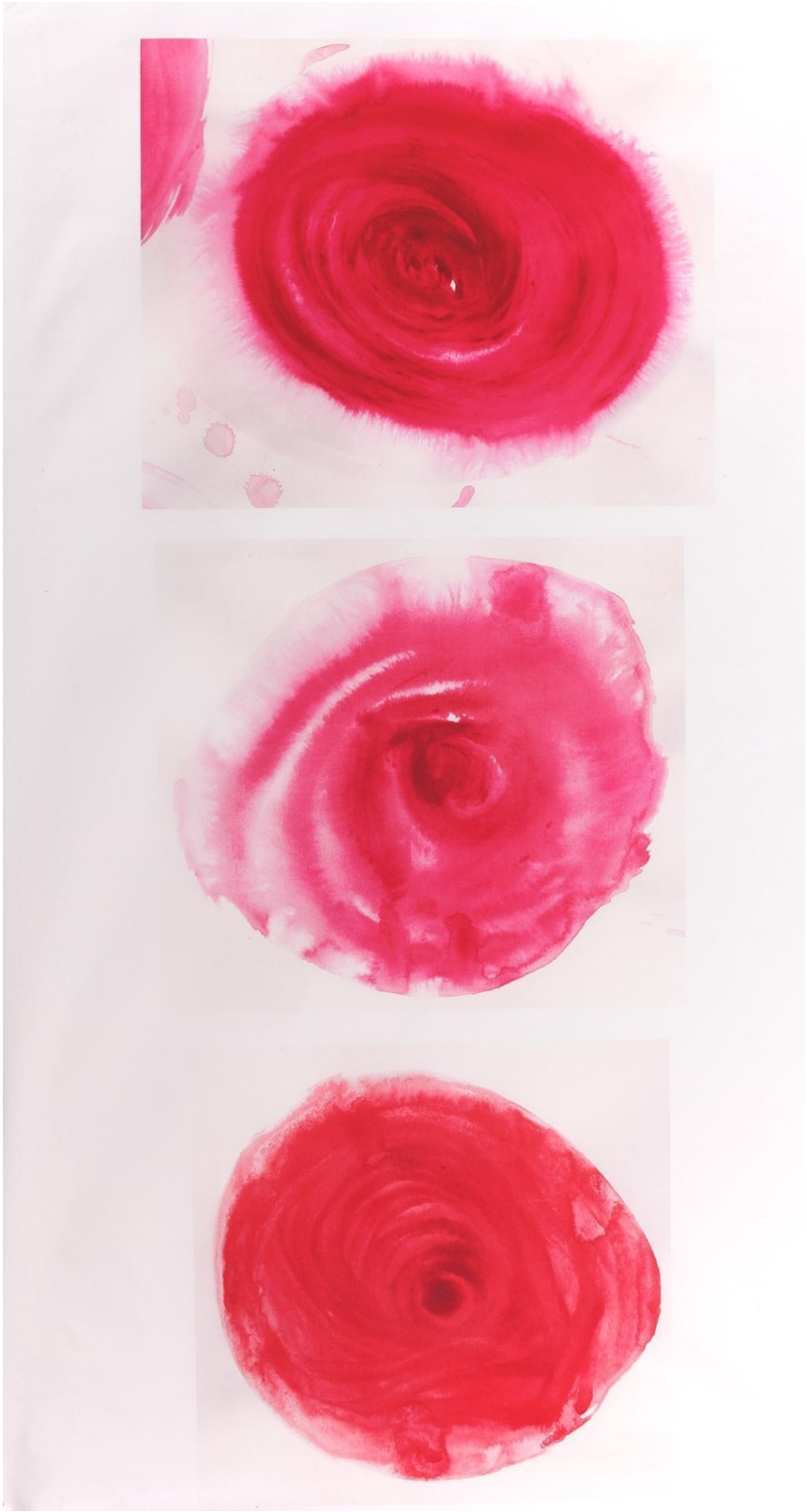


Fig.177. Remi Rana Allen. *Arose* (2016). A0 sublimation digital canvas prints.



Fig.178 Remi Rana Allen. *Arose* (2016). A0 sublimation digital canvas prints. Detail.



Fig.179. Remi Rana Allen. *Arose* (2016), exhibited at The Window Gallery, Buckinghamshire (2016).

The last stage of the production of *ARose* was to iron the canvases to fix the inks. The two canvases were first hung horizontally Fig.179, then eventually separated into separate artworks and mounted onto frames. The separation of the stoma images for exhibition in my *HOLES* exhibition at Chelsea 2019, I felt encapsulated the passing of time as the stoma altered through the years, shrinking, shapeshifting and finally settling at the necessary size,[191] this created an individual identity for each image. It is this series of work that aimed to explore the role of the maternal in the construction of the British Indian identity. The decision making involved as the mother in the ever-evolving hybrid identity of the child.

I move on to investigate the materials and processes further through *SkinWings* and *Specimens*. Moving away from direct mark making to making through medical products and medical machinery. This was another method to remove the emotional mother maker and draw out the maker as an artistic researcher.

SkinWings (2016-17)

The medical equipment utilised for the making of *SkinWings* (2016-17) and *Specimens* (2016) examines the role of the mother as an observer of the evolving identity of the child. These changes are documented through the two artworks.

When my son returned home from the Hospital, we were bombarded with IBD nurses visiting us to check on his progress and his medical supplies. There were various ileostomy pouches, ranging from the NHS ‘skin’ coloured pouch and the Ted Baker designer pouch. My son chose to use the

[191] Hanne Darboeven’s works inspired the timeline of the stoma digital prints and their installation as separate artworks.

cowl neck from the ConvaTec Esteem+ 30-40mm (Figs.180 and 181) and combined it with the Coloplast SenSura Mio Ostomy bag in neutral grey 10-55mm maxi (Fig.182) (Ted Baker designed pouch). This was the way he felt safe and secure in the wearing of the pouch.



Fig.180 ConvaTec ileostomy pouch. Photographer Remi Rana Allen (2016).





Fig.181 Detail ConvaTec ileostomy pouch. Photographer Remi Rana Allen (2016).

Fig.182 Coloplast SenSura Mio Ostomy bag. Photographer Remi Rana Allen (2016).



Fig.183. Remi Rana Allen. *SkinWings*. Charcoal on paper. Drawings, studio documentation (2016).



Fig.184. Remi Rana Allen. *SkinWings*. Charcoal on paper. Drawings, studio documentation (2016).

SkinWings was initially conceptualised through two sketches [Figs.183 and 184]. These drawings were the blueprint for the sculpture. I have often used found objects in my artworks,[192] and *SkinWings* is an example of recycling discarded objects. The ConvaTec pouch was discarded once the cowl had been removed, so I collected the pouches. There was something about these pouches that repulsed and fascinated me. Made from a fabric that was water resistant and appeared to have a skin like pattern on the surface, the pouches did not represent a true skin tone, white, black, or brown. Over two hundred pouches were deconstructed. They were impossible to tear, several layers forming odd shapes, these strange abstract shapes were laid out in various formations. Through this experimentation I realized they started to resemble a 'layer of skin' Fig.185, perhaps a shed skin.

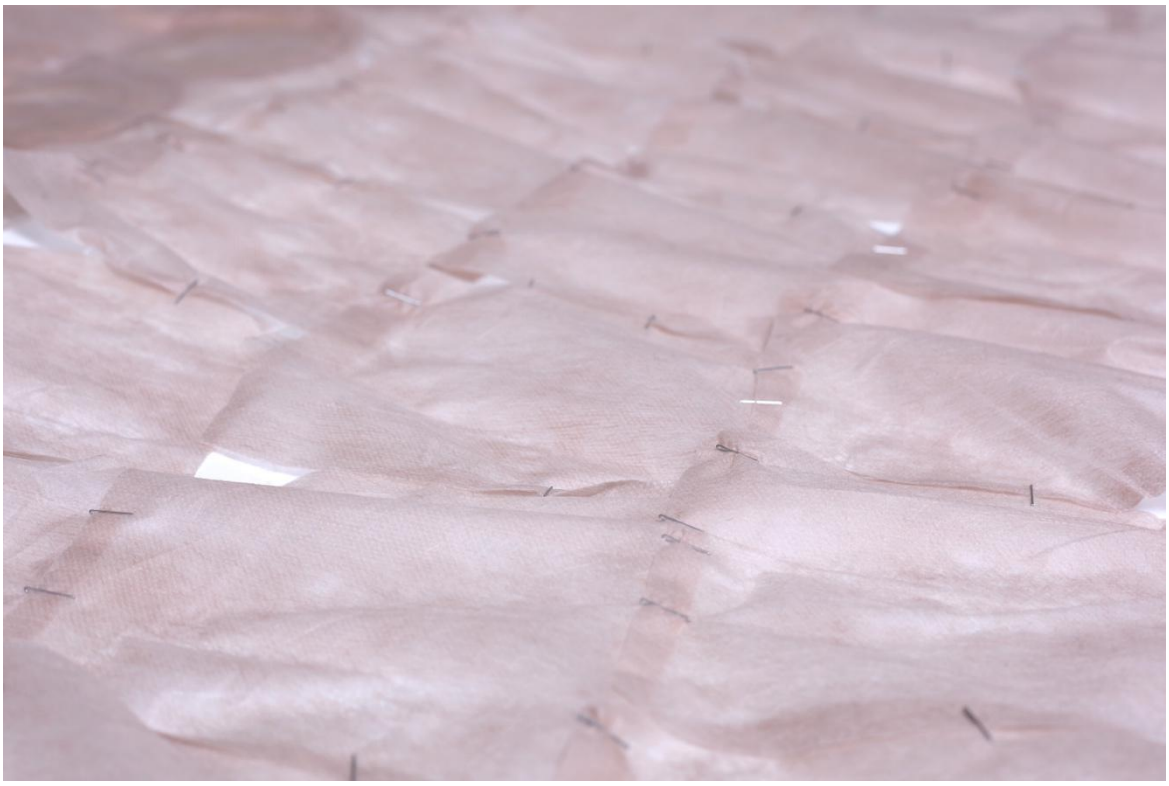


Fig.185. Remi Rana Allen. *SkinWings* (2016). Detail. Installation.

[192] Arte Povera.

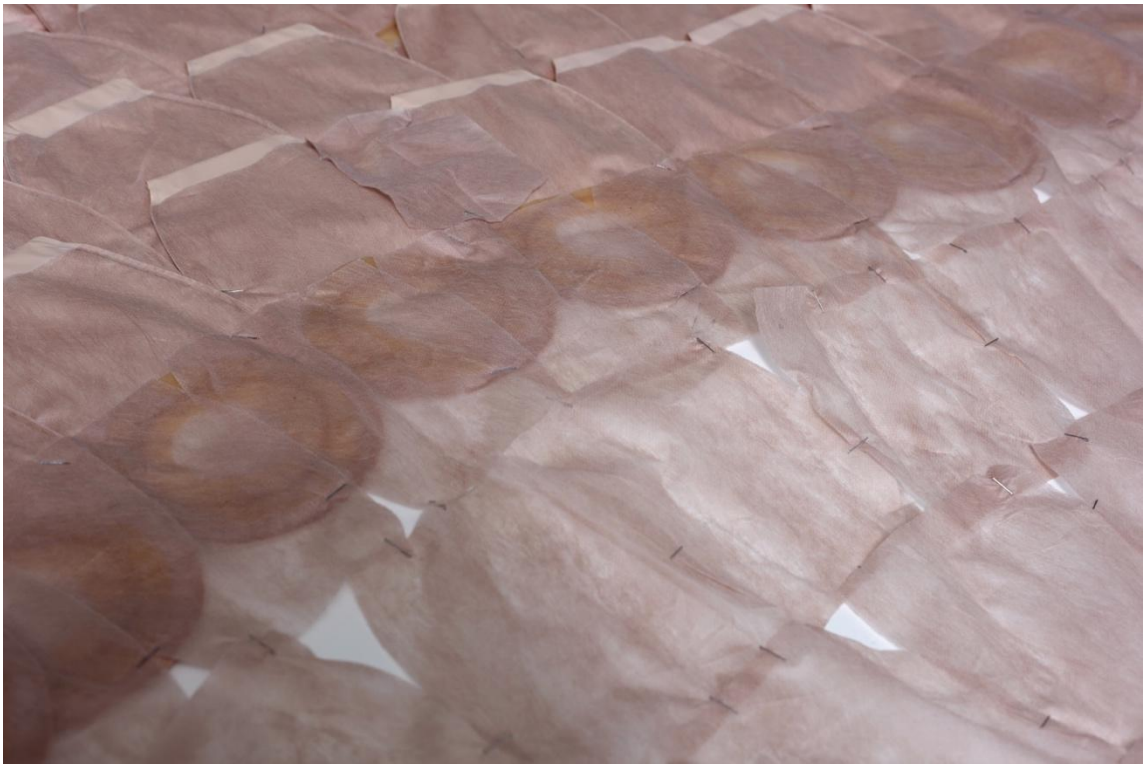


Fig.186. Remi Rana Allen. *SkinWings* (2016). Detail. Installation.

The shapes were connected by stapling the delicate semi translucent sheets together (Fig.186). The 10mm staples were the length of each of the five keyholes made during surgery. There was a scar below the pubis roughly 10cm long, the same size and positioning of my caesarean section scars. The repetitive stapling of the fabric felt like the actions of a surgeon stapling and stitching post-operative procedures. I continued to staple first randomly then automatically, machine like, unemotionally, a clinical making of the artefact.

The skin grew and enlarged, the shape of the pouches forming a body and curves, its own unique identity. The body grew into the shape of a wave (Fig.187). This procedure was performed a second time and two wavy shapes were grown from the pouches. As the ‘skins’ were laid on the floor they visually appeared as wings. I found two steel rods in the metalwork department; these were slightly longer than the length of the waved objects. The rods were curved to reflect the curve

of the skins. The top edge of the wings I stapled to create loops, which enabled the threading through of the rods (Fig.188). For installation I envisioned the skins to be hung, not only to enhance their transparent quality, but also their appearance as wings Fig.189.

It dawned on me that from the medical pouch which I had been repulsed by, because of its aesthetic qualities and usage, I had subliminally created a piece of work that had begun to represent freedom. Freedom from disease, freedom from hours spent on a toilet each day, freedom from pain, freedom from malnutrition, freedom to live. Through the medical intervention he had been gifted growth. The skin grew and metamorphosed into a newness during the making, metaphorically representing the construction of the identity of the child via the decision making of the maternal maker.



Fig.187. Remi Rana Allen. *SkinWings* (2016). Detail. Installation.



Fig.188. Remi Rana Allen. *SkinWings* (2016). Detail. Installation.



Fig.189. Remi Rana Allen. *SkinWings* (2016). The Window Gallery, Buckinghamshire. Installation (2016).

Specimens (2016)

Much in the same vein as *SkinWings* (2016-17), I wanted to utilise medical equipment with *Specimens*. However, in this case, the want was to allow the medical equipment to be the maker of the artwork. This move away from mark making to machine was significant. I would be the observer, documenting and making notes. My control in the creation of the artworks would be minimal, I would only aid the machine to function to enable the fluids to create the image. I felt this was akin to the role of the nurse. As my role of carer and mother had been usurped by the machine and the nurse in hospital.

An essential piece of equipment that had kept my son alive on many occasions in hospital, the intravenous drip. I contacted the Nursing Department at Buckinghamshire New University to acquire a drip stand and saline bags. The drip was set up in the studio and I experimented with the saline bags to adjust the speed at which the fluid was dispensed (see Figs.190 and 191). Paper was the original canvas for the dripping fluid, but this did not soak up the fluid, there was no image, only wet paper.



Fig.190. Remi Rana Allen. *Specimens*. Experimentation intravenous drips, studio documentation. Photograph (2016).



Fig.191. Remi Rana Allen. *Specimens*. Experimentation intravenous drips, studio documentation. Photograph (2016).

The canvas had to retain the imprint of the fluids, there was experimentation with various papers and fabrics until I sourced 'Resham'[193] (Indian raw silk). Raw silk is different from silk as it contains sericin, "the gummy substance, affording protection during processing, is usually retained until the yarn or fabric stage and is removed by boiling the silk in soap and water, leaving it soft and lustrous." (*Britannica*. 2017). The slight rough texture of this fabric had the qualities to absorb the liquids and form an image. I ordered the white Indian fabric from the Punjab; the fabric was divided into square pieces 30cm x 30cm. The size of the average floor tile, the floor tiles we often sat staring at in the hospital. I constructed seven wooden frames and mounted the resham. These seven canvases, a metaphor for the body absorbing the dripping fluids. The symbolism of the white fabric is also related to death in Indian culture, the corpse is often wrapped in a white sheet in preparation for the funeral pyre. In this case I wanted it to reiterate the death of a previous identity prior to the emergence of the newer self.

This artwork was not about a recognisable image, it was not figurative or literal. The piece was a representation of time, emotion and machine maker. The machine was exploited to create the artwork, and the emotions emerged through the dripping fluids. Seven fluids that represented the seven years, the context of the journey and the story. Saline, blood, urine, tears, bone, alcohol and milk – these were to be the fluids.[194] The saline used consistently to hydrate and administer drugs, this fluid formed the base for all the solutions mixed for the drip feeds. Blood, (khoon) the

[193] "Raw silk, which is popularly known as 'Paat' in Eastern India, 'Resham' in Urdu and Hindu dialect, and 'Pattu' in the southern pockets of India, is the most natural form of delicate fibre which can get easily and smoothly woven into different fabrics and garments." Available at: https://www.utsavpedia.com/textiles/raw-silk-redefining-the-velvety-essence-of-beauty/ (Accessed: 03.07.2023).

[194] "Under the full blue dress, the maternal, virginal body allowed only the breast to show, while the face, with stiffness of Byzantine icons gradually softened, was covered with tears. Milk and tears become the privileged signs of the Mater Dolorosa who invaded the west beginning with the eleventh century." (Moi. 1986, p.173).

relationship between mother and child and the frequent blood tests. Urine, another sample tested regularly. Tears, mine, hidden by the sharam of exposure as instilled by my mother. Bone calcium tablets were crushed and dissolved in the saline, bone age and bone strength constantly monitored through MRI scans. Alcohol for sterilising and preparation for surgery, blood tests and cannulas. Alcohol to numb the pain. Finally, milk, representing strength and mother's milk, the need to breastfeed for a strong baby with a healthy immune system.[195] Milk and tears also reference the milk and tears that appear in artworks of the Virgin Mary at the crucifixion. "'Stabat mater dolorosa' […] 'Stood the Mother, full of grief…'" (Moi, 1986, p.160). These seven fluids substituted my emotions.

The sample fluids were dissolved into the saline pouches and hung from the drip stand one at a time. Once hung the drip feed was set to the slowest drip intensity. The resham canvas frame is placed on the floor directly beneath the feed. The drip tube was lowered towards the canvas with 50cm separating them. This preparation process was my only interaction in the making. The machine was left to control the dripping overnight and generate the artwork. Over a period of two weeks the seven canvases were complete Fig.192. Astonishingly the images had a similarity, they revealed a circular abstract shape, this shape resembled the paintings of the *ARose* series.

[195] Denise Ferris artworks *Home Decorum from Milk* and *Poison series* 2003.
Rachael Epp Buller, *The Food Landscape*. 2007-08.

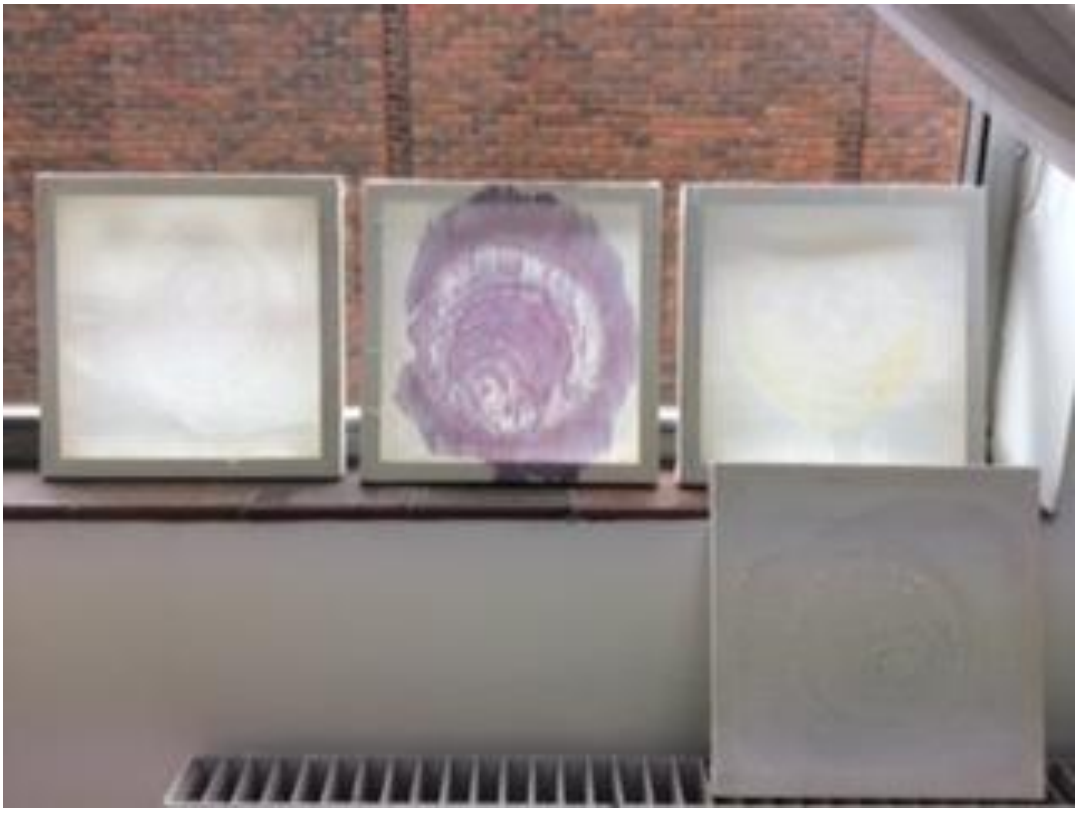


Fig.192. Remi Rana Allen. *Specimens*. Studio documentation. Photograph (2016).

