

**School of Humanities  
Department of Art**

**Smuggled in a suit with hidden pockets:  
Gujarati culture and contemporary art**

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## **Abstract**

In this exegesis I combine historical investigation with reflective artistic practice to generate original scholarship that is critical and creative. The focus is on various aspects of the migration of a particular group of Gujarati Hindu Indians. This group of Gujarati Hindu Indians left Gujarat in India at the beginning of the twentieth century to explore new trade routes. They sailed initially to South Africa to settle and then later resettled in Nairobi (Kenya). Then after Colonial upheaval caused their legal status to be threatened, many fled to England in the 1960s. My family followed this path and in this exegesis I examine the manifestation of the visual culture of this migrating cultural group—a visual culture to which I have made a sustained contribution of artwork, and which now is co-formulated together with this critical study of this largely untold art history<sup>i</sup>.

The research question is over how accumulated cultural transformations in the Gujarati Diaspora are inscribed upon an object. Ultimately, four select objects are found to refract the unique visual culture of the broader group of diasporic Gujarati people to whom my family belongs. This thesis produces a frame designed to critique the conventional museological frames of reference, and in doing so more fully realise the significant, epistemological potential of these objects. Existing physical and metaphoric frames of reference of such artefacts are also deconstructed as part of this process using both conventional academic and artistic investigation.

I aim to investigate the production of unique cultural encoding visible in four different forms, which have all been influenced by the migration of this group. First, the act of tailoring and fashion inscribe cultural experience upon garments and then contemporary art practices such as my own are examined, which inscribe narrative meaning onto art objects. I focus specifically on the transmission of cultural practices influenced by tailoring among the Gujarati Hindu tailor caste that moved first to Africa and then England, where my present day contemporary art practice is situated. I would like to explain at this stage that Gujarat being as ethnically, religiously and culturally diverse as most cities in India, this is as accurately as I am able to pinpoint our heritage and background. Having explained this, I will henceforth refer to this

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<sup>i</sup> As a result I refer to this lineage with the terms ‘my’, ‘we’ and ‘our’

group as Gujarati Darji's, this is because firstly Darji is the Gujarati for Tailor, and secondly because this is exactly how this group describes itself.

I trace the aesthetic migration of this group through the following objects: a fabled suit with hidden pockets, a goatskin overcoat, collages made from coloured confetti and mixed media sculpture. Throughout, I observe a persistent dialectical entwinement of themes. On the one hand, relocation into a new host culture repeatedly produces an identifiable element of cultural celebration. However, on the other hand, on closer inspection, these objects also often reveal an unexpected enfoldment with cultural trauma associated with displacement and integration.

As part of this investigation I also critique more conventional museological frames of reference and their physical manifestations, such as the physical mount, plinth or frame as problematic vehicles for effectively communicating cultural histories. Deeply politically entangled apparatuses, their significance to a host culture is actively problematised in my creative production and its search for the appropriate forms of presentation of cultural material. The artwork produced as part of this thesis is not intending to search for a neutral platform for the display of a cultural artefact but instead it attempts a reconsideration of the museological frame as an object-in-itself subject to intervention to allow marginal voices to reclaim histories in the museum, uniquely as a space of constant negotiation—and never conclusively established.

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## **Contents**

Introduction.....	1
Chapter 1 The suit with hidden pockets.....	16
Chapter 2 The little post-colonial museum.....	38
Chapter 3 The image in the confetti.....	56
Chapter 4 The museum as ethnographic object.....	90
Conclusion.....	114
Bibliography.....	117