The machine did not fail in its job to function as an artist. The marks it created were beautiful in their similarity and yet uniqueness. The resham canvas eagerly accepted the fluids, reminiscent perhaps of the mother feeding the child. What I have come to appreciate about this artwork is that by relinquishing control over the making, the machine, maker, artist could not have failed in what it created. Through its methodical emotionless repetition came a creation, from a randomness only the autonomous machine knew. The piece contextualises a seven-year narrative. It may appear humble and serene at first glance, but on closer inspection of the canvases and their individual titles, the subtext reveals so much more Figs.193, 194 and 195.



Fig.193. Remi Rana Allen, *Specimens*. 1 Urine, 2 Tears, 3 Bone, 4 Saline. Installation (2016).



Fig.194. Remi Rana Allen, *Specimens*. 5 Blood, 6 Alcohol, 7 Milk. Installation (2016).

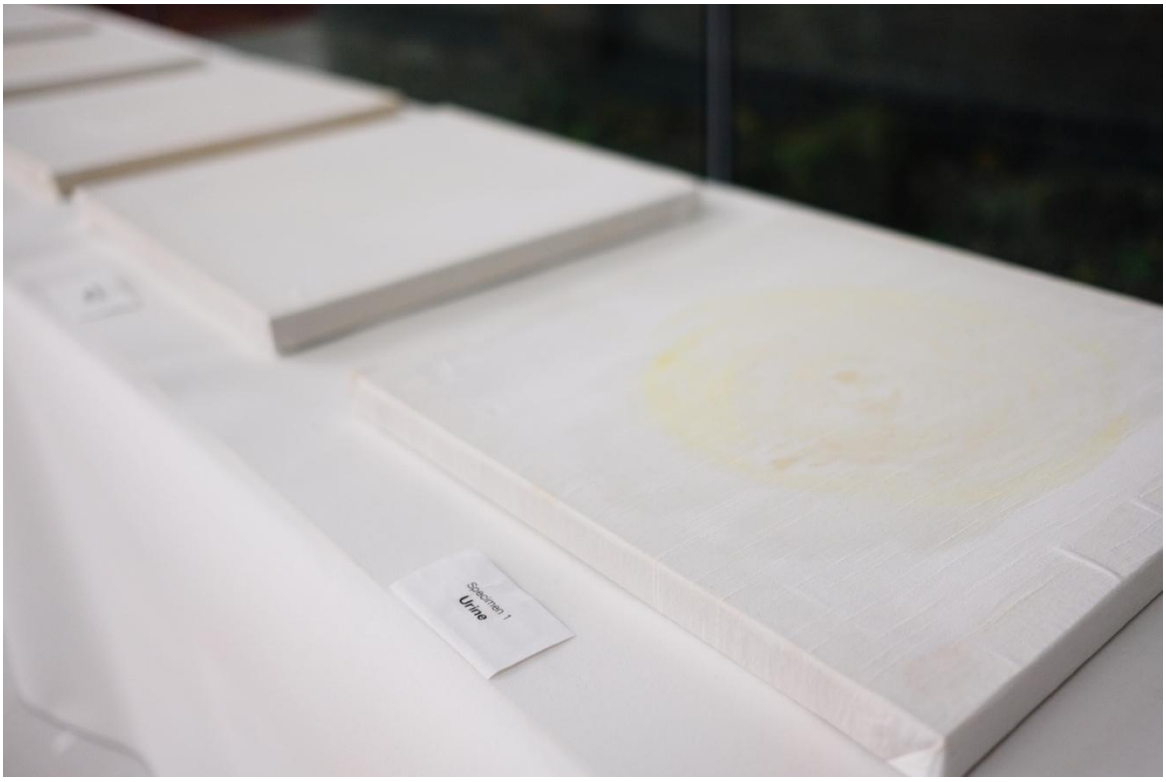


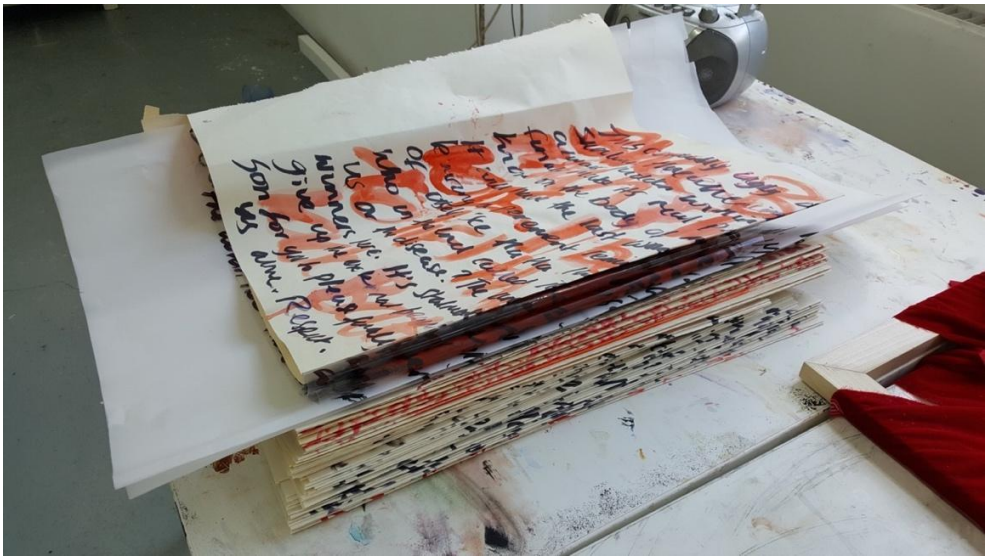
Fig.195. Remi Rana Allen, *Specimens*, *HOLES* exhibition. The Triangle Gallery, Chelsea. Photographer Henri Affandi (2019).

My faith and concluding *Seven Years of This* (2015-18)

Finally, I returned to the scrolls of handwriting. They were unboxed, they felt vulnerable and exposed. For ethical reasons they could not be exhibited as a large installation in their current format. Intuitively I started to french fold[196] the sheets (Figs.196 and 197). The short edge of 90cm dictated the overall size of the square pages. The folded pages were stacked, it no longer mattered that they were not in sequence. The desire to remove the intimacy of the story by abstracting its construction through the folding process was paramount. The 90cm x 90cm pages

[196] French folding essentially involves reverse folding 4pp sections back on themselves, and then binding the two open edges together with other sections.

needed binding. Whilst contemplating on how to bind the pages, thoughts formed regarding incorporating some of the elements of the various artworks together in the pages. I painted stomas similar to *Arose* (2016) and *Specimens* (2016). The steel rods from *SkinWings* (2016-17) were introduced as bolts in the binding.





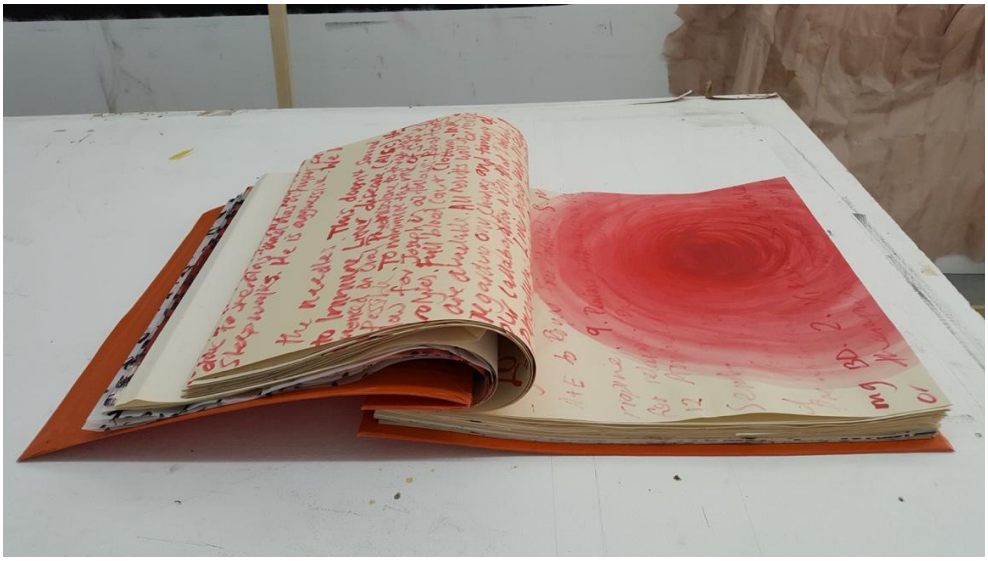


Fig.196. Remi Rana Allen. *Seven Years of This*. Making the book, studio documentation. Photograph (2018).



Fig.197. Remi Rana Allen. *Seven Years of This*. Making the book, studio documentation. Photograph (2018).

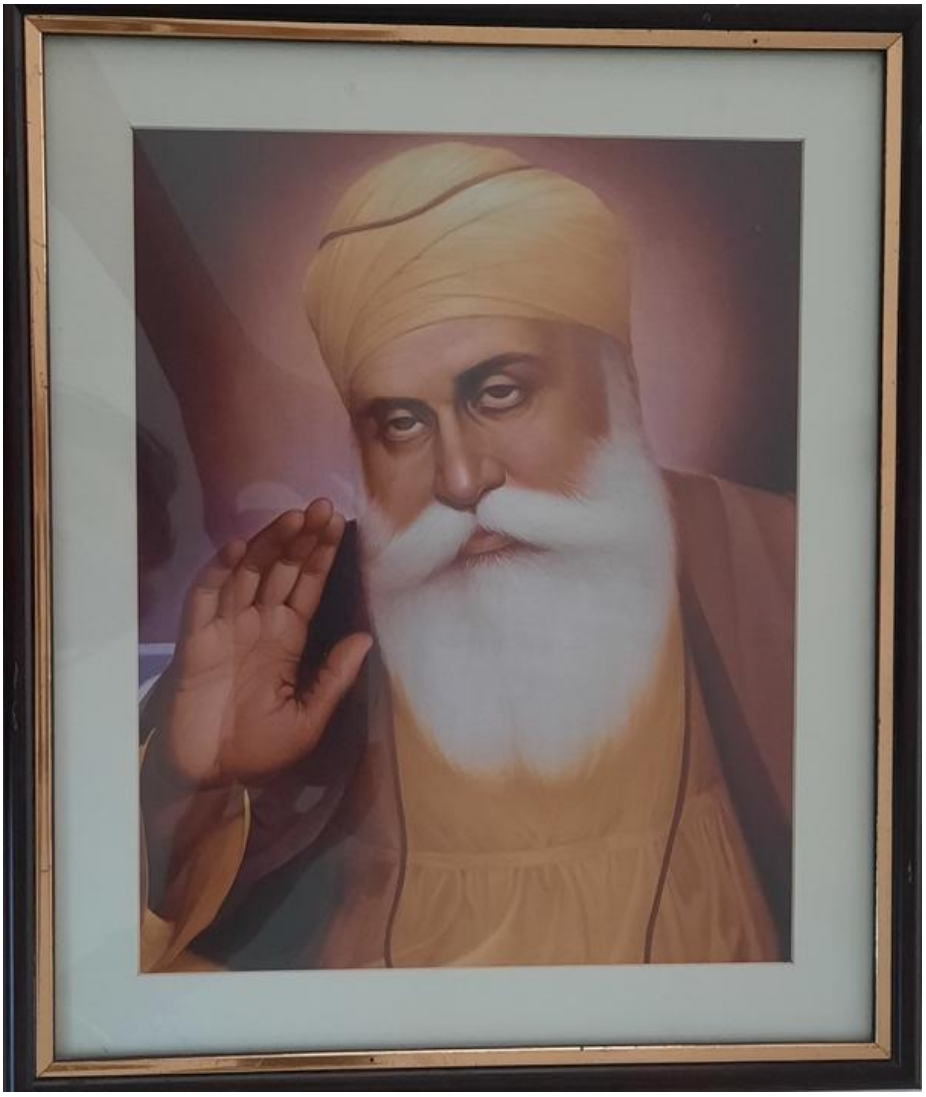


Fig.198. Artist unknown. Guru Nanak. Photograph (no date).

I recalled that one of the few objects my son had wanted with him during his stay in hospital was a picture of Guru Nanak[197] (Fig.198). My mother had given the picture to him, for his bedroom, to keep him blessed and safe. There are many superstitions in Indian culture relating to the child. For example, warding off evil spirits and the evil eye which may be cast upon the child, due to jealousy or envy of the mother. The most common taboo prevalent among Indian mothers in both the UK and India is the,

> …belief in the bad omens, vernacularly called as 'Nazar lagna'.[198] Almost all the families believed into it […] Dietary restraints in the mother, application of kajal[199] in the eyes of the babies and no exposure to outside air were also some of the important customs prevalent (Dirh & Batta, 2015, p.438).

It was not only the Indian customs that I had to contend with on the birth of my first son, but the beliefs of my mother-in-law. She had converted to Christianity around 1991 and it had become all-consuming of her daily life. The further she dived into her faith the further removed she became from us. There had been many lengthy discussions around the dinner table regarding her Christianity and when my father-in-law also converted in the mid nineteen nineties these debates became aggressive. They wanted me to convert too. The absurdity was that when coerced, my Indianness emerged as the overriding force behind my identity. When I was first introduced to them, they appeared to like me, albeit with a certain curiosity about the exotic brown woman. But

[197] Guru Nanak founder of Sikhism, the first Sikh Guru.

[198] Nazar Lagna translation, to be cursed.

[199] Kohl around the eyes, my mother suggested drawing a black dot behind the ear to protect my sons.

as their religion took hold, I was made to feel an outsider for my differences, not only being Sikh (non-practising), but my brownness and Indianness.

My mother-in-law's subjective interpretation of the Bible and its application to familial bonds, helped alleviate her fear of a loss of control over the family. She elevated her own position to the supreme, cleansed white Christian female. Her faith would enter her into 'heaven'. Something that, in her eyes, I would not achieve, due to my unbelonging as a non-Christian. But in fact, "Love and anger cannot coexist. Female anger threatens the institution of motherhood." (Rich, 1986, p.46). Ironically her behaviour was not dissimilar from the stereotypical Indian mother-in-law.

When my sons were born, they were not christened (my mother-in- law's biggest fear), but my father did attend the Gurdwara for each of their blessings. I have felt that my style of mothering was from a western perspective, but I am a British Indian woman, the Indian cultural customs I can relate to. Throughout the seven years of disease these superstitions started to make a strange sense. Perhaps in desperation, I as a mother would even return to faith to help my child become healthy. It was during this period that my belief in Sikhism transpired for a second time (previously my trip to the Golden Temple in 2010), the days leading up to surgery and throughout the hospitalisation I would silently chant "Satnam Sri Waheguru."[200] This chant became a form of meditation releasing stress, worry and anxiety. Cleansing the mind. I began to think in Punjabi. The chant had reawakened a part of my identity. My British Indian female identity, unfolding at this important moment, perhaps the Sikh religious part of myself was reasserting itself at this crisis

[200] Sikh prayer chant meaning "The name is truth".

moment. My hybrid identity reconciles mind and perceived image simultaneously as a British Indian woman, who is also a mother.

The isolation in the hospital removed me from everyday life and it was then that I meditated, hoping for enlightenment or a light directing the way out of the situation. At this point a turning away from my Western self and an inward reflection of what it meant to think in Punjabi and present as Indian. This rejection of my western self was in retaliation to the sense of failure of the western medical world to ‘cure’ my son. I spoke only to my son and the medics.

On the Paediatric Gastroenterology ward there were mostly Jewish, Muslim and some English parents. Our personalised food was stored in a communal fridge and I remember musing over the fact that we all shared the same fridge with our individual kosher, halal, curry and Marks and Spencer foods. We were united as parents or carers through our sick children suffering from gastro problems, yet our individual racial or ethnic appearances and religious identities were contained within a medium sized white fridge - ironically our identities in white society represented by that fridge.

The Guru Granth Sahib dictated the format and became the inspiration for the aesthetics of the book, my book of journey and faith. The binding of the book was between two hardboards, this was to ensure protection of the fragile story. The covers were wrapped in a screen-printed red turban, the turban had been printed a few years previously, the abstract image was of my son’s head. The edges taped with orange masking tape to create a clean edge (Fig.199). What was important to me was that I wanted the binding to exert strength and have a dominance in holding the ‘story’ together. Large steel bolts were sourced, the unbound book was placed in the

metalwork drill and two holes drilled for binding. The bolts were inserted, to hold the faithful book together. This is the only artwork I have created that I knew pre-installation how it would be presented. *Seven Years of This* was wrapped in Indian silk brocade fabric, much like the Guru Granth Sahib, when he is put to rest at the end of each day (Fig.200). The installation was to be set on a low-level plinth, the viewer would kneel to turn the pages of my representation of a religious book, paying homage to the story of *Seven Years of This* (Figs.201, 202, 203, 204 and 205).

In hindsight, how could *Seven Years of This* have been any different to what was created? The religious factor played a huge part in what was happening at the time. Faith was interpreted through the creative in the studio, albeit sub consciously.



Fig.199. Remi Rana Allen, *Seven Years of This* (2015-18). *HOLES* exhibition. The Triangle Gallery, Chelsea. Photographer Henri Affandi. Installation (2019).



Fig.200. Remi Rana Allen, *Seven Years of This* (2015-18). *HOLES* exhibition. The Triangle Gallery, Chelsea. Photographer Henri Affandi. Installation (2019).

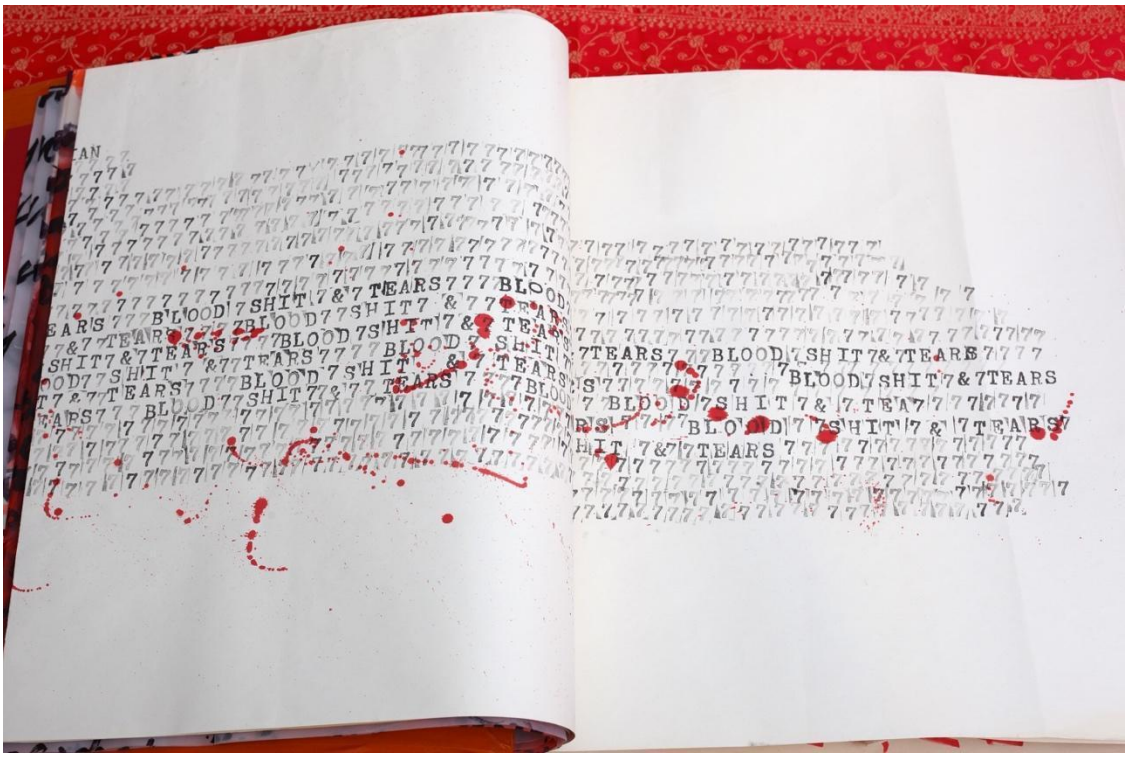


Fig.201. Remi Rana Allen, *Seven Years of This* (2015-18). *HOLES* exhibition. The Triangle Gallery, Chelsea. Photographer Henri Affandi. Installation (2019).

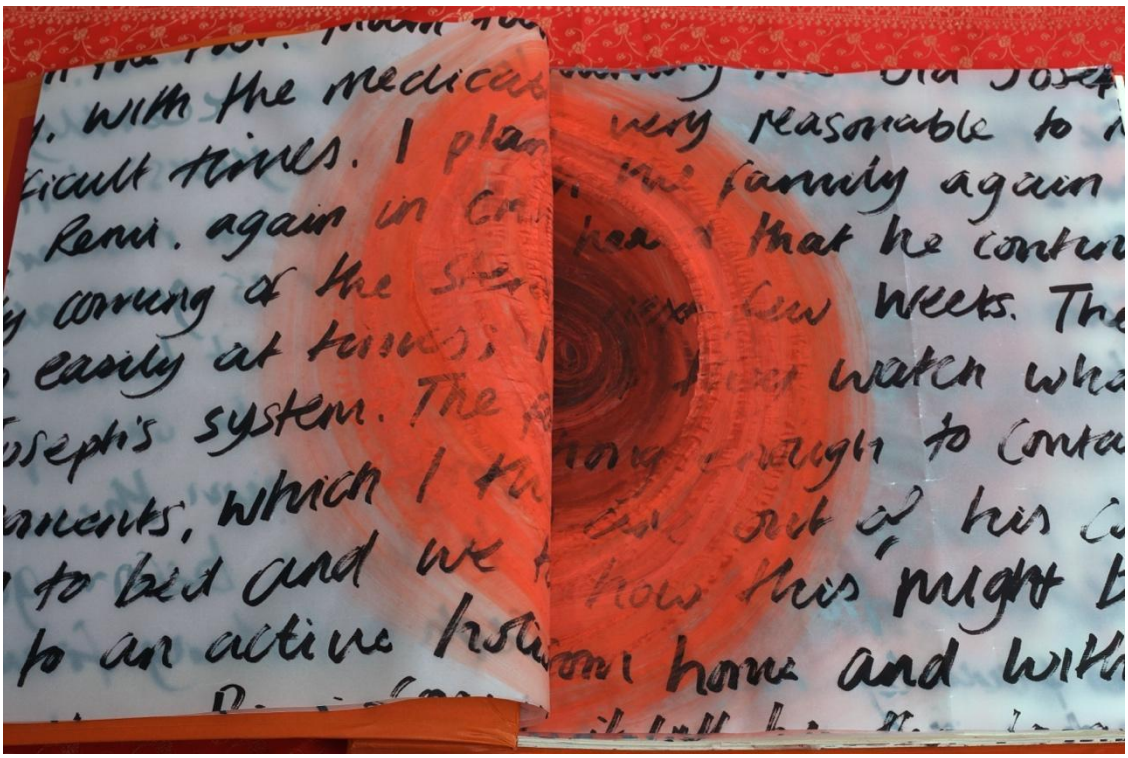


Fig.202. Remi Rana Allen, *Seven Years of This* (2015-18). *HOLES* exhibition. The Triangle Gallery, Chelsea. Photographer Henri Affandi. Installation (2019).

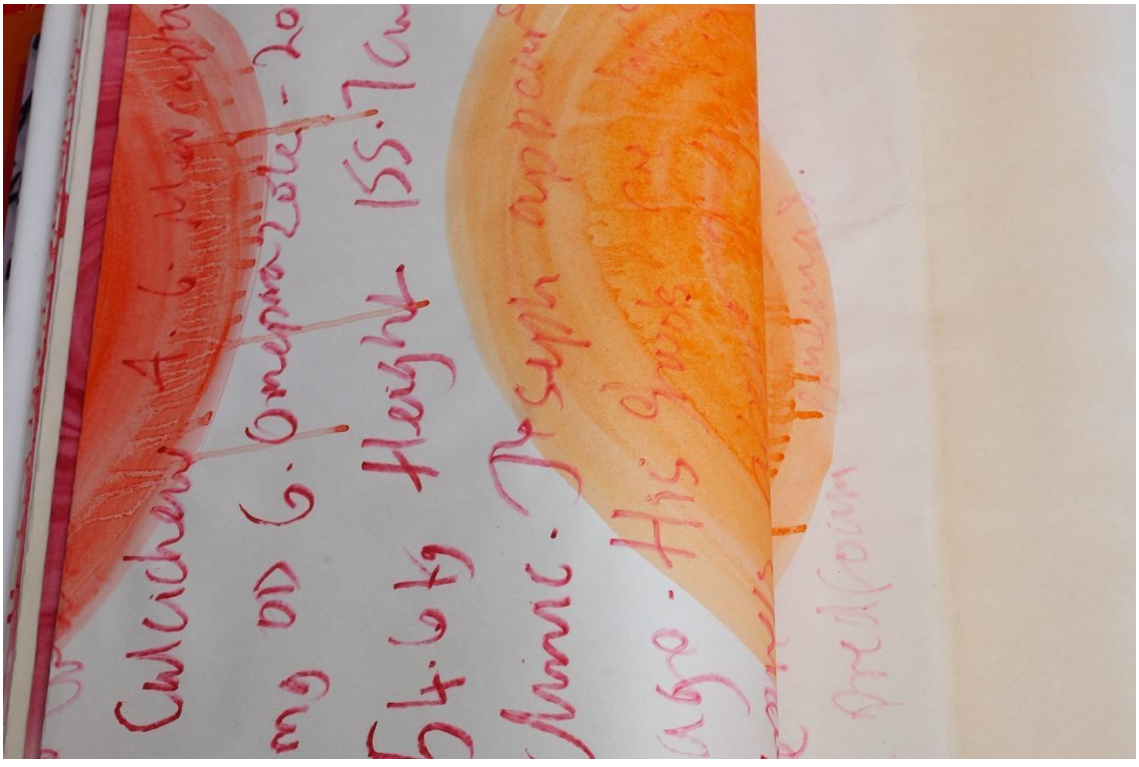


Fig.203. Remi Rana Allen, *Seven Years of This* (2015-18). *HOLES* exhibition. The Triangle Gallery, Chelsea. Photographer Henri Affandi. Installation (2019).



Fig.204. Remi Rana Allen, *Seven Years of This* (2015-18). *HOLES* exhibition. The Triangle Gallery, Chelsea. Photographer Henri Affandi. Installation (2019).



Fig.205. Remi Rana Allen, *Seven Years of This* (2015-18). *HOLES* exhibition. The Triangle Gallery, Chelsea. Photographer Henri Affandi. Installation (2019).

Chapter five commenced with a personal account of my womanhood at the age of nineteen, exploring my sexuality. This led to the autonomy of my body. The noteworthy memory introduced me to feminism. For me to unfold the construction of my British Indian female identity it was necessary to investigate the initial influences of colonialism on my matrilineal heritage. My familiy's British Indian female identity has travelled the plains of Kenya and shaped the lives of Manji, Mama and my mother, their Indian Kenyan Sikh identities, their lifestyles and their mothering.

10cm Holes (2017-18) subsequently investigated the similarities and differences of the British Indian Kenyan mothers in my family and myself as the British Indian mother. The impact that colonialism has had on our identities as mothers shaped the way our children dressed, the language they spoke and their education. *10cm Holes* revealed experiences of childbirth and early motherhood, this artwork set the scene for me to share my personal experiences, the failures and the successes of birthing and motherhood.

Analysis of my materials and the making processes, through to installing *10cm Holes* identified what I believed was a failure of my bodily function in bearing my first son. Furthermore, I discussed the attitudes associated with breast feeding by relaying the experiences of three generations of women within my family. Lastly *10cm Holes* discoursed the relationship dynamics between mama and my mother. I also shared my feelings regarding the rejection of my newer emerging identity by my mother. By reflecting on the creation of the artwork, enabled me to gain insights on the trauma and much needed reparation of my suspended identity. This identity emerged as my contemporary British Indian female identity through the experiences of motherhood.

Dream One became the subconscious marker of my relationship not only to my mother but I feel it could also be applied to my mother-in-law. The dream signalled a rejection of me by both women, because I would not adhere to their demands on my sons' upbringing. Through *10cm Holes* I have challenged the constructs of Indian mythology, superstition and generational advice on mothering, in relation to the birthing experience and breastfeeding. My break from some of these constructs, created faith in my individual decision making as a westernised British Indian mother.

The chapter moved on to *Seven Years of This* (2015-18), for the first time I wrote purely through the body of artworks and less through sociological observation and theory. My early motherhood journey and history was relived through the making of the artworks. I shared my inner thoughts and lived experience. *Seven Years of This* is my personal story, it is one of the starting points into the investigation of my identity as a British Indian woman, mothering a child who struggled with disease. This I believe to be an important contribution to knowledge because it breaks out of the existing social and cultural attitudes concerning sickness within the South Asian family unit, and the associated sharam and basti. As an artist / mother, British Indian woman I broke with the codes of silence and taboos in discussing or highlighting what is deemed to be shameful, *Seven Years of This* made this possible.

The ethical implications I faced during the making of the artworks led to an intense consideration of what was to remain private and what would be viewed publicly, the reason why I have chosen not to show visual stills or imagery from the *Untitled Film* (2016) and closed crit. At the onset my emotions controlled the making, the desire was to shed the experiences by revealing everything. I thought this would aid in moving on from the experiences. In revisiting the artworks, what became apparent was that my research could not only take place through my role as the emotional mother,

but also as the analytical artist. As artist and researcher, I have grappled with *Seven Years of This* and the ethical implications, realising that the artworks were to be formed from my perspective and not that of my son.

The medical products in *SkinWings* (2016-17) and the intravenous drip used to make the work *Specimens* (2016) are clues for the viewer, pointing them in the direction of the subtext of an arduous and traumatic past. The ethical lessons learnt from the *Untitled Film* were invaluable in pushing the body of work in the direction of storytelling from an artistic perspective and not as an over emotional mother. These revelations can only be realised through the reflective writing process, now as an objective and analytical artist, researcher and mother/maker whose work is informed through subjective methodologies. I realised through my artworks that I was still grieving for the 'perfect' child I had born, the child dreamt about in Dream Two.

The completion of *Seven Years of This* and subsequent installation in 2019 dealt with my faith. The silent chanting in the hospital and the meditative stillness of my mind were important, as I viewed what was happening to the body of my son. The deep inner reflection of who I was, a British Indian woman caught between my Indian appearance and my western mind forced some internal changes. Changes that welcomed back my faith in Sikhism and acknowledged the limitations of western medicine. It was the battle between western Christianity that was my white mother-in-law's faith and Sikhism and Indian cultural superstitions my mother believed, that were questioned during the period. As Kristeva writes,

> …the other is neither an evil being foreign to me nor a scapegoat from the outside, that is, of another sex, class, race, or nation […]

> I am at once the attacker and the victim, the same and the other, identical and foreign (McAfee, 2004, p.101).

What emerged undeniably was that my unpractised faith was part of my identity. The chanting in Punjabi became an integral player in the reconciliation of my mind and my appearance. The perception of my Indian female body and my western thought processes. By the unfolding of my then suspended identity, through *10cm Holes* and *Seven Years of This*, it became apparent that the two artworks are imperative in answering the research questions: That different geographic and historical contexts contributed to the development of a distinctly British Indian female identity amongst women in my family. And maternal roles impacted the formation of that identity in my family. Lastly, that my multi-media art practice can unearth and piece together the constituting factors in the development of that identity within my family.

Chapter 6, *Ika Kilo (One Kilo)* (2019) and *Killer Queen* (2019) *are* the last of artworks produced by myself during my residency in Rome in 2019. Together, they explore female sexuality through song, dance and myth. The Indian woman is stereotyped by society as virgin daughter, mother or aging matriarch. She is either orientalised by the coloniser or demonised by the Indian patriarch if she reveals herself as an autonomous sexual being. The two artworks demystify this perception of her, and instead insert that she is capable of sexual desire.

Chapter 6

Ika Kilo. Killer Queen.

Through my multi-media arts practice the previous chapter investigated the similarities and differences of the British Indian Kenyan mothers in my family and myself as the British Indian mother. It also discussed the impact that colonialism has had on our identities as mothers. In Kenya, the mothers amongst my family were impacted by colonialism, on several levels, such as child rearing practices, aesthetic practices e.g. in children's wear, the education their children received, and the three-tier system created by the white settlers. These ideas continued to the UK as the women migrated, but now they also faced new challenges in their lives in Britain; for example, their class status reduced from middle class to working class and for the first time they experienced racism.

10cm Holes (2017-18) revealed experiences of childbirth and early motherhood, and this artwork set the scene for me to share my personal experiences, the failures and the successes of birthing and motherhood. The chapter moved on to *Seven Years of This* (2015-18), my early motherhood journey and history was relived through the making of the artworks. I shared my inner thoughts and lived experience. This became one of the starting points into the investigation of my identity as a British Indian woman, mothering a child who struggled with disease.

Chapter 6, *Ika Kilo (One Kilo)* (2019) and *Killer Queen* (2019) *are* the last of the artworks produced by myself during my residency in Rome in 2019. Together, they explore female sexuality through song, dance and myth. Indian women are stereotyped by society as virgin

daughter, mother or aging matriarch. She is either orientalised by the coloniser or demonised by the Indian patriarch if she reveals herself as an autonomous sexual being. The two artworks demystify this perception of her, and instead insist that she possesses an autonomous sexuality. My female relatives who migrated to the UK from Kenya in the 1960s are represented through *Ika Kilo,* my rendition of an oversized penis made from textile hair extensions adorned by Indian women at weddings. This artwork not only illuminates their female sexuality and desires, but reveals through a private pre wedding gathering of women their united ability to perform through song and dance the power of their femininity, normally made invisible in a patriarchal society that seeks to restrict and limit their sexuality.

Killer Queen (2019) was inspired by true life events of my Great Aunt and the mythology of Medusa. It discusses global societal perceptions of dark haired brown skinned women cast as the evil other, if they assert bodily autonomy and disrupt the stereotypical conventions of her identity. To act outside of these permitted behaviours is to face being othered or ostracised from her community. I inquire into the similarities between Medusa and my Great Aunt who both took a stand against sexual violence, and in doing so, broke the conventions of their societies through their feminist behaviour.

This chapter will demonstrate that my art practice can unearth and piece together the constitutive factors in the development of the British Indian female identity amongst the women in my family. It will also show how different geographic and historical contexts contributed to the development of a distinctly British Indian female identity amongst those women.

Ika Kilo (2019) was inspired by a dance at hen parties performed by Indian Kenyan Sikh women of my family. I first witnessed the performance at a young age and the memory was the catalyst for this artwork. *Killer Queen* draws from the narrative of the vagina dentata, particularly Medusa, the goddess Kali, and the story of Chachiji, my great aunt in Kenya.[201]

The chapter will begin by exploring my memory of the Indian Kenyan Sikh women's dance and song performance. It focuses on their sexuality, normally a taboo subject within South Asian society. In a women only space however, they are free to express themselves through their performance. They sing about the large penis and perform with their chunnis imitating that penis. This generation of women who migrated to Britain in the 1960s have not previously been portrayed as sexual beings.

The chapter will move on to narrate the story of Chachiji, my great aunt, and how my research in Rome enabled me to make connections between her story, and representations of Medusa and Kali. Together all three contributed to conceptualising the artwork.

Killer Queen and *Ika Kilo* represent the changing visibility of the British Indian women's identity among the women in my family. It illuminates how they have adapted to 'positively' exist in an intersectional space. Gender, race and sex represent the primary intersections that formulate the foundations for the artworks, situating this specific identity of the British Indian woman in

[201] Chachiji's narrative is explained in chapter 3 *Khoon*.

contemporary Britain. This chapter addresses women's sexuality directly through the artworks, and how their sexuality is a part of the overall identity of British Indian women of my family.



Fig.206. Remi Rana Allen. *Ika Kilo* (2019). Indian hair extensions, gold thread,100 x 100cm. Installation.

The Vagina Dentata my proposal for the residency

Before being awarded the residency in Rome, I prepared a proposal for funding for a project *"The Toothed Mouth"*. The proposal was rewritten and adapted for an application to The British School at Athens in February 2019. The application was unsuccessful. The Mead Residency open call for applications from Post Graduate students opened in April and I was advised to apply. One of the research themes for the residency seemed suitable for my proposal, "Translation entails transformation: cultural meanings might change dramatically as a result of reception and translation, creating new knowledge and forms of inspiration." (BSR Research Themes. 2017, p.2).

An updated proposal specifically for Rome was presented at an interview at the London College of Fashion, Holborn, and I was awarded the month-long residency. The proposal initially covered the theme of the vagina dentata, meaning the vagina with teeth, which as Raitt explains,

> …is an ancient, widely known, if not widely discussed, mythical theme. It is also the subject of twentieth century male dreams and fears. It is one of the most basic notions underlying men's fear of women. The vagina dentata visualises, for males, the fear of entry into the unknown, of the dark dangers that must be controlled in the ambivalent mystery that is woman. The teeth must be removed! If the teeth are not removed, the male fears that his penis or testicles, or both, will be sheared away. From this primal fear emerge the stories and figurines that have been repeated from earliest times to the present, from New Zealand to North America to India (Raitt, 1980, p.416).

Barbara Creed explains,

> Freud argued that woman terrifies because she is castrated. I will argue that woman also terrifies because man endows her with imaginary powers of castration. Because the Freudian theory of woman's castration has provided the dominant theoretical justification for analyses of woman as monster… (Creed, 1993, p.87).

We can interpret this to mean that focusing on the

> …degraded, dirty or repulsive, or dangerous or harmful vagina, transmutes unconscious castration fears into conscious, active beliefs (and specific cultural practices) […] one may explicitly articulate a defence against the potency of unconscious fears; the vagina is seen not as a castrated organ, but as a castrating one (Rees, 2013, p.57)

It is this perception of 'woman as monster' with her ability to castrate that is explored through the mythology of the vagina dentata. Not just any woman, but the brown skinned woman with

> …her long dark hair […] is the epitome of the monstrous-feminine whose gender and sexuality, situate her as the evil "other" of the good white western self (Balmain and Drawmer, 2009, p.30).

Rich (1984) draws a parallel between Kali and Pieta,

> …at two ends of the spectrum, which is really a continuum, she is Kali, the “black mother” of Hindu religion, fangs ecstatically barred, a necklace of skulls round her neck, dancing on her dead husband’s body; while in Michelangelo’s white-satin marble Pieta she bends her virginal mannequin’s face above the icy, dandiacal corpse of the son on her lap (Rich, 1984, p.188).

In this text the mother appears as the evil other or the good white pure western self. The word ‘kali’ translates literally to the feminine noun ‘black’, as opposed to ‘kala’, the masculine noun. I note the use of the terms ‘black mother’ and ‘virginal’, I assume that Rich chooses these two characters as representations of evil and good, dark and light, wrong and right, east and west, death and birth, rage and peace, ugly and beauty, hard and soft, black and white. From a western perspective these binary representations reinforce the image of the oriental as evil other. But from the viewpoint of Kali’s faithful followers,

> … she may appear as the matrix or mother, from whom all things come forth and to whom everything will return at the end. In this case she is identified as Kali, the ’power of time’, or of death. […] Death is a return to the mother’s womb, to the earth from which we came. Kali alone is invoked by her faithful as ‘Mother’, the protectress. From whom else can mercy be implored, if not from the all-powerfulness of Time? (Danielou, 1992, p.80).

The Vagina Dentata has origins in several ancient cultures, as Rees explains:

> The same stories, created in an attempt to explain inexplicable events, to articulate fears and dreams […] often emerge from cultures which are both chronologically and physically remote from each other (Rees, 2013, p.52).

The vagina dentata story is prominent among the Baiga people in the Indian subcontinent. As Rees illuminates:

> The stories focus on the necessity of subduing women; of violently forcing them into death or marriage, having […] sadistically knocked their teeth out of their vaginas.[202] (Rees,2013, p.55).

These frenzied, mad, raving, passionate women who warranted taming and silencing,

> The lips/labia correspondence pervades these myths: an assertive, articulate woman is an unruly, transgressive, one (Rees, 2013, p.55).[203]

[202] This is reiterated by Raitt. 1980, p.416.

[203] This perhaps is one aspect of what Irigaray theorises in her essay *When Our Lips Speak Together* (1981).

The cover image of lips on Creed's book *The Monstrous Feminine* come to mind. The vertical lips suggested an entry way to the afterlife, in Rees' imagination, as she writes:

> the mouth of hell was depicted looking like a vagina (Rees, 2013, p.57).

I set off for Rome to discover more about the identities of unconventional women who were cast as the other for not conforming to social norms. From these narratives I was becoming aware of the connection between the British Indian female identity and the politics of her Brown body.

It is through *Killer Queen* that I speak out. She encompasses lips (mouth) and lips (cunt), a fantasy reminder of the potentially lethal qualities of the vagina, a myth rooted in the primal myth of the vagina dentata, as Rees reminds us:

> The human mouth has many meanings because it can do many things. It is associated with that other powerful bodily orifice, the vagina (Rees, 2014, p.51).

A general interpretation of the myth is that

> women are terrifying because they have teeth in their vaginas and that the woman must be tamed or the teeth somehow removed or softened […] before intercourse can safely take place (Creed, 1996, p.2).

Killer Queen, my artistic visualisation of Medusa is one interpretation of the vagina dentata, which gives voice and agency to the British Indian female identity. My intention was for her to be fearless, stunning, untameable and unashamedly sexual. The power I wanted her to wield through her stillness was intended to be hypnotic. Her lips are firmly shut.

My process is to create a brief in the form of a mind-map setting out my intentions for working in the studio (Fig.212). The Vagina Dentata brief would be my compass. I would compare the similarities between the western female identity and the eastern, their sexuality and their categorisation as women. The categories of mother, virgin and prostitute.