## List of Figures

Figure 2.1	Me as a 7 year old boy in 1971, wearing the goatskin coat made by my grandfather in the garden of the family home in Finchley, North London .....	38
Figure 3.1	<i>The Emperor's old hand</i> , 2013 Gouache on collage on paper 40 x 32 cm.....	56
Figure 3.2	<i>Lost foundation</i> , 2013 Gouache on collage on paper 40 x 32 cm .....	56
Figure 3.3	My grandfather in front of our family shrine, Collection of the artist	58
Figure 3.4	Shrine set up by my mother in law, Collection of the artist, 2014.....	58
Figure 3.5	<i>How about me</i> , 2010 gouache on collage on digital print 47.5 x 43 cm .....	58
Figure 3.6	<i>Moon river</i> , 2010 gouache on collage on digital print 47.5 x 43 cm ..	58
Figure 3.7	<i>Portrait 2</i> , 2006 Collage on paper 38 x 33 cm.....	61
Figure 3.8	<i>Portrait 3</i> , 2006 Collage on paper 38 x 33 cm.....	61
Figure 3.9	<i>Untitled</i> , 1986/7 Pencil on paper 15 x 10 cm.....	64
Figure 3.10	<i>Untitled</i> , 1986/7 Pencil on paper 15 x 10 cm.....	64
Figure 3.11	<i>Figure and wood</i> , 1983 Charcoal on paper 88 x 54 cm .....	65
Figure 3.12	<i>Falling</i> , 1985 Charcoal on paper 88 x 54 cm.....	66
Figure 3.13	Record sleeve for Spandau Ballet's ' <i>highly strung</i> ', David Band, 1984 .....	66
Figure 3.14	<i>Lowland hero spurns the cynics</i> , Peter Howson, 1985 .....	66
Figure 3.15	<i>The Virgin Mary</i> , 1996 Chris Offili .....	75
Figure 3.16	<i>Afrodizia</i> , 1996 Chris Offili .....	75
Figure 3.17	<i>Cross 1</i> . 1999 Felt, suede, mdf, wadding 58 x 48 cm .....	79
Figure 3.18	<i>Targets</i> . 1999 Felt, suede, mdf, wadding 30 cm diameter each.....	79
Figure 3.19	<i>Le Brun</i> , 2008 Collage on paper 40 x 34 cm.....	81
Figure 3.20	<i>Basquiat</i> , 2008 Collage on paper 40 x 34 cm .....	81
Figure 3.21	<i>In the ear of the ancient one</i> , 2013 Gouache and collage on paper 40 x 32 cm .....	83
Figure 3.22	<i>Once were great (after Chevalier)</i> , 2013 Gouache and collage on paper 40 x 32 cm.....	83
Figure 4.1	<i>One rupee</i> , 2013 Mixed media on wood assemblage 24 x 19 cm.....	90
Figure 4.2	Kurt Schwitters, re-construction of Hanover <i>Merzbau</i> (1981–83) Built from photographs of original made in 1933.....	102
Figure 4.3	Marcel Duchamp, 1941, <i>Boite-en-Valise</i> .....	102
Figure 4.4	Damien Hirst, 1993 <i>Dead ends died out, explored</i> .....	102
Figure 4.5	Joseph Beuys, 1970 <i>Beuys Block</i> (view of room 3).....	103
Figure 4.6	<i>F.M.Oldham</i> , 1988 Book, wax, wire, golf ball and model cars 19 x 13 cm.....	105
Figure 4.7	<i>Salambo</i> , 1988 Book, wire, weight and model hand 19 x 13 cm.....	105
Figure 4.8	<i>N-GOG</i> , 2009 Wooden structure, book-cover, suede 21 x 15 cm ....	106
Figure 4.9	<i>All-Star</i> , 2009 Wooden structure, canvas shoes, nails 21 x 15 cm ...	106
Figure 4.10	<i>The elephant in the room</i> , 2015 Wooden structure, book cover, airline ticket, toy elephant and soldier 21 x 15 cm.....	107
Figure 4.11	<i>The key to the washroom of western culture</i> , 2015 Wooden structure, brown paper, Indian advert, key, suede and elastic band 21 x 15 cm.....	107
Figure 4.12	<i>Coyote</i> , 2011 Oil paint on digital print on paper 124 x 74.5 cm.....	108
Figure 4.13	<i>Cobra</i> , 2011 Oil paint on digital print on paper 113.5 x 78 cm.....	108

Figure 4.14	African and Indian objects .....	110
Figure 4.15	Turkish, Chinese and Thai objects .....	110

## **Introduction**

This thesis investigates how accumulated cultural transformations, brought about by the act of migration, in this case of the Gujarati-Hindu Diaspora from India, through Africa to England, are inscribed upon a specific set of objects. These objects both chart this migratory process and provide a view of the cultural and material relationships that surrounded that process. Specifically, I chart the migration of a particular artistic sensibility, manifest in the production and utility of these objects. This thesis explores the context and character of these objects in order to traverse the historical, political and contemporary situations of this cultural group, viscerally reading the inscribed transformations and reinventions of the group through the objects.

I investigate these objects in order to ask: “how do I, as an artist belonging to the Gujarati Hindu tailor caste, translate a cultural aesthetic sensibility into my contemporary artwork, and what scholarship can it produce—indeed, what knowledge?”

The point of the research is throughout to establish the importance of postcolonial objecthood as it relates to both my personal history and my art practice. Postcolonial objecthood in my case involves visual (artistic) markers of both established visual cultural forms, as well as the intermingling of these with newly emerging object forms that are introduced through the experience of living within other cultures (for me, being in Africa, England and Australia).