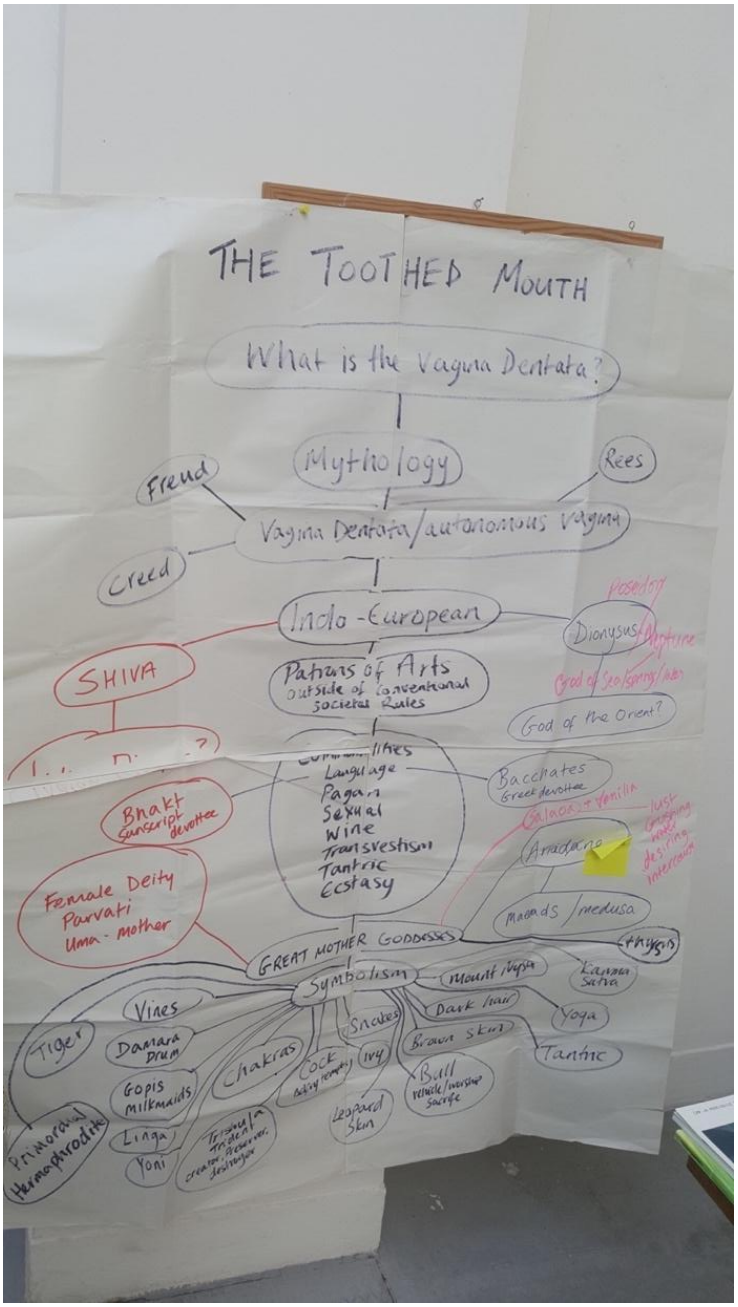


Fig.212 Vagina Dentata Mind Map – Studio at British School at Rome (2019).

At The British School at Rome 2019

Prior to travelling to Rome, in March 2019 I had asked my mother to contact my aunt in Lengheri in the Punjab for materials. On her next visit to local markets and to Delhi my aunt purchased over one hundred Indian hair extensions (prandhi) and packets of various sizes of red bindis (kum

kum). The items were posted duly to England, where they spent two months in customs awaiting export fees. I finally received the items after my interview for the residency and it was then that I realised the materials should travel to Italy. At that time I had no conscious thought of how they would be utilised.



Fig.207. Remi Rana Allen. *Killer Queen* (2019). Stone, Indian hair extensions, tape, bindi, thread, wire 70 x 80 x 65cm. Installation.

Rome was amid a heatwave. On arrival at the British School at Rome, I was shown to my studio and accommodation. I had more space than I had imagined. The first evening was spent meeting the other residents, artists, curators, writers, architects and researchers. The following morning, I explored the buildings and was guided around the library. The intensity of the heat in the building was distracting, until I found the basement, where an area housed the books on mythology. I spent many hours sitting on the floor reading the books and making notes. It was through the books that I learned of the Vestal Virgins.[204]

My research also identified the similarities of female categorisation and identity between various cultures. The Italian matriarch, the virgin and the hedonistic female, like the Indian matriarch, the dutiful daughter and the 'loose' woman. It felt to me that the eastern woman was aligning with the western through the stereotypical labelling of her identity. The similarities in the classifications of the female identity would begin to present at least one solution to my mantra "I think in English, I appear Indian". I have presented as western in mind and eastern in appearance, or as some residents of the BSR commented on my appearance that I could be from Southern Italy. Or was it,

> If you're brown, it's hard to deprogram yourself from thinking […] Am I too dark? If I get darker, will I lose my social position? If I avoid the sun forever, will I pass for white or at least southern European? Brown people can turn their in-between skin

[204] Staples, A. (1998) *Good Goddess to Vestal Virgin. Sex and Category in Roman Religion*.

Wildfang Lorsch, R. (2006) *Rome's Vestal Virgins. A study of Rome's Vestal priestesses in the late Republic and early Empire*.

Goodison, L. (1989) *Death, Women and the Sun*.

into a back door to Europeanness and whiteness. They just need to stick to the very southern parts of the continent (Al-Solaylee, 2016, p.8).

Was I passing as western in appearance and mind too?

Making *Ika Kilo* (2019)

Three days passed at the BSR as I acquainted myself with the environment, I began to deconstruct the red hair extensions, so they doubled in quantity (Fig.208). Simultaneously I worked with the gold hair extensions (Fig.209), laying them on the floor to represent a sun, constantly rearranging them and still feeling unsatisfied. These materials were difficult to work with, and I felt that they had no intention of cooperating with my creativity. Taking a step back from the materials in the heat of the mid-day sun, I recalled memories of my childhood, where Indian women would meet for singing and dancing both at their homes and in community centres or school halls for pre-marital celebrations.



Fig.208. Deconstructing red prandhis – Studio at British School at Rome (2019).



Fig.209. Gold prandhis forming a sun – Studio at British School at Rome (2019).

One specific memory stood out: Ika Kilo (One Kilo), as children we were not allowed to mention this at home. Remembering my parents looks and slight embarrassment if we started to sing the words “ika kilo, ika kilo”. We would attend many functions leading up to a wedding and at the age of five my mother took us to an all-female event. These were usually held in the home of the bride or the groom, but this time the event was held in what seemed a cold dark community centre. The kitchen area was a hive of activity as the women gathered around cooking samosas, bhajia[205] and other Indian snacks. There was a large canteen of hot water for the chai and pots filled with vegetarian and meat curries. At the stove two women rolled out the rotis[206] and cooked them on the thava[207].

[205] Deep fried batter coated vegetables.

[206] Unleavened flatbread.

[207] Black slate for cooking roti.

I do not remember where the men were whilst the women were cooking, but I do remember them turning up later to eat the food. Folding stackable tables were laid out in the main hall with paper tablecloths and plastic cups. Bottles of coke and cups for chai, the alcohol would appear later when the men arrived. Johnny Walker Black label was a symbol of wealth, as was owning a Mercedes amongst the men. Through the serving hatch I could see stacked thali plates ready for serving the food. Before the eating commenced and before the men arrived, some of the women started to giggle and become excited. There was going to be a surprise in one of the adjoining rooms. The women congregated in a circle, wearing salwar kameez and with their chunnis wrapped round their necks, they started to sing traditional songs in punjabi. They clapped and danced around in the circle, every so often one of them was nominated to take centre stage and perform a solo from the song, as the others would join in on the chorus. This group of women were mostly from Kenya, they had retained their community connections upon arriving in England during the early to mid 1960s. The songs they sang had been passed down from generations, these songs were not documented, and I realise now that they will die out with the passing of my mother's generation. At one point a male figure appeared at the door, dressed in an old jacket, baggy trousers and a lopsided turban. He stroked his beard as he eyed his female company. The women turned their attention on him and coaxed him into the circle. They teased him with their lyrics, and he would casually reply in a gruff voice. One of my aunts stepped forward to tease him further and he started to chase her around. At this point she removed her chunni and placed it between her legs imitating a lingam[208], which to the women's delight would weigh an ika kilo (one kilo). They continued chanting "ika kilo,

[208] Phallus.

ika kilo" The women laughed loudly whilst singing and this would continue until the old man was chased away.

It would be a few years later when I would be at another of these 'hen' nights that I would see my grandmother dressing up in my grandfather's clothes, applying a false black beard and wrapping her turban. She was the old male figure who taunted and teased the women. The women all knew what this performance involved, and the sexual nature of the songs and dancing. Away from the men they performed openly and without shame, what to them must have been taboo in male company. Through song and dance they created an evening where they felt empowered and autonomous. These women had the audacity to belittle the aged Indian 'male' figure through humour associated with the male ego.

Making connections between east and west through mythology

The Ika Kilo dance and song is more complex, my proposal for the residency in Rome had included the overlaps in the stories and connections that I made between the mythological gods Dionysus and Shiva. The Indo-European connection between the two is that Dionysus, sometimes known as the God of the Orient, or by the Romans as Bacchus (Greco-Roman God of wine and fertility), and Shiva as the Indian Dionysus. The similarities between them have included: "wine, ecstasy, the bull, snakes, the mountains, nocturnal rites with drums and dancing, frenzied women, fertility, the imposition of an alien cult upon established orthodoxy." (Doniger O'Flaherty. 1980, p.81) The two have been characterised in literature and art as bull, lion/tiger and snake, Dionysus' triple identity. "Shiva is the god particularly regarded as the god of animals […] riding on a bull, wearing a tiger skin and being draped in snakes." (Doniger O'Flaherty. 1980, p.105) These two

gods, outside of the conventional norms of society, can be viewed as the other. Or as Spector writes

> This god of paradox and extremes, of passion and masks, of ecstatic joy and terrifying destructiveness, of tragic drama and of madness—is, in our culture of Apollonian reason and technological control, another image of the Other (Spector, 2006, p.36).

For me, the memory of Ika Kilo has associations with the maenads, the followers of the Greek god Dionysus, who comes from barbarian Asia, escorted by a band of wild Asian women (Segal, 1978, p.186).

My foci were the ‘frenzied women’, the ‘raving ones’, the ‘mad women’ also known as maenads or hedonistic women. In a state of intoxication, the women would frenziedly dance, entering a state of ecstatic abandon. This sisterhood of outcasts was feared by patriarchy for their wildness and secret women only rituals.

Female empowerment through performance and rituals

Had the men made an appearance while my female relatives were dancing, they would have called the women ‘mad’ for their behaviour. But in the safety of their female-only space, the women performed what could be equated to a ritual, celebrating their sexuality – like the maenads who performed “ecstatic rites on the wild mountainside […] at night.” (Segal, 1978, p.186).

My grandmother, in her role as a male character, displays fear at being surrounded by so many women, perhaps afraid of them grabbing him and “tearing him apart” as the maenads did to Pentheus.[209] The irony, of Pentheus dressed as a female to witness the women performing, and my grandmother dressed as a male to partake in the performance, is comical.

The most significant interpretation I make of Ika Kilo, is that of freedom. The freedom the women felt when performing *Ika Kilo* has a direct correlation to the maenads. The Indian women were singing loudly, inciting each other on, building towards a euphoric state, in my view, like the mythological women who performed manic dances to loud music, inciting each other to a greater euphoria. “…'maenadism' is not a permanent state of being but a temporary experience. In their madness maenads […] abandon their homes and their children […] But the behaviour of these women who have been driven mad by Dionysus is a deviation. In the end they return to their former lives or become something else (Hedreen, 1994, p.50).

The women in my family, in my young eyes, were for that moment released from their daily duties, restrictions and patriarchy to celebrate their shared womanhood and their united freedom, akin to the description of the maenads. As Segal states, Pentheus could not

[209] King Pentheus murdered by the maenads for banning the worship of Dionysus/Bacchus.

Pentheus' resistance to Dionysus and his violent assertion of sexual differentiation suddenly gives way to the willingness to be dressed as a Maenad himself, a total confusion of the boundaries of the self and of sexual identities once the god releases his repressed desire to see the Maenads. The final destruction of Pentheus also involves both an inversion of sexual values and a destruction of gates. When he has been torn apart by his mother, Agave, a huntress and a warrior both, she, as leader of the Maenad band. (Segal. 1978, p.196).

> …tolerate the possibility that women, bearers and symbols of free sexual instincts and uncontrolled emotion, should run around free or, quite literally, "loose" […] he would shut away in the workrooms of his palace the Maenads who would run freely on the mountains. In the parade they sang a joyful ode on leaving "the looms and shuttles"." (Segal, 1978, p.193).

Ika Kilo (2019) the artwork (Fig.210) and the memory unite the areas of gender, race, religion[210], sex, patriarchy and motherhood. The minimal use of the Indian hair extensions symbolised these areas. The extensions worn by South Asian women (race), long uncut hair a symbol of Sikhism (religion), the phallic visual presentation of the hair extensions (sex) and the breaking of taboo subjects enforced by men (patriarchy) and lastly the hair extensions worn by the Indian bride who once married is expected to become a mother (motherhood). Through their performance the women have politicised their lives and bodies. The chunni, the sacred symbol of respect, appears here as a phallic symbol, unlike the metaphorical folds of the vagina in *10cm Holes* (2017-18).

In their performance, the women have integrated themes of religion, male dominance and sexual desire. The complexity of the chunni in the performance, this symbol of subservience in male company has emerged to defy its essentialism. The chunni appears as a dominating force, absurdly as the phallic object, the symbol of freedom from the oppression of Indian patriarchy. In Ika Kilo, my grandmother, dressed as a male, is the only character without the chunni. The other

[210] Socialization, then, can keep the female nature under control [...] which is still insisted upon in those honour and shame cultures which include modern Greece as well as other areas, both Christian and Moslem, bordering on the Mediterranean, and which, even now, justify the control and segregation of women on precisely the same terms. (Zeitlin. 1982, p.136).

women have adopted the chunni as phallus between their legs. Was this a form of defiance to remove or cut off what they saw as the only ‘male’ ego in the room? By luring ‘him’ into the circle, to then chase him out with the lunging chunni?

I find a connection of my grandmother’s character, to that of Shiva, who is castrated in many stories. “…he teaches them to worship him in the form of a phallus, the linga. Their acceptance of Shiva as Lord of Beasts and Lord of the Phallus is an acknowledgment of their own nature as animals, subject to lust like all animals…” (Doniger O’Flaherty. 1980, p.28). The women were freely exhibiting their sexuality without interruption by the male gaze, and it is possible that my grandmother was playing the part of Shiva, as she “excites the women and infuriates their husbands” (Doniger O’Flaherty. 1980, p.24). This was a performance that would have infuriated the men had they witnessed the singing and dancing. Perhaps this is why these performances are carried out without the presence of men. The chunni had initially been coiled around the women’s necks, and at the end of the dance, had become symbolic of a phallus or serpent as the women danced in a circle: these are symbols for the male and female, the phallus and vagina. My grandmother, female, performed as male.

I interpret this exhibition to indicate something of the nature of their sexuality – they were British Indian Kenyan Sikh women, grandmothers, mothers, daughters with needs and desires. They may not have been able to openly express their desires in public. Perhaps this can be realised by me as the British Indian female artist, which would answer one of my research questions that my art practice can unearth and piece together the constituting factors in the development of the British Indian female identity amongst the women in my family.

Visually representing the women's sexual desires

This memory reaffirmed my desire to expose the Indian woman's sexuality among the women in my family. To break down the stereotyping and reposition her in a space where she stands proud, defiant and unashamed of who she is.

I had struggled for three weeks with the gold hair extensions; they remained laid out on the floor in a circle. The day before the *Portico Show*, feeling frustrated, I grabbed the black woollen extensions and started to tightly coil gold thread around them. The hair morphed into what resembled a phallus, Fig.211. I laid it back onto the floor and brushed straight the flared golden ends, which swung and danced when the piece was hung, they seemed to resemble a 'lengha', skirts worn by Indian women at social functions and weddings.

Working on *Ika Kilo* and *Killer Queen* prompted thoughts about the possibility of how a dance, a song or tale can highlight the fragility of memory. Had I not recalled the *Ika Kilo* memory at that specific time, the connection between the memory and how it triggered my creativity regarding the sexuality of the British Indian women in my family would not have happened. If the women had not sung and danced from their memory, their hidden sexuality would not have been visible to me.

My memory of these Indian women is of their happiness and excitement. I emphasise with their Indianness as they spoke only in Punjabi when together, they dressed in non-western clothes, cooked Indian food and watched Bollywood films. These were the elements that defined their being as Indian, as seen through the eyes of a child in 1974. They were not English, but they were British. Having migrated to the UK and experienced racism in the 1970s when tensions were

heightened by the political agenda of Thatcherism, the overt racist attitudes in society at the time, rejected their claims to Britishness, perhaps why, as a child, thought of them as Indian.

The memory is significant in unlocking the invisibility of the British Indian woman, her mind, her body and desire. I question if it could be possible that even as early as the 1960s and 1970s as a community of first-generation migrants these women were altering their mindset from what they had known in Kenya where they had performed these songs and dances behind closed familial doors.

Now, in the west, they were bringing what was formerly a private act into a public space. Their thinking and behaviour further adjusted to Britishness. In the process, therefore, formulating the start of an evolving hybrid identity? If this is true, then it is the migrant generation that opened the door to the forging of a British Indian female identity amongst the women in my family, rather than myself as a second-generation British Indian woman. Although from my experience, I believe it will be my generation that will push that door open wider, allowing British Indian women to vocally emerge, marking the existence and presence of what it is to be an Indian woman within British society today.[211]

[211] "We are grappling with many of the same problems and conditions in similar ways. In other ways our solutions are different. Take the issue of how we name ourselves, for example. In the United States, Black means of African heritage and we use the term Women of Colour to include Native American, Latina, Asian-American women. I understand that here, Black is a political term which includes all oppressed ethnic groups, and the term Women of Colour is frowned upon. (Parmar and Kay. 1988, p.37).



Fig.210. Remi Rana Allen. *Ika Kilo* (2019). *Portico Show*. British School at Rome. Installation (2019).



Fig.211. Remi Rana Allen. *Ika Kilo* (2019) detail, *HOLES* exhibition. The Triangle Gallery, Chelsea. Photographer Henri Affandi. Installation (2019).

The connection between Chachiji and the maenads

What I find fascinating are the connections made between the British Indian Kenyan Sikh women of my family and the rituals of the maenads. There are some alliances, the next citation I associate specifically with the narrative of Chachiji and in relation to *Killer Queen*.

> Dionysiac rites function both as a reversal of normal social roles (abandonment of house and children, aggression, masculine behaviour in hunt and war, etc.) and as a confirmation of women's innate nature. A comparison between the wandering womb which was believed to be the cause of hysteria and the wandering Maenad. (Zeitlin, 1982, p.134).

Chachiji had been accused of being a hysterical woman, portrayed as a woman who had developed a mental illness due to her ‘infertility’; however, as it later transpired, it was not Chachiji that was infertile.

> …this animal nature that wanders on the mountains, tears creatures apart and eats them raw constitutes the cultural view of the essence of the female at the mercy of her sexuality and the demands of her womb, […] The female can only be controlled through irrigation of the womb by male semen to keep it moist and solid and by pregnancy which anchors it in place […] In social terms, read stability only through the control exercised by men, and in patriarchal marriage, through the production of legitimate children, especially sons (Zeitlin, 1982, p.135).

It is with the ‘control exercised by men’ and ‘patriarchal marriage’ in mind, that I equate the narrative of Chachiji to the creation of *Killer Queen*. Although unproven, accusations of her infidelity, infertility and mental health were grounds for the patriarchy to imprison this woman whose only ‘crime’ was to defend her sexuality. Chachiji represented an unsafe woman, one who needed taming, and hence her imprisonment.

The title of my artwork was realised on a flight home from Dubai in August 2019. I watched the film *Bohemian Rhapsody* the similarities between my own British childhood and that of the main character, Freddie Mercury, hit a nerve. I could identify with the racial experiences. The first single released by Queen, Killer Queen, played on repeat in my head. Having completed the artwork a month before, it felt natural that I should name my medusa *Killer Queen*.

Making *Killer Queen* (2019)

The making of *Killer Queen* (2019) started with sourcing a head. I asked the librarian and the receptionist if they knew where I might be able to purchase a life size female stone head. They must have had a chat, as the next day I was told that there was a stone head in the Director’s private garden (Fig.213). The solid stone head had been decapitated from the bust, and had originated as a sculpture of an Edwardian lady. Without the body the head was perfect. The librarian researched how it had been acquired. I was told that it had come from a graveyard not far from the BSR. With permission from the Director, I was allowed to remove the head from the garden. The head must have weighed over thirty-five kilos as I struggled to carry it to my studio, where it would be housed for the next three weeks. She rested on the desk, staring silently at me

as I considered the stories of Chachiji, Medusa and the Tantric Goddess Kali.[212] Who was she to be? The Indian Kenyan Sikh woman, the western mythological gorgon, or the eastern religious goddess? Surely, she had to be all three, creating a hybrid identity, an identity I am defined by. The next section will give a brief background of the characters Medusa and Kali, and their appearance in relation to the production of *Killer Queen*.



Fig.213. Stone female head found in Director's private garden. British School at Rome (2019).

The monstrous Medusa?

Medusa, one of three Gorgon sisters was born mortal and beautiful, the glory of her hair was praised,

[212] "The Sanskrit word *Tantra* refers to a type of instructional religious text, system or doctrine that originated around the 6th century CE in India. The name derives from the verbal root *tan*, meaning 'to weave', 'extend' or 'compose'; the wider tradition of Tantra 'wove' together various rituals and practices propounding *Tantrashastra* ('the teachings of the Tantras'), which were presented as the divine revelations of Gods and Goddesses." (Ramos. 2020, p.12).

> Athena transformed Medusa from woman to monster, changing her luxuriant long hair into a tangle of hissing snakes (Garber and Vickers, 2003, p.2).

I pick up the story at the moment when Medusa was raped and impregnated by Poseidon, in one of Athena's temples, a part of the story that is infrequently narrated.

She was very lovely once, the hope of many An envious suitor, and of all her beauties Her hair most beautiful—at least I heard so From one who claimed he had seen her. One day Neptune Found her and raped her, in Minerva's temple, And the goddess turned away, and hid her eyes Behind her shield, and, punishing the outrage As it deserved, she changed her hair to serpents, And even now, to frighten evil doers, She carries on her breastplate metal vipers To serve as awful warning of her vengeance (Garber and Vickers, 2003, p.2).[213]

Medusa's beauty was envied, and caused jealousy. After surviving rape by Neptune, Medusa was punished by Athena, who turned Medusa into a monster.

The Gorgons were often depicted as

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[213] The original text from Ovid, Book 4, *Perseus tells the story of Medusa*.

She was once most beautiful, and the jealous aspiration of many suitors. Of all her beauties none was more admired than her hair: I came across a man who recalled having seen her. They say that Neptune, lord of the seas, violated her in the temple of Minerva. Jupiter's daughter turned away and hid her chaste eyes behind her aegis. So that it might not go unpunished, she changed the Gorgon's hair to foul snakes. And now, to terrify her enemies, numbing them with fear, the goddess wears the snakes that she created, as a breastplate.
(https://ovid.lib.virginia.edu/trans/Metamorph4.htm#478205208 (Accessed: 2nd August 2023).

> …monsters with boar's tusks protruding on either side of wide leering jack-o'-lantern jaws, lolling tongues, and double wings, curved back upon themselves into sharp fins (Warner.,2000, p.108).

I had decided that it was not this version of Medusa that I would create as it presented both a horrific and grotesque representation of her (Fig.214).



Fig.214. The Head of Medusa. The Italian School. National Trust Kingston Lacy. Photo credit National Trust Images (17th Century) 21” x 17.5”. Public Domain Mark 1.0 available at: https://creativecommons.org/publicdomain/mark/1.0/deed.en Source/photographer available at: https://artuk.org/discover/artworks/the-head-of-the-medusa-100634

The grotesque Kali?

The visual representations of Kali can also be seen as grotesque, verging on a caricature, although this was not my intention with *Killer Queen*. My desire was to create an installation that would represent the black-haired, dark-skinned woman who was self-governing and relatable. According to Imma Ramos in *Tantra Enlightenment to Revolution*

> Orientalist scholars and Christian missionaries imagined India, as a subcontinent apparently corrupted by idolatry, black magic and sexual debauchery. This was embodied most vividly by the seemingly demonic and lascivious figure of the Tantric goddess Kali (Ramos, 2021, p174).

Her popularity gained momentum in the 18th century in Bengal, the heartland of Shaktism.[214]

> Kali was heralded as a ruthless yet compassionate Mother and protectress by Ramprasad Sen (c.1718-1175), a famous Bengali mystic and poet who popularised and transformed her into a benevolent and nurturing, simultaneously all powerful, object of devotion (Ramos, 2021, p.178).

[214] "**Shaktism**, worship of the Hindu goddess Shakti (Sanskrit: "Power" or "Energy"). Shaktism is, together with Vaishnavism and Shaivism, one of the major forms of modern Hinduism and is especially popular in Bengal and Assam. Shakti is conceived of either as the paramount goddess or as the consort of a male deity, generally Shiva." (Britannica.com).

Kali, also known as Kali Ma (Black Mother), is depicted as a black (sometimes blue) female figure, with long unruly hair, carrying the sword of knowledge and wearing a garland of severed heads – symbolising the death of the ego "through the transformative destruction of ignorance (Ramos, 2021, p.178). She has four arms and carries a decapitated head, and wears a girdle made of severed hands. Her hands and feet are coated in red - perhaps blood or kum kum, the red pigment worn on their feet by married Bengali women. The red dye is also used as a bindi, or in the centre parting of a woman's hair. Kum Kum can be seen applied to many ancient statues in India for blessings. Kali's eyes are frantically open wide and her large tongue protruding from her mouth (Figs.215 and 216).

Perhaps not surprisingly, Kali Ma "was reimagined by anti-colonial revolutionaries as an icon of Mother India rising to fight against her oppressors."[215] (Ramos, 2021, p.269). This re- imagining of Kali Ma as Mother India elevates her status to a political icon, incorporating geography and borders, and a fight for independence from white colonialism. Kali Ma, who also represents death and time, could be interpreted as the death of white colonial rule, and the time for a new autonomous era.

[215] Sutapa Biswas' iconic artwork *Housewives with Steak-Knives* also "Channels the goddess's power to challenge patriarchal structures." (Ramos. 2021, p.269).

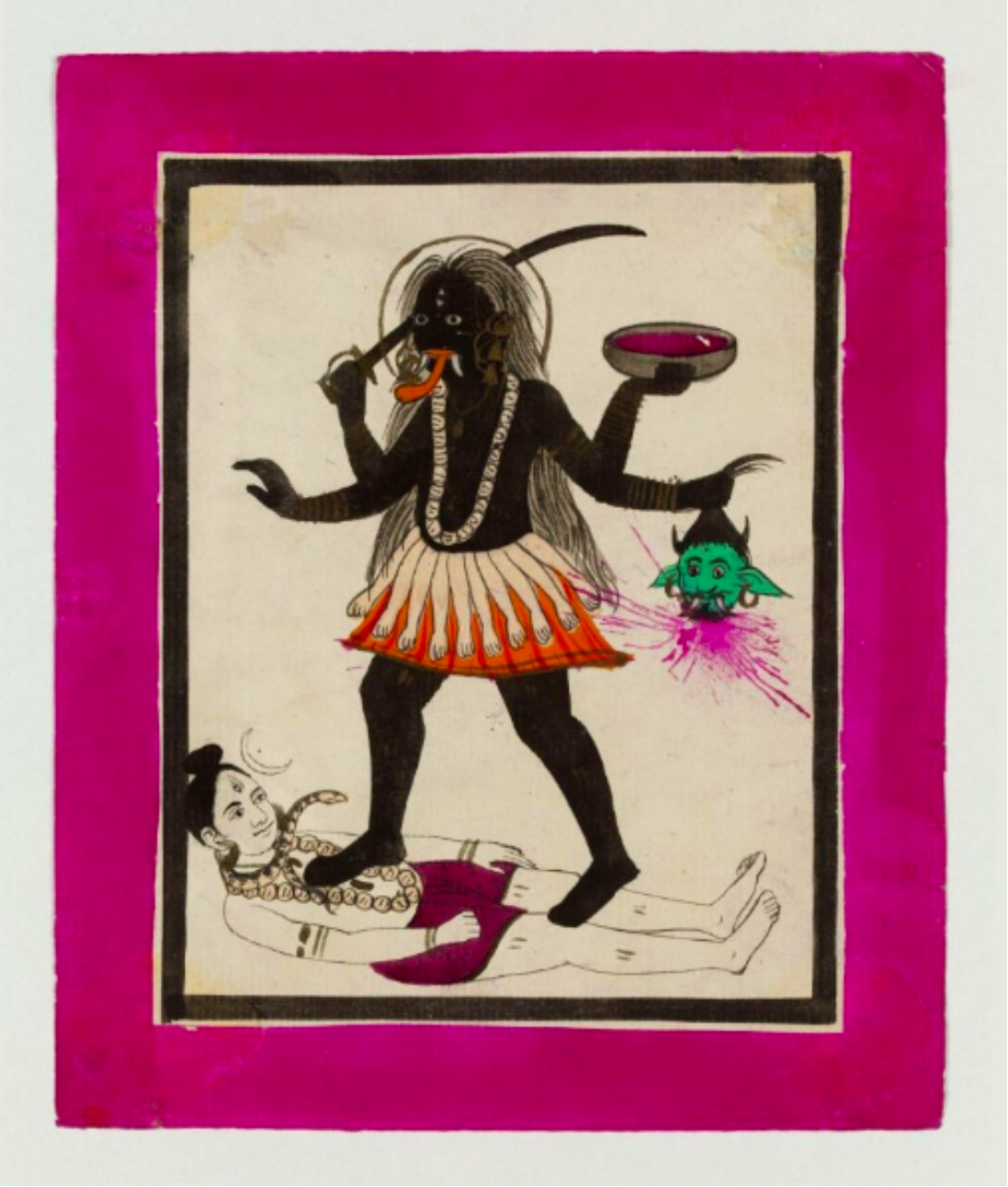


Fig.215. Kali dancing on Shiva. Drawing. Late 19th Century. Artist Unknown. Punjab. Brush drawing, in ink and colour wash on paper. V&A Collection.[216]

[216] Image can be accessed at: https://collections.vam.ac.uk/item/O70336/kali-dancing-on-shiva-drawing-unknown/



Fig.216. Kali and Shiva. Painting. C.1890. Artist Unknown. Kolkata. Watercolour and tin alloy on cardboard. 17” x 11”. V&A Collection.[217]

[217] Image can be accessed at: https://collections.vam.ac.uk/item/O72584/kali-and-shiva-painting-unknown/

The symbolism of women's hair in South Asian society

When I analysed Medusa and Kali's appearance, their hair took on significance, which prompted me to incorporate the red Indian hair extensions. They had been deconstructed and were resting on the large radiator in the studio.

I was unsure of how they would represent Medusa's coiled snake hairs, or Kali's untamed long black hair. For *Ika Kilo* the gold hair extensions had been bound by gold thread to form a lingam. For *Killer Queen* I wanted to retain the prandhi's essentialism, through the creation of a headdress.

The quality of Indian women's hair is revered in both the east and west. The respectable Indian woman has long dark hair (kesh)[218] that is combed (kangha)[219] neatly and nourished with coconut oil. The hair is usually plaited or bound into a tightly coiled bun at the back of her head. Unkempt hair is considered a sign of madness. As young girls, if we did not take care of our hair, my mother would say 'pagala lag diah' meaning 'you look mad.' Or that we would catch head lice, meaning that we were unclean.[220]

[218] Kesh meaning uncut hair, one of the five Ks symbol of Sikhism.

[219] Kangha meaning comb, one of the five Ks symbol of Sikhism.

[220] Hair plays a symbolic role too in signifying the society you adhere to, as Bartman maintains "The comment 'Control of hair by cutting, grooming, braiding, enclosing in a turban, or other means indicates an individual's participation in social structures within a publicly defined role and that individual's submission to social control,' while observed about South Asian cultures, also applies to ancient Rome." (Bartman. 2001, p.5).

As Ramos writes of Kali,

> …her unbound hair suggests dissolution and excess, in contrast with the hair of other goddesses, which is often braided, tied or neatly presented, symbolic of cosmic order." (Ramos, 2020, p.185).

Long dark hair among South Asians represents beauty, along with the misguided values of

> …light skin over dark skin and big eyes over small ones, long hair becomes another beauty standard […] The desire for long hair has roots that are centuries old, dating back to at least as early as the Harappan[221] civilisation (3300 to 1300 B.C). Since then, the length of one's hair has signified wealth, social class and religious affiliation – as well as served as a way to enforce certain social orders and gender norms (Kambhampaty, 2020, n.p).

Thick, long, lustrous hair is associated with male dominance, and it was thought that a man seeking a wife with thick long lustrous hair would make for

[221] Indus Valley Civilisation centre in Sindh and the Punjab (Wikipedia https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Harappa).

> …lifelong compliance in marriage […] There are several myths surrounding women's hair in the role of marriage, including that if a married woman cut her hair, she would risk harming her husband's health (Kambhampaty, 2020, n.p).

The Kama Sutra sexualises long dark hair, intertwining hair, sexuality and marriage. Hair becomes

> …the crucial aspect of sexual encounters […] dressing the hair with unguents and perfumes and braiding it" as an art to be studied. The Kama Sutra describes women's hair during sexual intercourse as being "loose and flowing," and instructs lovers to look for "good hair" among other things, including "…wealth, connections and a healthy body in marriage prospects. (Kambhampaty, 2020, n.p).

Faith also plays a part in South Asian women's relationship to hair. Two South Indian temples have been selling hair to hair traders, who,

> …collect the barrels every week. Many temples form contracts with traders, while others hold auctions, selling it to the highest bidder. Tirupati temple, the largest collector of human hair in the world - and also the most visited holy place in the world, with an average of 100,000 pilgrims per day - nets an average $3m (£2.1m) a year from this trade. The money is used for charitable work, schools and maintaining the temple grounds (Lang, 2016, n.p).

Indian women go on pilgrimage to offer their hair in exchange for a blessing or wish to be granted. Southern Indian temples sell the hair to Indian companies for export. The hair is generally bought online in bulk, bundles of raw hair via an e-auction site set up by the temples. Once the shipments are received, they are checked for grey hair and head lice, then washed and conditioned.

> From Hollywood to the UK to South Africa, the most widely used human hair is Indian, as its texture resembles Caucasian hair, which the hairdressing industry deems desirable (Lang, 2016, n.p).

I find it of interest that the indigenous Indian woman's hair travels from India to Africa and onwards to the UK: the same journey made by my maternal family.

Indian hair forms part of the "$58 million human hair export industry." (Toppa, 2021, n.p).

> Black women are 15 times more likely to get dismissed from work due to a hairstyle […] has led them to seek out weaves, wigs […] has helped sustain a thriving global human hair market […] Browsing any website for human hair […] a flood of results for "Indian remy hair." Which refers to a highly desirable category of cuticle-aligned hair from Indian hair donors. (Toppa, 2021, n.p).

The popularity of Indian hair according to a Black salon owner in Texas is that Indian hair works well with Black hair texture and is prized for its adaptability […] Indian hair can hold curls and

retain shine, as well as be bleached stark white, allowing it to achieve any colour (Toppa, 2021, n.p).

What is of interest to me is that so much ground is covered through the exchange of the hair in this instance. Race, gender, religion, sexuality, consumerism, capitalism, class, caste and migration. The importance of hair and its representations globally was becoming one of the central themes of *Killer Queen*. I had started with a desire to create a hybrid identity of east and west, an image of how I felt I presented. *Killer Queen* was becoming more nuanced, prompting me to think about how hair is racialised, and how it binds women together. I thought about brown and black women uniting over Indian hair. This becomes further significant through the lens of black feminisms who have politically incorporated the brown feminist too.[222] I do however feel that my practice and research on the construction of the British Indian female identity amongst the women in my family and the impact of the maternal has led me to understand that a brown woman's identity can be celebrated.

The prandhi

The prandhi[223] is my symbolic representation of hair and the serpent, but also the prandhi, a woollen hair extension used in the celebration of the hybrid female identity.[224] Perhaps this could be interpreted as my British Indian identity, constructed by the migration of my matrilineal heritage.

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[222] Southall Black Sisters are an example of an organisation identifying under the political Black feminist umbrella, aiding all Black, Brown and minoritized women facing violence in the UK. Pragna Patel the founding member 1979.

[223] Other contemporary British Indian female artists utilising representations of hair in their artworks include: Madi Acharya Baskerville. *I wish my hair was as long as yours* (2020). Sheela Gowda. *Behold* (2009). Roo Dhissou. *Naagni* (2021).

[224] The prandhi is a celebratory adornment worn by some South Asian women on their wedding day.

My family's journey, ironically, traced through the narrative of the Indian hair industry, which I traced in reverse from the UK to Africa to India. The UK is my starting point as it is my home, and I am British Indian, before moving onwards to Kenya, my maternal migratory home, and finally to India the home of my cultural heritage as a Punjabi Sikh woman.

Making the artwork in the studio

I now move back to the studio where the deconstructed red hair extensions were reconstructed into writhing snake-like structures. In a workshop at the BSR, I found heavy duty steel wire which I cut into 30 cm lengths. I had transported my 10cm steel rings, a material used for *10cm Holes* and *The Golden Temple* symbolising the cervix. Interestingly, on occasion when *The Golden Temple* has been exhibited, viewers have made the connection between the threads and their hairlike quality, the golden fine hair of the blond child or indeed the white, blond woman, or perhaps Goldilocks, (Fig.217). Although not my intention when making the artwork, I now wonder if *The Golden Temple* could also be a representation of Pieta, as Adrienne Rich described.[225] Or even the image of the good white western self as opposed to the dark-skinned black-haired woman. These are thoughts that require further unpacking, but for the purposes of this chapter, I concentrate on the Indian woman and her relationship to hair.

The prandhis were tightly coiled around the steel rings and covered the lengths of wire. The wire was wound and secured around the steel rings using a pair of pliers. I worked on the headdress consistently, having to adjust the wire around the rings many times. The problem was trying to get

[225] Note to reader, at this stage I am writing up my Thesis, therefore in compliance with the Research Degrees Handbook I am unable to investigate new ideas or research for my PhD.

the wire to extend up and out whilst staying in place, this was only successful if the end was tightened and the wool wound and knotted around the ring. Fig.218 and 219.



Fig.217. Remi Rana Allen. *The Golden Temple* (2017-19). The Festival of Quilts, NEC Birmingham. Photographer Uthra Rajgopal (2021).

Fifty ‘snakes’ were created using this technique. Roughly two or three snakes wrapped around each ring and twenty rings in total. The beautiful extensions consisted of golden beads forming a loop, within the loop were circular mirrors. The beaded mirrors were completed with fine red thread tassels. The mirrors reflect and fragment the gaze of the viewer, this I thought was in keeping with Perseus’ shield reflecting the image of Medusa,

Nevertheless, he had himself looked at the dread form of Medusa reflected in a circular shield of polished bronze that he carried on his left arm. And while a deep sleep held the snakes and herself, he struck her head from her neck (Kline, 2000, n.p).

On closer inspection of the mirrors, I realised some of them were covered in typography. In English, the text read “IN THE. AS THE” (Fig.220). These four words form part of a larger text which had been excluded. At the timeI discovered the typography, I had been reading Audre Lorde’s poem *From the House of Yemanjá,* a poem Lorde wrote in 1978. The poem spoke candidly of her relationship with her mother, her own dual identity and the racist white society she inhabited. The words written on the mirrors and Lorde’s poem resonated with me. I had a strained relationship with my mother, and Lorde calls for “Yemanja, the mother of all other gods in Yoruba mythology” spoke to me. Lorde invokes Yemanja to come to the rescue of women”[226] (Sipyinyu, 2004, n.p). I understood this, because I had experienced the pull to return to my faith.

[226] “Radical feminists look outside Christianity for religious inspiration, as for them, Christianity is as oppressive as any other institution constructed by patriarchy. Lorde identifies with these radicals. As feminist radicals, they research into ancient cultures which provide plentiful evidence of goddess worship and a possible correlation between female deities and matriarchy. Although many radical feminists do not insist on the actual existence of a Golden Age of Matriarchy, they use any evidence of female power to create new potent symbols. In most cases the goddess serves not as an object of worship, but rather as an affirmation of feminine power, being an incarnation of the female body and of the concept of women’s solidarity.” (Sipyinyu. 2004, n.p).

The following is where I correlate the text on the mirrors of the prandhis to Lorde's poem, [227]

I bear two women upon my back

one dark and rich and hidden

in the ivory hungers of the other

mother

pale as a witch

yet steady and familiar

brings me bread and terror

in my sleep

her breasts are huge exciting anchors

in the midnight storm.[228]

mother I need your blackness now

as the august earth needs rain.[229]

This seminal poem hit a nerve; it speaks of Lorde's struggle with her bi-racial identity, patriarchy, Christianity, sexuality and a place to call home without being 'othered'. Lorde, known as a "mytho-

[227] Full poem https://www.poetryfoundation.org/poems/42578/from-the-house-of-yemanja Accessed: 1st December 2021.

[228] Emphasis is mine.

[229] Emphasis is mine.

poet" became very relevant to me, and how I was processing the importance of mythology, the goddess figure and the maternal.

Celebrating blackness is one of the themes Lorde handles well in "*From the House of Yemanja*". Beginning from her own family in which her mother's forlorn desire for whiteness and her father's blackness was an issue of constant anxiety, Lorde says that she was black and therefore not her mother's favorite. Her mother, "[…] hid out a perfect daughter/who was not me"[10]. Lorde then beseeches the goddess Yemanja, mother of all other gods and goddesses, to give her the glory and pride of being black […] Because she has a spiritual likeness with the goddess Yemanja, she can be proud of her heritage and not dream of whiteness as her mother did. (Sip Yinyu, 2004, n.p).

I re-read the words on the circular mirrors and "IN THE, AS THE"; perhaps I could re-interpret the unfinished sentence to "IN THE NOW, AS THE NEW" a spiritual interpretation or a blessing of *Killer Queen*, my re-presentation of the mythical Medusa, the goddess Kali and the maternal. The evolving female form of the monstrous 'other' transgressing into a woman formed or informed by a contemporary Indo-European hybrid identity.



Fig.218. Making the headdress – studio British School at Rome (2019).



Fig.219. Making the headdress – studio British School at Rome (2019).



Fig.220. Detail of Prandhi – studio British School at Rome (2019).

Hair and the Vestal Virgins

The headdress felt incomplete as there was no visual reference to guide me in recreating a representation of European hair. This was when I discovered the hairstyle worn by the Vestal Virgins in ancient Rome. The vestal virgins were six priestesses chosen by the chief priest to represent the daughters of the royal house. They tended the cult of Vesta, the Goddess of the hearth. They lived near the Temple of Vesta, and were required to remain chaste virgins. Their duties included tending the fire in the temple of Vesta, preparing food, and fetching water from the sacred spring. They were also required to officiate at the Vestalia ceremony, the public worship of Vesta, held between the 7th and 15th June. If they broke the rules, they were beaten, and if they did not uphold their vow of chastity, they were buried alive - the blood of a vestal virgin was not to be spilt.

The requirements for a vestal virgin were to be from respected parentage who were freeborn, alive and without physical or mental defects. Usually, the Vestal Virgins were chosen when they were between the age of six and ten, and they served for thirty years. Once their term was over, they were free to marry whoever they chose. Unlike other married or single women of the same social status, they were emancipated from paternal rule and empowered with the right to own and manage property.