The objects under investigation will, one by one through the various chapters in my writing, allow a visual unfolding of the metamorphosis of this particular cultural group and the causes of their changes. These objects not only belong to, and thus reflect particular points in this unfolding history, but allow me, as an inherent carrier of this tradition, a point of embarkation, where these visual traditions start to intermingle with fresh cultural perspectives and thus reflect in my own visual production. New cultural traditions are thus formed, mirroring the hybridization that these cultural minglings have created.

As a member of the cultural sub-group under study here, auto-ethnography was the principal research methodology of this project. A critical examination of my history and that of my family enabled the unfolding of the relationship of my family to the objects and the positions of our community in a broader context. Karen O'Reilly provides an explanation of the relevance of this form of research;

Ethnographers have now directed the ethnographic lens onto themselves and are writing autobiographical life and oral histories, reflexive accounts of personal experience, sometimes called autoethnographies. Kip Jones (2007) relates this to the "growing use of tools from the arts and humanities for investigation and dissemination of social science research". These are often, but not always, located in the post-modern tradition that challenges attempts to be objective and detached. But they are also used to connect the personal story with wider cultural and social issues, that is, to make a more general claim or to illustrate theoretical arguments. Autoethnographies are fully self-reflexive accounts.<sup>1</sup>

Charlotte Aull Davies describes my reason for turning to this reflexive form of research as being most apt to my personal situation:

Reflexivity, broadly defined, means a turning back on oneself, a process of self-reference. In the context of social research, reflexivity at its most immediately obvious level refers to the ways in which the products of research are affected by the personal and process of doing research. These effects are to be found in all phases of the research process from initial selection of topic to final reporting of results. While relevant for social research in general, issues of reflexivity are particularly salient for ethnographic research in which the involvement of the researcher in the society and culture of those being studied is particularly close.<sup>2</sup>

However, Davies also outlines the most obvious problem with this form of self-reflexive analysis:

On the other hand, this turning back, or self-examination, both individual and collective, clearly can lead to a form of self-absorption that is also part of the definition of reflexivity in which boundaries between subject and object disappear, the one becomes the other, a process that effectively denies the possibility of social research.<sup>3</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> Karen O'Reilly, *Ethnographic Methods* (New York: Routledge, 2012), 130.

<sup>2</sup> Charlotte Aull Davies, *Reflexive Ethnography: A guide to researching selves and others* (Oxon: Tailor & Francis, 1999), 4.

<sup>3</sup> Davies, *Reflexive Ethnography*, 5.

Though I acknowledge this potential problem, and see that questions might arise as to the relevance of the personal to the plural, my being an active member of the culture I describe and its journey gives validity to my research. Through this mode of autoethnographic research, I not only examine my history but also enact a form of self-determination significant to the wider cultural concerns of the Afro-Indian Gujarati Darji community in post-colonial Britain and narrate a timely story for the host western society that we all now call “home.” I hope that an acceptance of the relevance of this story then leads to further understanding (even celebration) of the products of our community and the changes they set in motion within the culture we inhabit.

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Texts such as Salman Rushdie’s *Imaginary Homelands: Essays and Criticism 1981-1991*,<sup>4</sup> and Homi K. Bhabha’s *The Location of Culture*,<sup>5</sup> have helped me orient my art practice within a fracture in the identity of British society. It is a space characterized by communities of colour that relocated to England from former colonies following decolonization. Appropriately, artworks produced in this space have their background in my experience of the visual forms of the Gujarati caste and in the methodologies I learnt during the education I received in a British art school. Both experience and methodology coalesce to create a third space, which allows the vivid visualization of a life lived within this space of negotiation. This space is still in constant contention, but through its very nature it has given rise to one of the most exciting spaces of contemporary art production: that of the diaspora.

I argue that the migration of Gujarati caste into a host culture and the ensuing socio-cultural dynamic has produced a cultural encoding readable in often seemingly inexpressive objects. Every day objects, consumed and discarded, enable a reading of the changing place of a migratory culture, and provide an understanding of where my community and I stood at various times in our recent history. I begin such a reading through examining a particular suit jacket tailored by my family in colonial Kenya specifically for diamond smugglers. The mainly native African smugglers

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<sup>4</sup> Salman Rushdie, *Imaginary Homelands: Essays and Criticism 1981–1991* (London: Penguin, 1991).

<sup>5</sup> Homi K. Bhabha, *The Location of Culture* (New York: Routledge, 1994).

approached my grandfather as well as several others in the migrant Gujarati community to adapt a garment to hide small diamonds, to enable the diamonds to be smuggled out of South Africa.

The first chapter takes as its focus the suit jacket with hidden pockets as described above. This is an example of display and concealment, as well as celebration and trauma, revealing much about the Gujarati diasporic community under investigation. The chapter is an investigation of the influence of colonial/postcolonial conditions on the visual iconographies of Gujarati Darjis as they moved from India to Africa and then England. Methodologically, this historical examination is partially achieved through auto-ethnographic methods, transcribing a genealogy of the migratory journey of my own family, and its relationship with the aesthetic sensibility of their tailoring.

The apartheid like system that existed in colonial Kenya, (referring here to the way different racial groups were physically segregated as they were in apartheid South Africa, discussed and further revealed in Chapter 1), would have prohibited the White community from conducting business with the Indian community at that time, whilst the Black community would have had no choice. The jacket enfolds these states of cultural display and concealment, defining the hierarchies put into place by the White colonial power. Except for employment with the Indians, opportunities for the Black community were severely lacking under the apartheid system. The Gujarati community in South Africa and later in Kenya were therefore wedged between the white colonial and the native black African, belonging to neither and forced to negotiate between the two. Although there is some writing regarding this history by the African members of this group, the “Indian version” is elusive, as it is a history that has been mainly orally transmitted and is seldom documented in text. Accordingly, I have used interviews with some Indians who experienced colonial life in Nairobi (including my father) to study Gujarati perspectives on transition to decolonization in Africa and Britain of the 1960s–1980s in greater depth.

In chapter 2, I explore the existence of this cultural sensibility of translation and negotiation in a child’s goatskin coat also designed by my grandfather after immigrating to Britain. Made from a goatskin (a garment in this most African of

materials, used historically by the tribal people of Kenya for items such as water carrying bags), which my grandfather had brought with him from Africa, the winter coat was especially designed for me as a child to keep out the cold English weather. The goatskin material of the coat became a remnant of an African culture passed through on the way to London, a cultural imprint within our personal, ever hybridising culture. Through this example of cultural merging, I establish that my community's central value systems, constituting both religious and cultural beliefs that have carried through all the migrations undertaken and that still hold sway in our present post colonial western surroundings, has carried through these various migratory paths, and has enabled my community to establish and re-establish itself under varying and often adverse circumstances. It has also adopted values of the host cultures without too great a sense of loss nor the need to always look back, in order to re-establish its identity and overlay one with the other, often merging as a form of adaptation and thus survival. In England, this cultural merging has allowed not just survival, but as I will go on to discuss, this community has thrived culturally and economically beyond expectation.

Through detailed analysis of this object, this investigation simultaneously relates the changes in British political policy in regards to those from minority backgrounds during the later stage of this migration, particularly focusing in the 1980s on the visual culture influencing the first generation of Gujarati migrants to Britain. The societal shifts heavily influenced this migratory group and are seen in the political pressures informing my early artistic career as a young Gujarati Indian in a British art school during the period of Margaret Thatcher's political leadership.

From the suit jacket with hidden pockets and the goatskin coat, I then move on to explore my own creations in chapter 3, beginning with several abstract paper collages made of small, confetti-like paper circles painted in gouache which I made later in my adult career. These collages take ethnic flashpoints and ethnographic objects as their subject matter, among other things. The conditions of my subjectivity during this time are interpreted through a critical assessment of dominant and marginal artistic norms and cultural iconographies present in these works. This discussion also looks at multi-migrations to explore the adaptations of outsiders to host cultures, in particular through their visual culture. I thus critically examine the

discourses and artworks of other diasporic artists, in order to establish the area to which my artwork seeks to contribute. These artworks follow elements of instructions taught to me by my grandfather in my early teens for hand tailoring a shirt. Specifically, the processes of designing, translating to cloth, and then stitching together the separate elements, are recalibrated in these artworks. The collages are also first drawn and transferred to tracing paper. Collaged in separate pieces in order to produce shapes of different colours (very similar to pattern-cutting a garment), they are finally glued back together on to a backing sheet, much like a finished article of clothing. My connection to caste is inscribed into the collage through this reference to my cultural background, embracing the transmission of adaptable cultural practices. These works as interventions into the migration of visual culture through Africa and then England are explained and extended throughout the third part of this exegesis.

The first art project (discussed in chapter 3) is a series of collages that continue an existing body of work, which explores the subjects of diaspora and ethnography. The chapter discusses not only British-African Gujarati Darji culture, and its metamorphosis over the last few decades, but the diaspora and ethnographies of similar ‘others’ in parallel subcultures—examining the changes all our efforts have brought about in the western host cultures that surround us.