Fig.221. Marble head from a portrait statue of a veiled priestess of the goddess Vesta, Roman Empire, British Museum. Carole Raddato from FRANKFURT, Germany, CC BY-SA 2.0.[230] Fig.222. Portrait of Plautillia. Jamie Heath. CC BY-SA 2.0.[231]

[230] Available at https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:Marble_head_from_a_portrait_statue_of_a_veiled_priestess_of_the_goddess_Vesta,_Roman_Empire,_British_Museum_(14289538566).jpg (Accessed: 04.09.2023).

[231] Available at https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:Portrait_of_Plautilla_(49345462162).jpg (Accessed: 04.09.2023).

Some commentators have reported that the vestal virgins cut their hair when ordained as a symbol of their chastity. On the Severan Temple of Vesta in Florence, there is a depiction of "The Lotus tree on the left [which] represents the tree on which the young initiate Vestals draped their newly cut hair." (Lindner, 2015, p.13). They wore their short hair in six braids (there was a seventh braid that was made up of the remaining hair at the nape) coiled with woollen thread around the parted hair.

> There is no doubt that the Vestals wore religious vestments, cloaks wrapped on top of traditional stolae, depicted to lend dignity to the occasion, which also demanded that they adorn their hair in the familiar sex crimes[232] style and that they secure it with linen vittae or headbands, which were powerful symbols of purity, of religious devotion, and of faithful execution of solemn vows. (McElroy, 2016, pp.22-23).

As Lindner describes the hairstyle of the Vestal Virgins,

The infulae are narrow, long strands of wool that were wrapped around the head in parallel rows, covering the Vestal's braided hair. The infulae connected at the nape of the neck to the vittae […] Virgil and Ovid[233] described the vittae as a ribbon or band worn by all freeborn women to confine the hair and to distinguish them from women of low birth or low morals – freed women, slaves and prostitutes. (Lindner, 2015, pp.100-101). (Fig.221).

[232]Sex crines also known as seni crines translation six braids.

[233] Virgil and Ovid poets during The Golden Age of Rome.

Fig.222 is an example of how the hair was parted and braided. In addition to the above descriptions of the Vestal Virgins' hairstyles there was the infula

> …white, woollen bands coiled around her head, and the vittae, which were attached to the infula and fall down the shoulders of the Vestals in strands or loops. Since this headdress is visible on every Vestal portrait in some form, its existence is clearly a symbol of their chastity, sacred status, and rank within the order. The headdress represents her identity as a Vestal in good standing. A Vestal found guilty of incestum is stripped of her infula and vitae before receiving her punishment, therefore signifying her loss of priestly status. Similarly, a Vestal who retires from service after thirty years is expected to remove her insignia. […] Servius[234] describes the infula and vittae as "a band similar to a diadem, from which ribbons hang down on either side; most are broad and twisted [and in color they are] red and white' Schenck, 2015, p.75).

I knew very little about the Vestal Virgins before travelling to Rome. It felt serendipitous that I had packed red and white woollen textiles. I started to weave and coil the thick threads into braids resembling those of the Vestal Virgins. These braids were placed among the pre-made snake-like forms of the headdress, almost completing its making.[235] (Fig.223).

[234] Servius Roman poet, grammarian and commentator.

[235] In Greek and Roman mythology, the snake represents good fortune, rebirth, healing, protection and guardian deities that protect the home or temple. The etymology for Medusa is 'guardian' to protect.



Fig.223. Vestal Virgin hairstyle placed among the ‘snakes’ – studio British School at Rome (2019).

My relationship with the stone head

I returned to the stone head, who had watched the making of the headdress. The head was old, weather beaten, and there was moss and dirt in the crevices of the sculpture. Fig.224.

The dark grey head was obviously not a brown woman’s head. However, this was not an issue, what was important was that I had located a life size female stone head for my sculpture.



Fig.224. Stone head – studio British School at Rome (2019).

The head had an authenticity and an unknown history, perhaps even secrets that were not to be shared. I did not name the head when it sat on the desk, but I referred to it as ‘she’. She became an important companion in the studio, and I would talk to her as I made the artwork at night. As I

walked around the studio, I could feel her gaze follow me. There was a strange atmosphere in the studio since she had arrived, it was to do with her silence and her ever watchful eyes. She was having a visceral effect on me; her presence was unnerving, and I was starting to feel vulnerable in her company. Or was I being paranoid?

Perhaps it was her history, she had originated from the graveyard, who did she represent? Perhaps I should have brought the bust into the studio too, the head without body was unsettling. I had inadvertently re-enacted Perseus' actions of removing the head from the body. I wondered if the narratives of Medusa, Kali and Chachiji were causing this reaction to her. These stories conflate, forming a hybridity of the mythology, the goddess and the human.

'She' had begun to control my feelings and emotions when I was around her, I felt fear, trepidation and anxiety. I had decided to leave the small desk lamp on at night. I would go up to my bedroom which was on a mezzanine, from there I was able to look down on her, watching her as she had watched me earlier. This became disconcerting, so one evening I searched for the roll of red tape. Tearing off a piece of tape I gently applied it to her eyes. The all seeing, all knowing 'she' had been blinded. I could now gaze at her with ease. Even with her eyes taped she cunningly wears Kali's third eye, the red bindi. She wards off evil spirits and gazes intuitively at the viewer. For me she also embodies Shakti[236] and rules with divine feminine power.

I believed that by applying the red tape I could conceal elements of Medusa's myth, and what she had endured - the sexual violence, jealousy of her beauty, male dominance and her subsequent

[236] Shakti in Hinduism is a cosmic energy representing divine feminine power.

killer gaze. My initial intentions for using the red tape were related to Poseidon's rape of Medusa, the tape represented sadomasochistic non-consensual sex, bondage and discipline. But for now, I had applied the tape so that I could make it without her watchful gaze, but also, so I felt protected from the feelings she had evoked. Strangely the application of the tape elicited a protective urge towards her, I became the protector of the guardian goddess of protection. I did not want her to be harmed by a male gaze viewing her reflected image, as Magalhães writes,

> there was a shared culture that tried to prevent visual contact between men and women […] Women should be shielded from the masculine gaze, either by the walls of the house, the thickness of their garments, or just the social conception that separated the two genders (Magalhães, 2020, p.93).

In ancient Greece it was acceptable to gaze at a woman of a lower social status or a prostitute. As Magalhães (2020) further states,

> There was a deeply rooted connection between eyes, erotism and sexual desire […] Not only purely mythical accounts but also narratives claiming historicity show that whoever transgresses those visual barriers always suffers a harsh punishment. There is a rape analogy in this action: a sexual intention, perpetrated through the eyes without the other person's consent. (Magalhães, 2020, p.94)

Perhaps I was protecting *Killer Queen* by applying the tape, she was not able to meet the male gaze literally with her eyes, but her third eye was defiantly unconforming to the patriarchal societal rules.[237]

According to the myth, Perseus, Medusa's slayer, guided his way backwards to her through the reflection on Athena's bronze shield. The small circular mirrors on *Killer Queen's* headdress pay lip service to her myth. Interestingly on closer inspection of *Killer Queen's* 'snaked' hair, the viewer stops seeing her when looking into the mirrors, but views their own fragmented reflection, their own gaze. Was there a subliminal element in the making? As Cixous writes,

> Too bad for them if they fall apart upon discovering that women aren't men, or that the mother doesn't have one. But isn't this fear convenient for them? Wouldn't the worst be, isn't the worst, in truth, that women aren't castrated, that they have only to stop listening to the Sirens (for the Sirens were men) for history to change its meaning? You only have to look at the Medusa straight on to see her. And she's not deadly. She's beautiful and she's laughing (Cixous, 1976, p.885).

The empowerment of women through the re-presentation of Medusa

From the very beginning, it was my aim to create a re-presented image of Medusa. I did not want to fall into the trap of constructing a Medusa that identified with the male storytelling of the myth. That narrative served to strike fear into women, and serves as a reminder to women of the harms

[237] "When a woman was seen by a man, she should blush and lower her gaze." (Magalhães, 2020, p.43).

that could befall them should they resist male control. If women rejected the male version of the myth, they would not allow themselves to be repressed. Instead, if they conversed with each other, they would expose the fallacy of the myth, and would feel self-empowered in the realisation that the beautiful Medusa was laughing in the face of patriarchal control.

There is a connection here with Lorde and her poem *From the House of Yemanja* (Lorde, 1997)[238] through the rejection of the systems of patriarchal or matriarchal subjugation, which for Lorde maps a road to female self-empowerment. This is a significant connection in my exploration into the construction of the British Indian female identity of women in my family, and my contemporary British Indian identity, and how the maternal has impacted.

According to Rees,

> Freud thought that Medusa, with her hair made of coiling serpents, was the epitome of the fetish-object. She was the terrible made visible; her writhing, serpentine hair was the observable manifestation of her hidden genitals (Rees, 2013, p.59).

Medusa is depicted as a predatory sexual being,

[238] Poemhunter.com. 2012, *The World's Poetry Archive*, accessed: 09.05.2025 https://www.poemhunter.com/i/ebooks/pdf/audre_lorde_2012_3.pdf

> …the CUNT is the place where deception and betrayal transpire" (Wajnryb (2005), cited in Rees, 2013, p.59). Medusa represents a nasty version of the vagina dentata (Creed, 1996, p.111).

From her reading of Freud's (1922) essay *Medusa's Head*, Creed suggests that,

> We have not often attempted to interpret individual mythological themes, but an interpretation suggest itself easily in the case of the horrifying head of Medusa … a representation of woman as a being who frightens and repels because she is castrated …[it] takes the place of a representation of the female genitals, or rather … it isolates their horrifying effects from their pleasure giving ones […] To decapitate = castration. The terror of Medusa is thus a terror of castration that is linked to the sight of something. […] it occurs when a boy who hitherto been unwilling to believe the threat of castration, catches sight of the female genitals, probably those of an adult, surrounded by hair, and essentially those of the mother… The hair Medusa's head is frequently represented in works of art in the form of snakes, and these once again are derived from the castration complex. (Freud (1922), cited in Creed, 1996, p.110).

Cixous' (1976) critical reading of Freud's analysis of Medusa as monstrous and horrific is relevant here. *Killer Queen* is more in keeping with the feminist reading of Medusa, the calm face of the stone head and a coiffeur headdress representing an abstract version of the multiple snakes. I find it interesting that of the many artistic representations of Medusa, some male artists render her as

the monstrous feminine (Figs. 225, 226), whereas some women artists' interpretation parallels that of Cixous (Figs. 227, 228).



Fig.225. Caravaggio. Medusa, 1597. Oil on convex panel, 60 x 55cm. Saiko. CC BY 3.0 [239]

[239] available at: https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:Caravaggio,_scudo_con_testa_di_medusa,_159598_ca.,_donato_a_ferdinando_I_dal_card._francesco_maria_del_monte.jpg (Accessed: 17.08.2023).

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Fig.226. Statue of Perseus with the Head of Medusa, by Benvenuto Cellini. Bronze and marble (base). Under the Loggia dei Lanzi, Florence, 1554. Jastrow. CC BY-SA 2.5 [240]

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[240] Available at: https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:Perseus_Cellini_Loggia_dei_Lanzi_2005_09_13.jpg (Accessed: 17.08.2023).

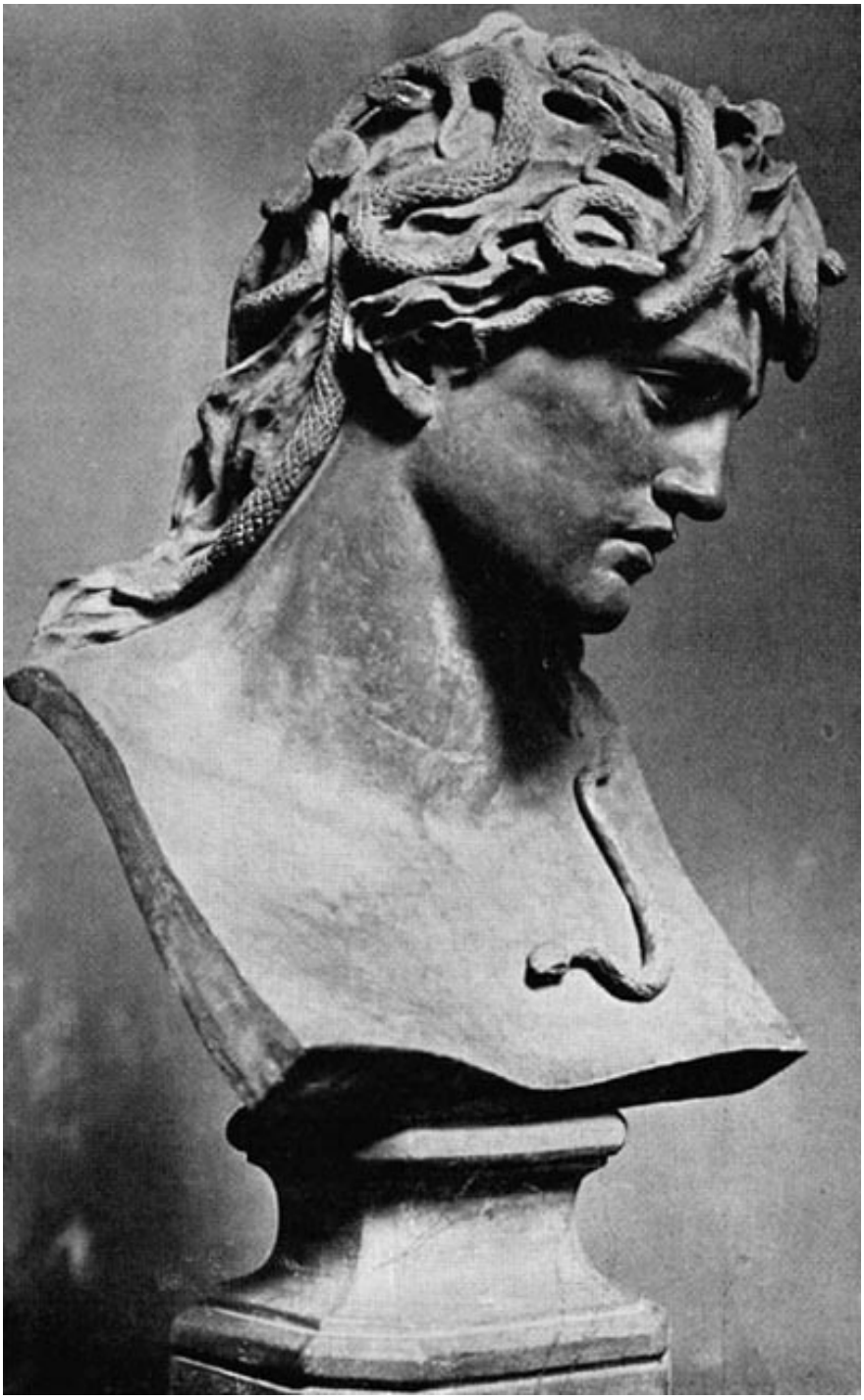


Fig.227. Evelyn de Morgan. Medusa. Bronze sculpture (1900). Photographer George P. Landlow. Screenshot.[241]

[241] Available at https://victorianweb.org/sculpture/demorgan/2.html (Accessed: 17.08.2023).



Fig.228. Harriet Hosmer. Medusa. Marble. Sculpture (1852). Public Domain Mark 1.0 https://creativecommons.org/publicdomain/mark/1.0/deed.en.[242]

[242] Available https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:Hosmer_Medusa_MIA_7629.jpg (Accessed: 17.08.2023).

The symbolism of the serpent in the East

It is Creed's (1996) critique of Freud's case study of Little Hans in *Analysis of a Phobia in a Five-Year-Old Boy* (1909) that I expand on, to highlight the importance of eastern cultural beliefs and symbolism. Creed notes how Freud "isolates the phallic and ignores the vaginal significance of the snake as a sexual symbol." (Creed, 1996, p.111). This is of significance when exploring the dual hybrid identity of *Killer Queen*. The symbolism of the coiled snake represents "bisexuality found in all cultures." (Creed, 1996, p.111). The duality of the coiled serpent represented by the steel ring, this material I used to previously represent the cervix in 10 cm *Holes* functioned as an object suggestive of dual gender.

When the symbolism of the serpent is interpreted from a wider non-Eurocentric context it allows for a fuller understanding of the connection between mind, body and soul. The snake coiled with tail in mouth denotes phallus and vagina, but what Creed fails to explore further is the non-European, non-white cultural relevance of this. However, I do so through *Killer Queen* and her dual identity; in juxtaposing Medusa and Kali we enter the realm of Hindu energy and spirituality, in addition to mythology, goddesses, castration and the power of the female genitals. Kali is the darker manifestation of the cosmic energy, Shakti, which

> …is a spirit of an awakened woman, who is the 'Paripurna' (Full Knowledge of Who She is). She is the awakened woman who is full of Strength, Creativity, Insight, Confidence, and the epitome of beauty. A Shakti in herself knows 'Her-Value', 'Her-Grace', and 'Her-Worth', who is ready to receive all love and ready to give her pure divine energy to her surroundings. A shakti is not afraid to speak the truth, connect

with her other sisters to lift each other, and encourage the best version to stand in her divinity (Choudhury, 2022, p.3).[243]

Shakti is considered by Yogis to be the power sleeping within the body, a coiled serpent known as Kundalini "She who is coiled, an individual's Shakti, located at the base of the spine and visualised as a serpent. The goal of Hatha[244] yoga is to enable Kundalini to rise through the chakras[245] of the body and reach the cranial vault where she unites with Shiva"[246] (Ramos, 2020, p.304). [Fig.229],

Taking on board the symbolism of the coiled serpent, the steel ring lent itself to this representation as I coiled the woollen textile tightly around the metal. The textile was then extended upwards and held in place with the wire, like the kundalini rising through the chakras to the cranial vault. The stone head is not only significant for its 'turning people to stone', the curse of the Medusa, but potentially the cranial vault. It was upon reflection that by combining the three materials, the prandhi, steel ring and stone head although initially selected in isolation of each other; the first two had been transported to Rome the third a found object,[247] enabled me to visually represent the eastern version of the coiled serpent as the rising kundalini to the top of the head. I felt that *Killer Queen* was embodying theory and practice through its evolving meaning and conflating hybridity.

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[243] There is a connection between what Shakti represents and the poetry of Lorde, and Cixious' essay.

[244] Hatha yoga – 'yoga of force'. Hatha yoga drew on earlier Tantric conceptions of the body and methods for internalising divinity. It introduced a range of complex postures (asanas) accompanied by breath control (pranayama) and 'body locks' (bandha), which were muscular contractions used to direct the flow of breath or life force (prana) throughout the body. (Ramos. 2020, p.302).

[245] Chakra – 'wheel'; chakras are energy centres within the yogic body of the individual that are meditated on during yogic practice. (Ramos, 2020, p.300).

[246] Shiva is the deviser of the world. (Danielou, 1992, p.76).

[247] Part of my process has been to transfer materials and combine with site specific found objects on residencies.

This artwork is relevant in exploring the hybridity and make-up of the ever-evolving British Indian female identity especially in relation to the story of my great aunt Chachiji, imprisoned for killing the family patriarch in defending herself from his sexual abuse.



Fig.229. Scroll depicting chakras and the rising Kundalini. Rajasthan, India. Early 19th Century. Gouache on paper. National Museum of India (Delhi). Artist, Ajit Mookerjee. Painting. Detail. Scan (Ramos. 2020, p.76).

Exhibiting *Killer Queen* in Rome

The final stage of the making was to complete the snake headdress by aligning and mounting the steel rings into a tower or diadem. The coiled wire prandhis were stretched and pulled up through

each of the steel rings, then extended upward and outward. The red tassel representing the snake's mouth, hung gently from the extended prandhis. The tower was secured with black thread tied tightly to keep it in place. The headdress sat next to the stone head, not yet installed. As a collective of seven artists, we decided to curate a group show on the portico and steps of the British School at Rome, [Fig.230]. 'The Portico Show' took place on the evening of the 25th of July 2019 [Fig.231].

The head and headdress were transported to the front steps of the British School at Rome, where the headdress was gently placed upon the head, bringing *Killer Queen* to completion (Figs. 232 and 233). She was viewed by invited guests and passing public. Her serpents swung gently in the summer evening breeze. *Killer Queen,* my representation of Medusa was to remain beautiful, and allowed to narrate her sexual abuse through the red taped eyes. This allowed the viewer to gaze upon her without fear. She was protected by the red bindi, her third eye chakra. I reiterate her importance to me as a companion in the studio for over three weeks; she remained to me a beautiful woman, who suffered abuse and was cast as the evil 'other' because of her identity as a woman. My interpretation of the birth of Pegasus from her neck after her decapitation, was that of an ejaculation of her demons.



Fig.230. *The Portico Show.* British School at Rome. Graphic Design Remi Rana Allen. Poster (2019).



Fig.231. Remi Rana Allen. *Killer Queen* (2019). *The Portico Show.* British School at Rome. Installation (2019).



Fig.232. Remi Rana Allen. *Killer Queen* (2019) with bust, Director's Private Garden British School at Rome (2019).



Fig.233. Remi Rana Allen. *Killer Queen* (2019). Installation.

Exhibiting *Killer Queen* in London

The headdress was to be transported back to London, but I could not or would not leave the stone head behind. There was no chance of the Director selling the head to me. The only alternative was to make a cast. I purchased several packets of plaster bandages from an art shop in Rome. On the last day of my stay, I cast the front of the head, with a view to complete the cast back home in London (Fig.234).



Fig.234. Casting the stone head – Studio British School at Rome (2019).

On my arrival back in London, I had booked the Triangle Space for a supervisory studio visit and solo show *HOLES*. This meant that if *Killer Queen* was to be exhibited, she would need to complete it. The casting process involved using a chick brick[248] to create the back of her head. One part of the chick brick was cast, allowing for an overlap that would be secured around the front cast when pouring the plaster. The two casts were glued together with further bandages. Once dry, the interior was basted with Vaseline to aid easy removal of the cast from the plaster cast. I placed the whole cast upside down into a bucket and poured in a brown plaster. This was my opportunity to create the Brown head of the Indian woman, and to integrate the story of Chachiji.