In the fourth and final chapter, I begin with a sculpture that reflects on the small domestic shrines set up by Hindu families all over the world and expand to focus on the underlying dynamics that underpin such display. Through this research I turn attention toward the museological as a frame of reference, with a special interest in the cultural positioning of the objects, as a parallel to the social positioning of the people that produced them (the journey of the Gujarati Darjis being a case in point)—rethinking the museological frame to allow for more elusive phenomena than museological practice generally entertains, especially in reference to cultural context that is stripped from ethnographic objects when they are removed from their original place of inception. This is for me of particular interest for the reason that I directly associate the objects of my culture held in various museums around the western world (as well as those of various ‘other’ cultures) and their means of display as directly reflecting the objective/subjective relationship of my culture to the

white British culture through coloniality and beyond. As an extension of this relationship, I research if the changing state of museological practice should/could reflect changes in the power balance of these relationships, or if indeed there is any relevance left in the holding of ethnographic materials in such a historically subjective manner. This rethinking is explored through sculptures that problematize the normative means and materials of display. Steel and Perspex are replaced with twine and binding (materials that directly reflect the practices and cultures of the ‘other’ as often represented in ethnographic museums as a focus of the west’s exotic gaze), while entwining the museological frame with influences from a larger aesthetic and cultural sensibility, premised upon adaptation. These sculptures—the physical constructions and the critical metaphorical frame they create—fulfil two important criteria: firstly, they question the trajectory of the historical artistic sensibility of the Gujarati diaspora in the advent of the compromised contexts of contemporary art; a compromise due mainly to the un-belonging status of this community when first it physically entered a western arena (and thus leading to a situation where contemporary art has not functioned and thus reflected the concerns of a section of its own community). Secondly, as ways to negotiate changes in the relationships between the producers of these objects (such as the people of my own community), and the western environments within which these objects are often found. As such, these sculptures expand the frame knit from the life and history of ethnographic objects and their relationships to the cultures that create them.

The second art project (discussed in chapter 4) originates in the viewing of ethnographic material at the *Ethnologisches Museum* in the suburb of Dahlem, Berlin in early 2011. Seeing the immense collection—the largest in Europe, took me back to an earlier time in my art practice when such African object forms had enormous significance in my paintings. As an expansion of the first project, which is concerned with images, this investigation turns to the realm of the object and ponders what would happen if the ethnographic object were to wander out of its frame and into “the world,” it would then leave the means of its presentation without its sole purpose as simply a holder or crutch. The artwork is a set of 3-dimensional works that begin by considering the tools of presentation and museological display; expanding this form as an artwork in itself and not just as an object of utility. This deconstruction of the museological frame problematizes the ethos of neutrality

associated with western museological culture concerning minority and colonial cultures. It explores a freedom of cultural expression never before granted, and questions the extent to which the merging of experiences transmutes the nature of the evolving norms of modern western societies in the display of cultural artefacts.

Finally the chapter summarises and reflects on the research and ventures a model for rethinking the reconfiguration of Gujarati visual culture into a future museological frame of reference.

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This thesis also asks how such inscriptions can fill physical and metaphoric frames of reference that compel museological research to be more self-critical. Overall, this investigation reclaims the museological frame of reference (the physical mount, plinth or frame, or indeed the host culture— far from neutral platforms and in fact objects-in-themselves shaped by ideology)—raising questions concerning hybrid or diasporic identities and contexts more broadly.

A manifestation of celebration and its tragic enfoldment with trauma emerges through the investigation of these objects: the suit with hidden pockets, the goatskin coat, the collages and the reclaimed museological frames. Here, as elsewhere, the unfolding story of post-coloniality and its discourses involves many moments of trauma caused by racism and separatism, specifically through cultural transformations caused by geographical displacement and vexing relations of power, of (former) subordination, and as such, several of these flashpoints are discussed herein. Among these historical transformations, there are also moments of display and concealment, manifesting because of the political and social changes in power structures between peoples and the changing face of the visual culture of a former colonial centre as it mutates through its encounter with the visual culture of the marginal 'other' in its society. This doctorate is also emphatically about the tremendous value enshrined in aesthetic decisions and the influence of display and concealment on these decisions. Finally, it negotiates many of the formerly concealed ideas of an oppressed people and thus helps to bring forth at least a small part of the plethora of that which has been historically unconsidered.

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The first two chapters of this exegesis focus on historical articles of clothing created from a familial tradition of tailoring. I also present and consider two of my own art projects, discussed in Chapters 3 and 4. These art projects explore postcolonial objecthood. Whether an object of utility, veneration, or art, the deeper dynamics of cultural resonance and dissonance form central interests in my art practice and my life. A love of the form of an object and an interest in the cultural significance carried by objects have enabled me to construct a personal aesthetic and value system through the manipulation of collected objects often intermingled with and related to imaginary objects. I introduce this methodology in the later chapters. A life long study of ethnographic objects informs much of my artwork and has aided my realization of the importance of the framing of ethnographic objects. This realization has informed the works described here, and in particular, the second of the projects that are presented as the creative production component of this research.

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During this research, I have begun to reconcile academic discourses of Postcolonial thought with a subject placement that I have lived all my life. It has been interesting to put the experiences of both my Afro-Gujarati culture, and the lives of other migrants that came on mass from Africa into a wider social, historical and political perspective. The one quote that started my journey is from one of the foremost writers of Postcolonial theory, Homi K. Bhabha, who states that the position I inhabit is a 'third space' located 'in-between' cultures. He has also expressed the need for a culturally aware art that reflects this position:

The borderline work of culture demands an encounter with 'newness' that is not part of the continuum of past and present. It creates a sense of the new as an insurgent act of cultural translation. Such art does not merely recall the past as social cause or aesthetic precedent; it renews the past, refiguring it as a contingent 'in-between' space, that innovates and interrupts the performance of the present. The 'past-present' becomes part of the necessity, not the nostalgia, of living.<sup>6</sup>

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<sup>6</sup> Bhabha, *The Location of Culture*, 10.

Though very useful in kick-starting my own thinking, I found Bhabha's text lacked a sufficient connection to real world experience. It is Salman Rushdie on the other hand who most aptly describes my own experience of the societal position of the 'other' in my youth:

We are Hindus who have crossed the black water; we are Muslims who eat pork. And as a result—as my use of the Christian notion of the Fall indicates—we are now partly of the West. Our identity is at once plural and partial. Sometimes we feel that we straddle two cultures; at other times, that we fall between two stools. But however ambiguous and shifting this ground may be, it is not an infertile territory for a writer to occupy. If literature is in part the business of finding new angles at which to enter reality, then once again our distance, our long geographical perspective, may provide us with such angles.<sup>7</sup>

Madan Sarup has provided a valuable methodological rendering of the experience of the migrant, described in his book *Identity Culture and the Postmodern World* thus:

I want to suggest that the social system appoints many incomers to spend a period of service testing the boundary. Migrants mark the outer limits of group experience; they provide a point of contrast, which gives the norm some scope and dimension. At present the norm stresses similarity, but what would happen if the norm changed and stressed difference? What would happen if there were recognition of the diversity of subjective positions and cultural identities?<sup>8</sup>

The change that Sarup suggests is strongly mirrored by Vron Ware's 2007 book *Who cares about Britishness?*<sup>9</sup> which looks at the shifting terms of the race debate and the recently established importance of broadening the parameters by which Britishness can be judged, to include the stories and experiences of migrants in Britain, as well as those British Citizens of a widened British society.

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<sup>7</sup> Rushdie, *Imaginary Homelands*, 15.

<sup>8</sup> Madan Sarup, *Identity Culture and the Postmodern World*, (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 1996), 12.

<sup>9</sup> Vron Ware, *Who Cares about Britishness?: A Global View of the National Identity Debate*, (London: Arcadia Books, 2007).

Mugo Gatheru is a Black African writer who has provided valuable research material and has aided my background understanding of the personal lives of my family in colonial Africa, as well as the greater story of British colonialism. A member of the Kikuyu tribe, Gatheru gives an autobiographical account of the lived conditions of the individual Kenyan native in relation to Indians and Whites, in *Child of Two Worlds*.<sup>10</sup>

Reading about the lives of Mahatma Gandhi and Jawaharlal Nehru have filled many gaps in my own history as well as that of my cultural group and of the greater history of India. I have researched these great men in the books *Gandhi: Naked Ambitions* by Jad Adams,<sup>11</sup> *Gandhi and Civil Disobedience: The Mahatma in Indian Politics 1928–34* by Judith M Brown,<sup>12</sup> and “Gandhi’s Formative and Transitional Years in South Africa” by Robert Schwartz,<sup>13</sup> and finally *The Discovery of India* by Jawaharlal Nehru himself.<sup>14</sup> These seminal statesmen were involved in the forming of modern India and instigators of attitudes and responses to the migratory Indian ‘out in the world’, a situation that I attempt to unravel in chapter two.

A seminal work by Dilip Hero unfolds the history and political consequences of the mass migrations of native British citizens from the colonies of the Caribbean Islands and East Africa to Britain in the middle of the 20<sup>th</sup> century.<sup>15</sup> Hero describes the social upheavals brought about by the enforced movement endured by so many thousands of coloured minorities following decolonisation, and how the experience

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<sup>10</sup> Mugo Gatheru, *Child of two Worlds* (London: Routledge & Kegan Paul, 1964).