The plaster dried overnight and the next day I gently removed the casting. She was solid, heavy and brown, there were parts of her nose missing which I would rebuild, and other areas I would have to grind down (Fig.235). As she dried out over the weeks before the exhibition, I noticed the plaster turned paler in areas, but remained brown in the damp parts. I attempted to keep her damp to retain her brownness but lost the battle. She insisted on being a hybrid of both, forming her own brown-white identity [Fig.236]. This was not an issue for me, as it is often my process to have to let go at some point, either during the making or the installation process, and allow the artwork autonomy. In fact, the dualness of *Killer Queen's* appearance can symbolise the duality of Chachiji's British Indian female identity.

Since then, *The Portico Show* in Rome *Killer Queen* has been selected for several exhibitions, including *HOLES (2019)*, *Fantasy of Having a Trailer Wagon All to Myself* (Gallery 46,

[248] A terracotta two-part oval baking device for cooking chicken.

Whitechapel, London 2021), *Displace, BLOC Members Show* (BLOC Gallery Sheffield 2021) and *20/20 A Brief Survey* (The Truman Brewery, London 2021).

My artwork appears as a slightly different version depending on the space, sometimes in a blacked-out area, or window, or white cube space. *Killer Queen* is always gently installed; the installation process has become a performance and it has even been suggested that I appear to be dressing an Indian bride (Fig.237). The tools required to install the artwork are hair straighteners, hair scissors, spare bindis and red tape, these refresh her appearance and exorcise any evil spirits she may have acquired from previous viewings. Each time she appears in a public space she is reborn (Figs.238 and 239).



Fig.235. Recasting the stone head in London – Home Studio (2019).

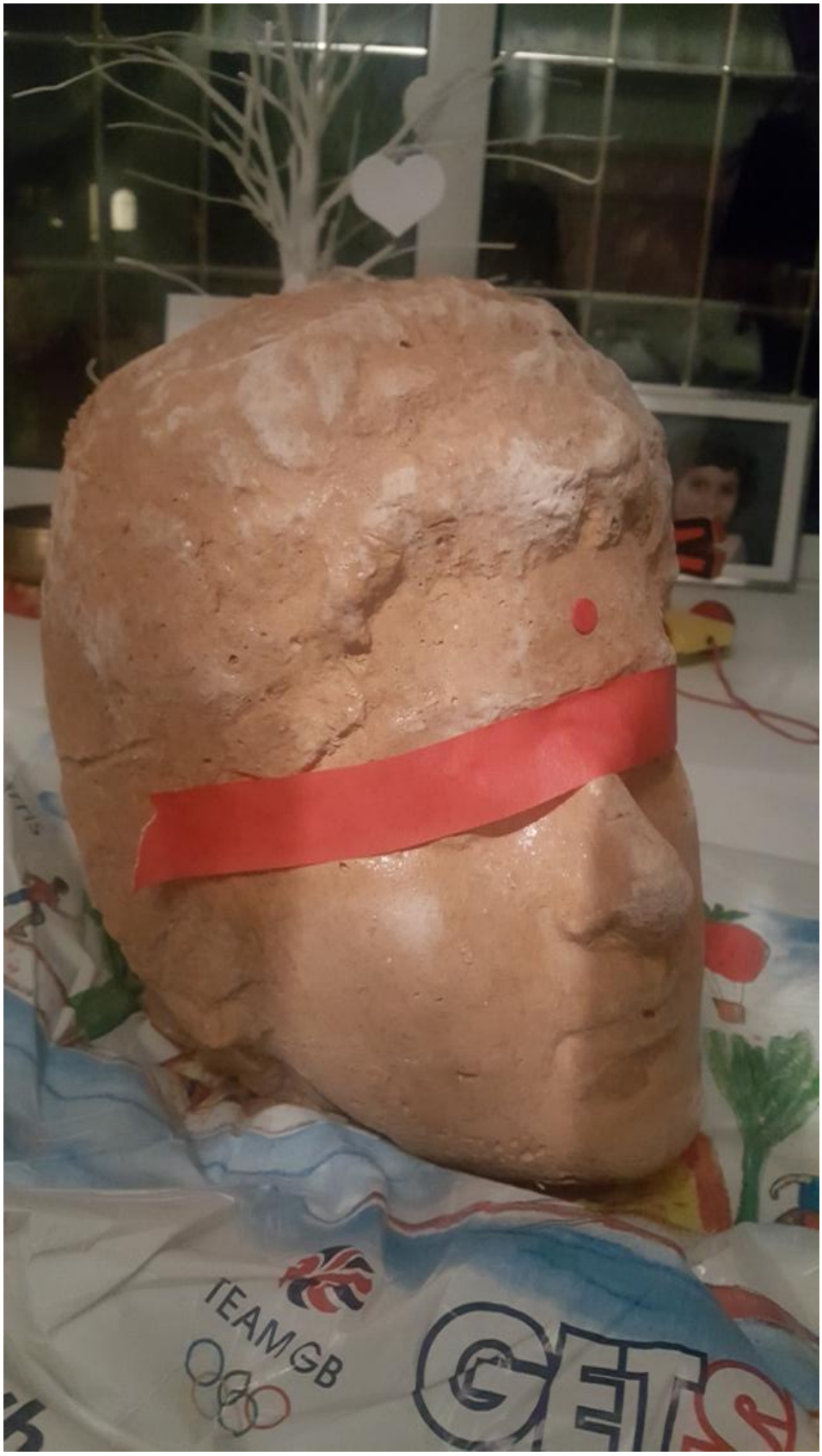


Fig.236. Recasting the stone head in London – Home Studio (2019).



Fig.237. Remi Rana Allen. Installing *Killer Queen* (2019) Gallery 46, Whitechapel, London Installation (2021).



Fig.238. Remi Rana Allen. *Killer Queen* (2019). The Other Art Fair, Truman Brewery, London. Installation (2021).



Fig.239. Remi Rana Allen. *Killer Queen* (2019). *BLOC Projects Members Show*, BLOC Gallery, Sheffield. Installation (2021).

Final thoughts

Upon reflecting on *Ika Kilo* (2019) and *Killer Queen* (2019) I have gained an insight into what constructs the British Indian women's identity among my maternal family. This Chapter has explored mythology and the goddess through feminist lens, highlighting the importance of female empowerment and sisterhood in the face of patriarchy. The Brown woman has been represented by Chachiji and her othering by the community following the events that led to her imprisonment.

The behaviour of unruly women in relation to ritual, performance and autonomy also dictated the making of *Killer Queen*. It appears that the British Indian female identity within my family is formed of many dualities and hybridisations. Until this chapter it was perceived that their identity was very much formed through the second generation of British Indian women such as myself. But upon closer analysis of *Ika Kilo* the memory, I believe that it emerged through the first generation of diasporic migrants to Britain in the early 1960s.

Their sense of sisterhood and their dance performance away from male eyes has highlighted their previously hidden female sexuality, which may be read as their resistance to male domination. Seen through my childhood eyes, I interpreted their singing and dancing at a gathering to celebrate a pending wedding as their determination to declare their equality and self-governance. They sing and dance in the face of patriarchy, disparagingly.

The Chapter went on to discuss the symbolism of the chunni, the private celebratory ceremony at the hen night, where the Indian women, without shame, appropriated the chunni as their symbol of power. In so doing, they disempowered the phallus, the symbol of patriarchal power mapped onto

the penis. They reinstated the chunni from its function as a head covering, the sacred symbol of patriarchal respect, to a sexual erect phallus, castrated from its authority, realising that whoever occupies power can be disempowered. The size and weight of the phallus was important to the women, this is visualised through the *Ika Kilo* (one kilo) artwork, perhaps subliminally, they were re-presenting the patriarchy, its vastness and weight they felt burdened by.

It is through *Killer Queen* that the insights into sexuality and duality are most apparent. This complex and intricate artwork is a visual representation and my interpretation of the mythology, the goddess figure and the human through the tales of Medusa, Kali and Chachiji. It highlights parallels in women's status as mother, daughter, virgin, or prostitute, in both Eastern and Western societies.

I went on to explore hair and the relationship between how women present in society, both mythologically and in real life. Hair plays an important role in defining a woman's sexuality, social behaviour and mental state. The selection of the prandhi as a material for *Killer Queen*, signified discourses in connection to societal control and the positioning of the female, that is, how she is classified through the appearance of her hair, and therefore controlled in both South Asia and the West.

Finally, the serpent and its symbolism has been explored in relation to death, life, rebirth, the genitals and duality. I have drawn attention to the limitations of analysis of the symbolism of the serpent from a Eurocentric perspective. With this consideration, it became evident the importance of the Eastern interpretation of such symbolism has equal relevance. To examine this only through Western eyes has proven limiting, because, as Creed (1996) noted, other cultures offer alternative

meanings. *Killer Queen* has further exposed the need for the inclusion of Eastern cosmic energy, spirituality and symbolism.[249] The hybrid duality of East and West as presented through the realisation of *Killer Queen* is mirrored when unfolding and reassessing how the different geographic and historical contexts contributed to the development of a distinctly British Indian female identity amongst women in my family. It has also shown how my multi-media art practice can unearth and piece together the constituting factors in the development of that identity within my family.

[249] These themes have been explored by Shazia Sikander, Sutapa Biswas and Bharti Kerr amongst many others.

Conclusion

My research has led me on a reflective journey, one that has explored my identity as a British-born Indian woman, artist and mother. When I started my research in October 2014, I could not have foreseen the many changes that would take place in the forthcoming years. In December 2014, I was forced to take a timeout due to the sudden deterioration of my son's health. A year later, I returned to my artistic practice and research, with a renewed determination to make new artworks based on my personal experiences as an artist and mother by pouring the emotions I had felt during my son's time in hospital and post op recovery. These emotions led to my creation of many of the artworks included within this Practice-Based PhD.

I discovered that my making process is often ignited by a period of pain or darkness. When I reflect upon the artworks, I realise that I was attempting to deal with a particularly difficult situation at that time. Yet still, I found creative inspiration: during that period, the specific artwork that emerged from my mind and hands seemed appropriate for the situation. I had to take further time out to deal with the trauma of my son's disease, and had to pause again during the Covid pandemic in 2020. Looking back, I have experienced and achieved more than I could have imagined on this journey over seven years.

This thesis artistically unfolds the role of 'the maternal' in the construction of British-Indian female identity amongst women in my matrilineal line (1914 – 2023). In 2014, I searched for peers in the artistic field who contextualised my practice. The artists I constantly came across were Zarina Bhimji, Bharti Kher and Chila Kumari Burman. They seemed out of reach, but they were repetitively referenced by academics, students and peers for their theories on South Asian female

artists. Upon my transfer to Chelsea College of Art, my research became more expansive as I had access to networks, and I realised that a new wave of British South Asian and South Asian women artists was emerging.

Álvarez-Errecalde's phrase "I became an artist when I became a mother" (Álvarez-Errecalde (2016), cited in Angell. 2016, n.p) encapsulates my interest in my maternal family history, which is the central focus of my enquiry. Tracking the familial female journey from India to East Africa to the UK, I question my Indian heritage through British Indian eyes, interpreting coded behaviour relatable to both Indian and British experiences.

This research is positioned in British South Asian feminisms, situating my identity as a British Indian woman in a contemporary context. The importance of the research is highlighted by the slow dilution of my cultural heritage as it seeps further from my grasp. There is an urgency to record and evidence the identity of the women amongst my maternal family before historical generational knowledge is lost. Through myth, song, dance, oral history, archival records, photographs and film, their British Indian female identity is documented and examined, its ever-evolving hybridity is recorded from colonial India, East Africa to modern day Britain.

I have had to search within to be able to express externally what it means to be a British Indian woman and mother in contemporary Britain. Initially, my hybrid identity felt like a struggle between being Western and Eastern, and it was this that motivated my research project. This led me to question my thoughts in English and the reception and perception of my appearance as Indian. How has my matrilineal history, heritage and culture influenced my identity? And what was the importance of the maternal? These two questions formulated the basis of my enquiry.

1. How have different geographic and historical contexts contributed to the development of a distinctly British Indian female identity amongst women in my family?

2. How have maternal roles impacted the formation of that identity in my family?

3. How can my multi-media art practice unearth and piece together the constituting factors in the development of that identity within my family?

This thesis is structured chronologically, as below. This introduction briefly outlines the rationale for my research, the research questions, the aims and objectives, and its significance to the academic field.

Chapter one highlighted the interplay between my research methodology and studio methods. I addressed the methodologies I employed to investigate my family history. The methodologies included self autodriving, self-reflexive and auto ethnographic. Some theories and concepts from cultural studies and sociology helped to explain the histories that were discussed. I moved on to document my artistic practice, which makes use of found home footage, photographs, Super 8 footage and other published and archival material with sourced materials to create object-based installations, film work, digital prints and paintings.

Chapter two reviewed literature from Brown and Black feminists, post -colonial theorists, capitalism and social reproduction theory and the contemporary arts practice of British South Asian female artists working within the field of my research study. To help explain the histories

discussed within my artworks, I again drew from theoretical frameworks and concepts from cultural studies and sociology. Finally, I contextualise my artistic practice within the wider field of visual arts practice.

Chapter three is an introduction to my maternal heritage, which is investigated in the chapter and throughout the thesis. The film *Khoon* portrays an overview of my family's journey from Kenya to London in the 1960s. It was a starting point that not only laid the foundation for this study but paved the way for further research into colonial East Africa, patriarchy, and Indian women's roles as daughter, wife, mother and widow. I realised through collating my photographic and documentary evidence from family archives that the Indian women of my family adhered to certain codes and practices. For example, they were expected to serve the patriarch and fulfil age-related roles within the hierarchy of the household. They had little room for autonomous decision-making and were limited by rigid patriarchal, religious and societal rules enforced upon them. They were raised to be good wives, to bear children, and to serve others. I discussed white society's perceptions of Indian women as the voiceless, subservient other, exotic and orientalised. In telling the story of my aunt, who was jailed for the killing of my Grandfather, I disrupt these representations of Indian women as passive victims of Indian men.

Chapter three questions the identity of the East African Indian women in my family, in their roles as grandmother, mother, mother-in-law and daughter. I ask: how are cultural traits reproduced and how are these sustained in the context of social and community relationships? I argue that it is women who are the conduits through which heritage and culture pass. This chapter highlighted how, despite stereotypical perceptions of Indian women as passive victims of male power, they nevertheless play crucial determinant roles in their family's lives, e.g. making decisions about their

children's education, or about improving their family's social mobility through migration. Under particular circumstances, women disregard the views of the matriarch and the patriarch, as shown by the actions of women in my family.

This is evident in the retelling of the life of a British Indian woman who made her way from Mumbai to Mombasa circa 1914, and whose efforts were integral to the building of a home, while nurturing a family in a foreign land, without the support system of an extended family. She created her own place in society, and at home as the matriarch, bore many children, and became a role model to the younger women of the household. The patriarch of the family, however, was free of the restrictions that sought to confine women to the home; he led an independent life as a trader, travelling to remote parts to sell his goods to the indigenous Maasai people. There were no rules or regulations he followed; his actions were never questioned, and he enjoyed freedom of agency.

Throughout my research for this chapter, I have at times felt uncomfortable with some of the attitudes of family members whose stories I have told. I have had to confront many aspects of racism, classism, sexism and sexual deviance in their narratives. Racism appeared throughout, evident in the attitudes of the East African Sikhs towards the Africans whose country they migrated to. My family accepted the white colonialists' three-tier social status system based on colour and race. They assumed that they were superior to the African communities, an attitude that was fostered and encouraged by the white colonialists. This has been a source of constant anxiety for me as I have pursued this research project, and the academic literature that I sought to help my understanding of the racism of East African Indians towards the Africans in Kenya, and towards the Black community in the UK, was limited. Parminder Bhachu (1985), Amrit Wilson (1979) and Dharam P. Ghai (1965) have researched East African Asians in the UK, but as the dates indicate,

the research has yet to be advanced and situated in a contemporary context.[250] Although this material may have been updated since the writing of my thesis.

My study highlights the research gaps, one being the racial tensions between Indians and Africans. This has been an important aspect of *Khoon*, which explores the relationship between the two races. *Khoon* identifies and records these gaps in the hope of bringing new knowledge for future referencing by artists and academics in this field of enquiry.

Translating my research into writing was distressing, as it aroused emotions including disbelief and anger at members of my family amongst the wider East African Indian community and their attitudes. These contrasted with the greater acceptance of Black people by the direct migrant Sikhs, who arrived in the UK primarily to work to accrue savings, before returning to the Punjab. They travelled alone, their status as working-class immigrants who were categorised as Black, an identity which they accepted without questioning.

Chapter three also drew on *Khoon to* investigate the evolving British Indian female identity amongst women in my matrilineal heritage. Although they remain South Asian, Sikh, Indian, they are anglophiles who yearn to be British, Western in nationality and status. It was the second generation of East African Sikh women who initiated the family's migration to Britain, as they sought to fulfil their dreams of Britishness.

[250] Bhachu. P. Twice Migrant Sikhs East African Sikh Settlers in Britain (1985), Wilson. A. Finding A Voice Asian Women in Britain, (1979) and Ghai. D. P. Portrait of Minority Asians in east Africa (1965).

Chapter four, titled *1947* and *The Golden Temple*, discussed my two installations. The first details the history of the partition of India, particularly the Punjab. The initial part of the chapter outlined a history of British Indian women during the era of the Raj. The theme of this chapter was to analyse the colonial and patriarchal control, violation and forced division of Indian women due to their faith. There are continuities between the two artworks, *1947* and *The Golden Temple*, where the former discussed the horrendous gendered violence including rape and mutilation of women by religious males during the struggle over Partition.

Research on gender-based violence highlighted the issues of sharam, basti and izzat, imposed upon women by the household's patriarch and matriarch, instilled not only by the patriarch but also the matriarch. *1947* became a memorial to the women who suffered the violence at the hands of the brown man. In pre-Partition India, British Indian women were not defined or categorised by their religion, but as the country divided and descended into civil war, religion became an important factor shaping women's experiences and identities. However, the women in my family in Kenya had no personal experience of the violent partition of India; it did not impact their religious identities, and they continued to live in harmony with Hindus and Muslims.

The second artwork expanded upon the ongoing impact of religious male dominance. I assessed through my artwork *1947* the impact of the partition of India upon the construction of the British Indian identity among women in my family from 1947 onwards to today.

The Golden Temple tried to capture critical moments, events and themes that structure their lives: religion, marriage ceremonies and birth. An analysis of both artworks from conceptualisation through to production and installation was contextualised by theoretical texts

and narratives which inspired the works. The two pieces unveiled the ongoing journey of the evolving hybrid identity of the British Indian women in my family and the maternal influences in shaping the family's migration journeys, but also the progression towards a new identity as a British Indian woman in the UK.

The chapter also analysed what it means to have an Indian female body, its form and development from childhood, through puberty and womanhood. Issues concerning breast development and menstruation illustrated the attitudes of Indian society and how perceptions around women's sexual bodies justify control and ownership over women's bodies.

The Golden Temple explored the religious and cultural heritage of my paternal family. The temple, or gurdwara, is used as a metaphor for the female body. A pregnant dome, giving life and light, yet influenced by and under the power of man-made constructs and restrictions (perhaps that is why man-made fibres were used to make the artwork). Sikhism is considered a forward-thinking, equitable, diverse and inclusive religion, one that is supposed to be inclusive of caste, class, gender and race. This religion, as with many others, is constructed and interpreted by the patriarchy, and their 'values' that subjugate women are reinforced and upheld by the matriarchy. For instance, rules such as adherence to marriage within the same caste, class and race are priorities, and are upheld by women.

Upon reflection, both *1947* and *The Golden Temple* brought to light the united identity of the Punjabi, Indian and Pakistani woman, our shared cultural, social, and geographical heritage. Regardless of religious differences, we share much in common, from dress (salwar kameez), language, social customs, food, work and even humour. This knowledge, acquired through my

research, has led me to question my identity to non-Punjabi British South Asian and South Asian women globally, who have not shared the Punjabis' history of Partition. This one event in 1947 divided a country and people, but perhaps it is possible that through our acquired cultural knowledge, there is a reuniting and relearning of our shared pasts, whereby we position our identities as British Indian or British Pakistani women in the third space of hybridity and evolution.

Chapter five explored the journey from womanhood to motherhood. An extensive collation of personal maternal familial data was analysed to produce the artworks *10cm Holes* and *Seven Years of This*. Where chapter three, *Khoon* left off, *10cm Holes* picked up the threads. I investigated the relationships between mothers and daughters through the history of my maternal family in East Africa. I explored their passing on of cultural and social customs and knowledge, as a means of maintaining their identities, even if only partially. These identities were transformed, modified and evolved depending on the nature of the family structure. In the UK, for instance, the matriarch took on the maternal duties of raising the children, whilst the mother led more of an independent life, working outside of the home. The relationships between the women were addressed through the photographic documentation.

I argue that the role of the mother in constructing the British Indian woman's identity in my family was of utmost importance. The changes were initiated by migration from the Punjab to Kenya. These first migrants arrived without extended family, like the direct migrants from the Punjab to the UK. They built their communities, religious, educational and social structures from scratch.

10cm Holes utilised the chunni as the tool for inquiry into the British Indian modernisation of the female identity of the women from my matrilineal heritage. The symbolism of this material, its

coding and representations, the wearing of the chunni in certain ways and its symbolism in the signalling of a woman's virtue were documented in this chapter. Along with the chunni, the sari and the salwar kameez highlighted East African Indian women's mental and physical separation from the Punjab. They left behind both land and heritage to start new lives in East Africa. Removing themselves from the sub-continent, the women also removed themselves from the working-class Indian woman who laboured on the land. This is suggested by their wearing of a sari rather than a salwar kameez, the traditional dress for working in the fields.

As further evidence of their elevation, mothers also 'used' their children to display their new status, dressing them in western clothing, and purchasing toys and other children's products from overseas.

Their husbands also displayed their emerging affinity for western lifestyles through their clothing, with some replacing their traditional modes of dress for the trousers, shirts, jackets and ties worn by the colonisers. Though they retained their turbans, which identified them as Sikhs, they restyled the obligatory turban into a tighter, neater, starched structure.

Chapter five drew on my personal experiences of birthing, motherhood and my relationship to my mother, and developed an argument for the social construction of my British Indian identity. It also addressed the mother's influential role within the family, and how the difficulties of my relationship with my mother led to another transformation of my identity in contemporary Britain.

Seven Years of This probed motherhood from my perspective, the relationship with my son. It explored the body of artistic work that I produced, most of it during a time of pain and change as my son's body went through the same. Reflecting upon these artworks brought several realisations, such as the lack of autonomy women have over their bodies during birthing, and the importance and influence of the mother in aiding the new mother, her daughter, through the changes and traumas. One important aspect was the awakening I had during the breastfeeding of my son was that, as an Indian woman, it was possible to meet the eyes of a male without fear of being labelled as a defiant, combative or unruly woman.

It could be argued that the account I give of a memory of my appointment with a GP as a teenager is the crux of my research. An especially significant insight here was the control of Indian men over Indian women's bodies. His decisions over his wife's body are often supported by the matriarch and impact on her lived experiences as daughter, wife, mother, and daughter-in-law. This evokes Spivak's argument about how white males' interventions in the practice of sati saved Indian women from Indian men (Spivak, 1988). From my perspective, this memory was not about my having been saved by a white male GP, but more a reminder of my empowerment and ownership of my body.

As I worked through my memories and thoughts during the making process of *Seven Years of This*, it became apparent how the suffering of my son and the feelings and emotions I experienced during this traumatic period led me to question my faith and its place and relevance in my life. The ordeal repositioned my understanding of faith, and I came to an acceptance that medicine and man were incapable of curing my son, and I decided to surrender to faith to cope with the pain. This episode in my life influenced and caused a period of loss in what Bhabha refers to as a 'Third

Space' (1994). An unseen space, habitable during growth or a period of evolution. This space can only be recognised in hindsight, when another version of oneself, a newer hybrid, emerges. These are the beginnings of acceptance, when the blending of the facets that make up identity is dissected, inspected and relearned.

In Chapter Six, *Ika Kilo* and *Killer Queen* focused on the sexuality of the Kenyan British Indian women in my family. The stereotypically assigned roles of daughter, wife and mother were questioned through the two artworks. *Ika Kilo* narrates through memory how a community of women of various ages are united through wedding rituals. These women exhibit an unedited and exuberant side of themselves, normally hidden from the patriarchy. The childhood memory I recount evoked an awareness that, contrary to stereotypical beliefs, Indian women have and take pleasure in their sexuality. They portray their desires through a 'humorous' song and dance performance, which carries underlying connotations of rebellion and freedom from the patriarchy, and a want for self-expression. I question whether it is only East African Sikh women who perform these songs and dances in settings away from the male gaze. I have not witnessed direct migrant Sikh women do so, perhaps because the westernisation of Kenyan Indian women has proceeded ahead of the direct migrant women. It could be argued that British Indian women's identity is influenced more heavily by Britishness than that of Indian Punjabi women.

Killer Queen is based on the story of Medusa, a mythical goddess, and explores several notions of what it means to be an Indian woman in both the East and the West. I discuss ideas about women's hair and its association with notions about femininity, hygiene and mental health. The symbolism of the snake in mythology and its relation to the phallus was discussed in terms of the Vagina Dentata myth: the fear that men have of being consumed, castrated, severed or

emasculated by the vagina during intercourse. What emerges from *Killa Queen* is the importance of Indian women's autonomy over their sexuality. Although *Killer Queen* does not directly address Chachiji's story, what was of significance were my thoughts regarding her autonomy over her sexuality.

As I reflect on *Killer Queen*, I become aware that this artwork has many meanings to many people. The ripple effects it creates through the mythology of Medusa and the vagina dentata also allows for the story to be told of one British Indian woman who fought for female sexual autonomy and ownership of her body. Chachiji's actions in defending her rights to ownership of her body resulted in her imprisonment, because she defied male expectations of ready access to her body. It is the feminist story of my great aunt that haunts me. Had it not been for Chachiji, the sexual deviance of the patriarch may well have continued through further generations.

Through the methodologies of self-autodriving, personal narratives and memory, it has been possible to uncover many facets of new knowledge relating to the impact of the maternal on the construction of the British Indian female identity amongst the women in my family. Firstly, addressing the title: I felt a constant unease at titling the identity of the Indian woman - was she British Indian, British South Asian, or British Asian? All three titles had their limitations. British Indian is recognisable as the identity of the Indian woman with British nationality. My research argues that British nationality had less to do with geographic place and more to do with colonialism. British Indian can mean being Indian and located in a commonwealth country, such as India or Kenya.

The focus of my research was my matrilineal lineage from India to Kenya and eventually to the UK. The label ‘British Indian’ I felt, was diluting my personal experiences of being a British Indian woman. It also limited my methodologies, as much of the research is based on personal documentation and familial histories. For me to justify these methodologies, it was necessary to centre the research on the personal, yet to make it relatable to the wider audience, through the artworks, and the sociological and historical academic texts.

There were certain limitations encountered in this research. My inability to travel to India due to the pandemic in 2020 led to the cancellation of a funded research trip. I have been unable until now to conduct fieldwork in Kenya. The knowledge gained from this visit will lead to further research in this area.

My practice-based PhD has created many opportunities, including *HOLES,* my solo show in 2019 (Fig.240). This was a pivotal moment in my research, as this was the first time many of the artworks were presented publicly. The invaluable feedback from students, staff, academics and my peers from the art world and PhD community set the road map for what followed with my research.

HOLES was also the launch pad for BL&ME: Brown Leaders & Makers Exist, a publisher and research hub that I founded. I aim to continue my exploration of otherness through the term Brownness. BL&ME’s first publication in October 2022 created a much-needed conversation on what brownness means locally and globally. Contributed academic essays, artistic practice, poetry and personal narratives My book *Cha* (Fig.241) brought to light the existence of a community with a unique voice. *Cha* engaged this community on the topic of brownness, at a time when the world was watching the UK, as it voted in the first brown South Asian prime minister in October 2022.

Cha continued as a project through to March 2023, when the research was disseminated through an exhibition ChArt (Fig.242). As the curator, I exhibited selected artworks and delivered a three-day programme of events, ChArt: reads (poetry), ChArt: talks (panel discussion), ChArt: performs (live).[251]

[251] Brown Leaders and Makers Exist (BL&ME) are delighted to announce *ChArt*, a durational and performative exhibition that will be held in March 2023. Hosted at Chelsea College of Arts' Triangle Gallery, the event will open on Tuesday 21st March and feature a selection of artworks and prints, alongside a schedule of performances – all stemming from BL&ME's debut publication, *Cha*. The focus is to disseminate the core research findings from the print publication, with an emphasis on the context and format of the exhibition itself as it shifts in form and content throughout the week.

Cha explores the notion of Brownness as a diverse and inclusive mode of cultural identification. In the current polarising climate of populism, which has energised divisive nationalist agendas of 'us and them', Cha uses the analogy of a tea break to offer a space for contemplating states of cultural in-betweenness. Whilst the notion of Brownness implies skin-color, the ethos of Cha was not restricted to this, rather it aimed to promote diversity, equality, and dialogue through the arts. We continue along this vein with ChArt.

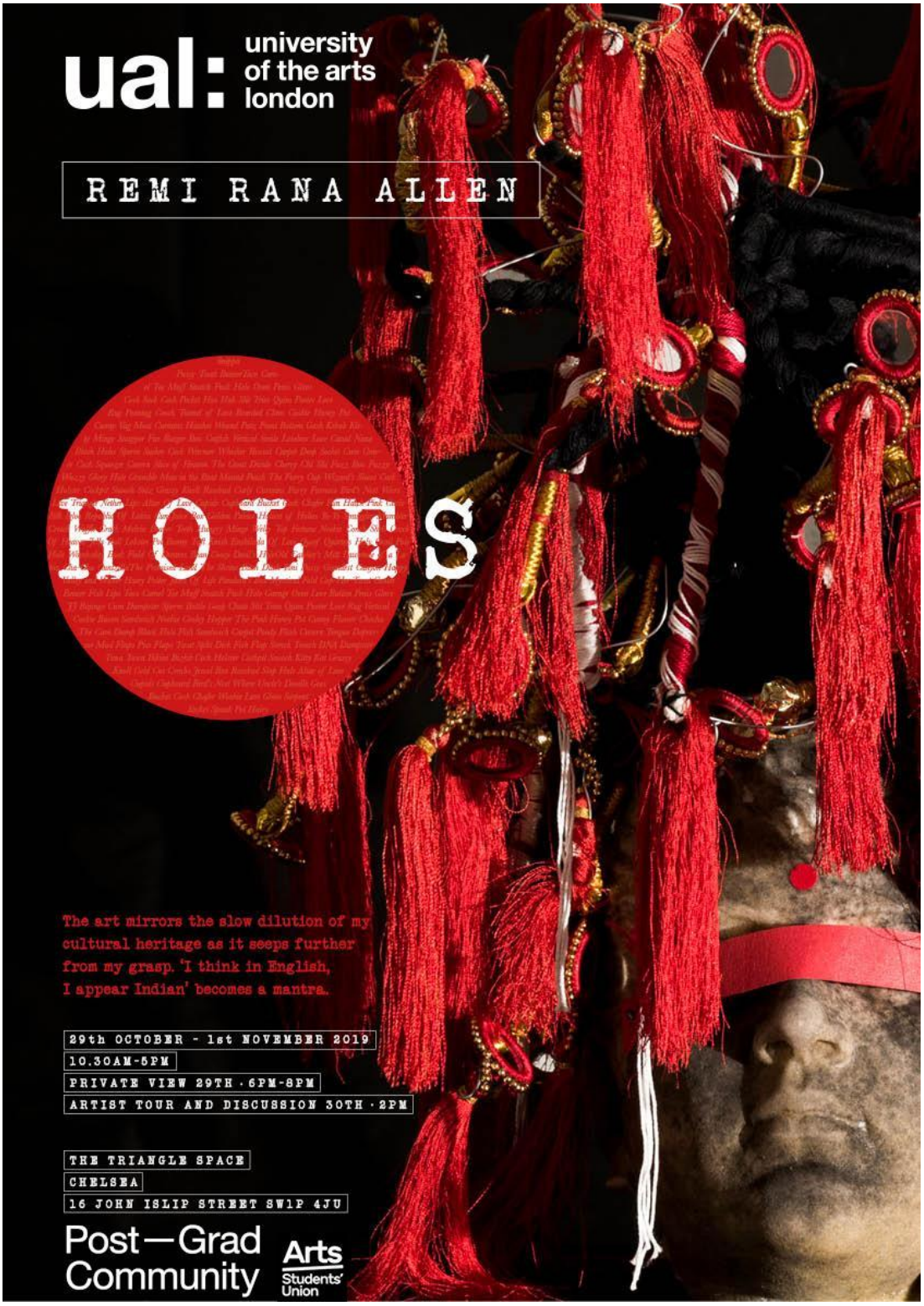


Fig.240. Remi Rana Allen. *HOLES* solo exhibition. Triangle Gallery, London. Poster (2019).



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My practice and research have successfully generated funding from the Research Student Support Fund, Research Student Initiative Fund, TrAIN: Transnational Art Identity and Nation, British Art Network, Tate and Paul Mellon Centre, a-n Artists Newsletter: Time Space Money and the Arts Council England: Develop Your Creative Practice. This last stream of funding sets the foundation for furthering my practice and research. A recent trip to Kenya has uncovered data that will storyboard the creative for a solo touring show. The exhibition is booked for July 2024, opening in Brighton, then travelling to Exeter, Nairobi, Delhi and Mumbai. I intend to return to Kenya to forge a partnership with Nairobi University, where I have been invited to teach as a visiting lecturer.

During my PhD, I have made many significant connections with South Asian female artists in the UK, India, America, the Middle East and Pakistan. This new wave of emerging female artists is telling their stories of their cultural heritage, migration and brownness. Discourses relating to racism, othering, orientalism, childbirth, sexuality and identity are common themes we share as artists. Some of the themes are taboo in South Asian society. For me to define my British Indian female identity, it is apparent that as diasporic South Asian women artists, our geographic borders are virtually non-existent. They dissolve as we find a common ground through our experiences as British South Asian, South Asian women artists.

My networking has presented me with the opportunity to share my practice and research findings not only at UAL but with the Slade School of Art research department and at the University of Exeter: Art History and Visual Culture, and the Centre for Imperial and Global History. It is also my intention to globalise my research through networks at Nairobi University, Ashoka University in Delhi and the United States.

As my PhD concludes, I reflect upon the journey of the last seven years. There have been many discoveries, not only about my identity as a British Indian woman, but also as a mother. Alongside the emergence of a new wave of British South Asian female artists, there is another area of the art world that appears to be under assessment, that of the maternal. Specific to my research, as I have stated, there is the slow dilution of our cultural heritage as it seeps further from our grasp. Other second-generation British South Asian artists are also questioning how we retain our culture and heritage through our children. Our children should not feel like tourists, instead, they should feel proud of their paternal and maternal diasporic and varied histories.

I have uncovered many fragments of new knowledge to answer my research questions. The different geographic and historical contexts contributed to the development of a distinctly British Indian female identity amongst women in my family. The maternal roles impacted the formation of that identity. Finally, my multi-media art practice has unearthed and pieced together the constituent factors in the development of that identity within my family.

These findings seem to be the beginnings of a vast field that British South Asian feminisms and post-colonial and decolonising methodologies can further expand. I hope that my practice and research into the role of ‘the maternal’ in the construction of British-Indian female identity amongst women in my matrilineal line, 1914 - 2023, is of use to future artists, academics and scholars.

One final thought…

I remember visiting Tate Britain in February 2020, just before the first lockdown due to Covid 19. The exhibition I visited was Sophia Al Maria, Beast Type Song. The film was shot in the old disused Central St. Martins site in Holborn. Al Maria's film had a profound effect on my thinking in relation to my PhD. The one still that remained with me contained the words – for colonialism to be successful it changes faith, hair, language and dress. This encapsulated my practice and research. From *Khoon* to *Killer Queen* I have been witness to the effects of colonialism upon my family. As Jay states,

> "...the coloniser does not only destroy a local political system in order to impose himself, but he also attacks what held society together: its traditions, its collective memory, its languages, its rituals and cultural practices, in order to replace them by his own 'superior' cultural heritage." (Jay. 2017, pp.63-4).

To understand what decolonisation means for me, it is through my art practice that I gain my knowledge. My artworks are not only a personal archive of my maternal familial heritage, but a dissemination of what being colonised means, the losses include a mother tongue, faith, the sartorial and alteration of hair. The areas I have desperately at times tried to capture through my making.

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Glossary of Terms

Apna Ghar – Translation: "Our Home" in Punjabi/Hindi.

Ardas – Sikh prayers recited collectively or individually.

Ayah – Nanny, especially one who worked for British families during colonial rule.

Autodriving – A technique of eliciting responses from participants using photographs.

Basti – Embarrassment or a sense of humiliation.

Besharam – Literally "without shame"; used pejoratively to shame perceived immoral behaviour.

Bhajia – Deep-fried batter-coated vegetables, common in South Asian cuisine.

Bindi – A self-adhesive dot worn on the forehead by Indian women; symbolic in Hindu tradition.

Black – A political term that includes all oppressed ethnic groups.

BMW – Acronym used to signify "Black, Muslim, White," a shorthand for racialized identities.

Brownness – A political term used in various western contexts to describe some racialised groups, particularly those of South Asian descent in the UK.

Chunni – Also called *Dupatta*; a head covering or scarf worn by Indian women.

Chupli / Chupla – Flip-flops or casual sandals.

Chura / Churiya – A collection of bangles, often associated with bridal attire.

Colourism – Prejudice or discrimination based on skin tone within a racial or ethnic group.

Coconut – A derogatory term: “brown on the outside, white on the inside,” suggesting someone has adopted white cultural values.

Dharma – One’s spiritual duty or purpose in Hindu philosophy.

DEI – Diversity, Equity, and Inclusivity.

Desh Pradesh – Literally "home and abroad"; often refers to a dual sense of home in diaspora.

Desi – Refers to things or people from the Indian subcontinent; literally means “of the homeland.”

East and West – Binary used to refer to the global East (e.g. South Asia) and West (e.g. Europe/America), often in cultural comparison.

Englishness – Often conflated with whiteness in postcolonial discourse.

Episiotomy – Surgical incision made at the vaginal opening during childbirth.

Gurdwara – Sikh temple.

Granthis – Priests who read from the Sikh holy scripture.

Guru Granth Sahib – The central religious scripture of Sikhism.

Guru Nanak – Founder of Sikhism and the first Sikh Guru.

Hybridity – Cultural identities formed through the mixing and interaction between different cultures.

IBD (Inflammatory Bowel Disease) – A chronic condition involving inflammation of the digestive tract.

Intersectionality – The concept that various social identities (race, gender, class) intersect to create complex systems of oppression.

Izzat – Honour or respect, especially in familial or community contexts.

Kachera – Traditional cotton undergarment worn by Sikhs.

Kali – Hindu goddess, often depicted as fierce and powerful; also means “black” and is associated with female strength.

Kama Sutra – An ancient Sanskrit text on sexuality, eroticism, and emotional fulfilment.

Kama / Shakti – Hindu deities symbolizing desire (Kama) and female energy or power (Shakti).

Kanga – Small wooden comb, one of the five articles of faith for Sikhs.

Kanjari – A derogatory term meaning “whore” in Urdu and Punjabi.

Kalank / Kaalak – Terms for "blemish" or social disgrace.

Kara – A steel bracelet, worn by Sikhs as a symbol of faith.

Kash / Kesh – Uncut hair, considered sacred in Sikhism.

Kirpan – A ceremonial sword or dagger worn by Sikhs.

Kirtan – Devotional singing of Sikh hymns.

Khoon – Blood

Kundalini – A form of primal energy believed to lie coiled at the base of the spine in Hindu tradition.

Kum Kum – A red powder used to mark the forehead; sometimes an alternative to a bindi.

Langar – Free community kitchen in Gurdwaras, offering meals to all regardless of religion or background.

Lavan – Sikh marriage hymns sung during the wedding ceremony.

Lehenga – A long skirt worn in traditional South Asian attire.

Lingam / Shiva Linga – A symbol of Shiva, representing male generative energy.

Manyatta – A cluster of huts forming a homestead in Masai communities.

Masai – Indigenous ethnic group from East Africa, known for warrior traditions.

Masai Boma – A fenced enclosure made of sticks and shrubs, often housing livestock.

Medusa – In Greek mythology, the only mortal Gorgon; often invoked in feminist discourse.

Mendhi – Henna; temporary body art applied during festivals and weddings.

Moraans – Young Masai warriors.

Nazar Lagna – The idea of being cursed or affected by the evil eye.

Otherness – A term to describe those marked as different or excluded from the dominant culture.

Parota (Paratha) – A layered, unleavened flatbread made from wheat flour, traditionally pan-fried with oil or ghee and commonly served with curries or vegetables in South Asian cuisine.

Patka – A small turban worn by Sikh boys.

Prandi – Hair extensions worn by Indian women to lengthen or thicken braids.

Prashad – Sweet, blessed food offered in Sikh temples.

Pugh – East African Sikh style of turban.

Pughri – Traditional Indian turban.

Pungha – A large blade or machete.

Rasam-rawaz – Social customs or traditions.

Rotis – Unleavened flatbreads common in South Asian cuisine.

Salwar Kameez – Traditional outfit consisting of a tunic (kameez) and baggy trousers (salwar), worn by Punjabi women.

Samosa – A savoury, triangular pastry of South Asian origin, typically filled with spiced vegetables, lentils, or meat, and either deep-fried or baked.

Satnam Sri Waheguru – A Sikh chant meaning "The name is truth."

Sari – Traditional garment worn by South Asian women; a long piece of fabric wrapped around the body.

Sati – Derived from Sanskrit, meaning “faithful wife”; also refers to a now-outlawed Hindu practice where widows self-immolated.

Self-autodriving – A self-reflective method of eliciting thoughts, ideas, and creativity from one's own visual or written material.

Self-briefing – A method involving mind maps or word diagrams to reflect or plan.

Shakti – Divine feminine power or energy in Hinduism.

Sharam – Shame; often used to discipline women’s behaviour.

Shiva – A principal deity in Hinduism, representing both creation and destruction.

Shukas – Cotton sheets traditionally worn by Masai.

Sri Guru Singh Sabha – Major Gurdwara located in Southall, UK.

Sub-total colectomy – A surgical procedure involving the removal of a portion of the large bowel.

Third Eye Chakra – The spiritual energy centre located in the forehead, associated with intuition and unconscious awareness.

Thava – A cast iron flat pan used for cooking in South Asian kitchens.

Vestal Virgins – Priestesses in ancient Rome who maintained the sacred fire of Vesta.

Yantra – Geometric diagrams used in tantric Hindu practices to aid meditation and worship.

Yoni – The womb or symbol of female generative power in Hindu philosophy.

Zari / Jari – Gold or metallic thread used in South Asian garments for decorative embroidery.