<sup>11</sup> Adams, Jad. *Gandhi: Naked Ambitions* (London: Quercus, 2010).

<sup>12</sup> Brown, Judith M. *Gandhi and Civil Disobedience: The Mahatma in Indian Politics 1928–34*. (London: Cambridge University Press, 1977).

<sup>13</sup> Schwartz, Robert. “Gandhi’s Formative and Transitional Years in South Africa.” *History* 489 (Fall, 2008).

<sup>14</sup> Nehru, Jawaharlal. *The Discovery of India*. (London: Oxford University Press, 2005).

<sup>15</sup> Dilip Hero, *Black British, White British* (London: Penguin Books, 1973).

of those so-called ‘others’ in a Britain still stuck in a mire of imperial and hence racist sentimentality was tainted by colour. This particular book explains much of my personal experience, and has been both thought provoking and creatively enriching in terms of my writing and art making. Another similarly informative book about the Asian migrant experience in post-colonial Britain is by Roger Ballard.<sup>16</sup> Ballard lays out the early history of the Asian experience in England, noting ways in which relationships developed between both differing Indian communities, and the native white community in which they now lived. Most interestingly, he explains how the business and mercantile aspirations of these communities, including those of my own specific community, rooted and flourished in those early years of post colonial internship, and thus allow me to later in history posit a cultural hybrid culture of belonging (one in which I place myself), that used these beginnings as a spring board to a new and further flourishing identity.

A.A. Gill explores and challenges the major systems of British culture and identity,<sup>17</sup> arguing that there is a chasm between what Britain thinks it is, and what it actually is. Gill includes reasons for the changes that occurred in British society in the 1980s and in the core cultural values of England as a nation. It also has enabled me to relate some of the experiences of my own family to those of other former migrant-outsiders that journeyed from the outside to the inside of British society, and is an important reference point for this research.

Niall Ferguson’s is a fascinating biography of the white man’s experience of colonialism,<sup>18</sup> and though it did not add measurably to my research, it was still illuminating to discover the workings and attitudes of the higher power in the colonial equation. It also provides a wonderful overlap in the attitude of this community with that of the Indian community (including my own), towards the lasting impact of African iconography on our visual cultures.

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<sup>16</sup> Roger Ballard, *Desh Pardesh—The South Asian Presence in Britain* (London: Hurst, 1994).

<sup>17</sup> A.A. Gill, *The Angry Island: Hunting the English* (London: Phoenix, 2005).

<sup>18</sup> Niall Ferguson, *Empire: How Britain Made The Modern World* (London: Basic Books, 2004).

Frank Willett has been another interesting author in terms of researching the status of this particular so-called native art and its changing relationship to the western vernacular.<sup>19</sup> Of special interest to me in this instance was the writer's assertion that these visual forms (as it covers a very large range) have a power and a resonance way beyond that of their native surroundings. This can certainly be seen in the examples of the use of ethnographic visual forms in a wider context by western artists such as Pablo Picasso,<sup>20</sup> Neil Cox asserts Picassos re-formulation of African sculpture in the early part of the 20<sup>th</sup> century (a point where the art world is still looking at ethnographic material with a subordinative western gaze). Henry Moore,<sup>21</sup> another giant figure of European modernism but working later on in the 20<sup>th</sup> Century, is affected by and inspired by Mayan Sculpture, by which time the gaze is starting to change in its conception of the material viewed.

Various texts describing The Black Arts movement of the 1980s have been highly informative, as it was a movement that I encountered at the time.<sup>22</sup> The most interesting of these texts has been from a publication from INIVA (Institute of International Visual Arts) in which several writers examine this phenomena and its historical relevance, including Rasheed Araeen, one of the protagonists of this movement.

Contemporary investigations into the 'other' in art practices and discussion of present thought fills the pages of the invaluable *Third Text* publication, originally instigated and edited by Rasheed Araeen. As well as finding much of value in conceptual terms, it has also provided fascinating discussion of those whose practices have been regarded as 'other' in the Euro-American mainstream.

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<sup>19</sup> Frank Willett, *African Art* (London: Thames and Hudson, 1971).

<sup>20</sup> Cox Neil, *Cubism* (London: Phaidon Press, 2000).

<sup>21</sup> Jean Fisher, *Exhibitions and the world at large* (London: Tate Gallery, 2009), 3.

<sup>22</sup> Gilane Tawardros, ed., *Changing States: Contemporary Art and Ideas in an Era of Globalisation* (London: Institute of International Visual Arts, 2004).

The artwork of Eduardo Paolozzi,<sup>23</sup> in *The Lost Kingdoms and Six Paper Moons from Nahuatl* exhibition at the now defunct Museum of Mankind in London in 1985, is one of the few instances of an equal and balanced interaction between ethnographic objects and their changing status in a constantly mutating British art world. I felt moved by the visual complexity of this show when I first saw it, which placed ‘western’ artworks within the same framework of presentation with the ethnographic objects held in the collection of this museum. However, I had no frame of reference to comprehend its conceptual complexity. It has been both exciting for me to re-visit this exhibition through the original catalogue and enlightening to be able to finally appreciate its full scope, 30 years later.

*Art and Artifact: The Museum as Medium* by James Putnam has enabled me to establish a definitive link between established museological practices and materials, and contemporary art practices.<sup>24</sup> In addition, Hans Belting has allowed for the placement of my art practice of the ‘other’ within the context established above.<sup>25</sup> This second book also helped me critically examine the ever-changing relationship of ethnographic objects with western museology, and relate this formulation to a wider socio-cultural background.

The ultimate contribution of this investigation is twofold: firstly, the exegesis articulates an as yet untold cultural and historical phenomenon (caused by the above metamorphosis in this cultural group and its changing relationships with those that surround it) and secondly, the accompanying body of original artwork extends this phenomenon into the present. The entwined lines of inquiry reveal events that are refracted by the objects. Ultimately, recurrent themes emerge, particularly those of celebration and trauma, through artistic strategies of display and concealment. These strategies come about because of the positions of this community within the various cultures it has inhabited, a placement that is usually thrust upon it rather than one it

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<sup>23</sup> Eduardo Paolozzi, *Lost Magic Kingdoms and Six Paper Moons from Nahuatl* (London: British Museum Press, 1985).

<sup>24</sup> James Putnam, *Art and Artifact: The Museum as Medium* (London: Thames and Hudson, 2001).

<sup>25</sup> Hans Belting, *Art History after Modernism* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2003).

chooses to inhabit of its own free will and choice, inevitably causing trauma entwined with racial prejudice and segregation. Though later in more contemporary western culture, this situation moves towards a more celebratory paradigm of acceptance through the proliferation of a multi-cultural society. Through this writing I research and thus establish this journey in the following writing, from the point of view of both the macro, socio political environments and changes that took place in and around the various places my community has migrated, to the micro effects they have had on my cultural make up and art making practices.

## Chapter 1

### Introduction

My grandfather, Mr. Chabilddas Kalyanjee, whose parents, Kalyanjee and Nankor, first traveled to South Africa from Gujarat in the early 20<sup>th</sup> Century, was an Indian trader who worked his way up the financial ladder through tenacity and daring, both in Kenya, where the family moved to in the 1930s, and in England. While in Kenya, he built a thriving tailoring business that survived through all conditions as he was always thinking of ways to make an extra shilling: he made school uniforms, blankets during the war years, crocheted tablecloths for British dining tables, and even tailored suits with hidden pockets for diamond smugglers. I begin this chapter with a discussion and analysis of this latter garment as my first investigation into Gujarati postcolonial objecthood—providing a contextual frame for the unfolding historical account of the migratory journey taken by my family and others of the Afro-Indian colonial community through Kenya.

Examining the full meaning of the diamond smuggler suit, and the pockets hidden therein, requires researching the roots of the relationships between blacks, whites and Indians in an almost apartheid culture in Kenya during colonialism, and the effects it had on the personal lives of the various cultural groups that lived there. I describe the problems entrenched within the rigidity of East African coloniality, for instance in the dealings of Indians with Africans under this racist social regime, in an attempt to better comprehend the significance of the transactions surrounding the suit with hidden pockets. I specifically question if such dealings inadvertently contributed to the racism, shedding light on how and why the Indians (concentrating on my community of Gujarati Darjis) in colonial Kenya were economically successful. The making of bespoke suit jackets for diamond smugglers refracts many social complexities. Further, I trace the skills that the story represents: adaptation for economic and social prosperity—and study how they persist in a contemporary diasporic culture, also for these Gujarati Tailors, throughout their migration to England.

I have been forced to put together the story of this garment through various conversations with people who had heard of the object rather than experienced it

first-hand. In spite of the inevitable distortion, it is through the retelling of this story that the core values of the Gujarati diaspora in which I am interested are translated, values that in this instance include the cultural practices linked with a specific professional identity of Gujarati tailoring that directly relate to its keeping this sub-culture alive and distinct. Throughout this oral history, the value of carrying one's culture through different environments, and working to successfully optimize whatever situation prevails is impressed upon the listener. In scrutinizing this particular object and its relevance to the social placement of the Gujarati Tailor community, I establish a context that is specifically engendered by race and the relationships highlighted by colour in this historical moment. In order to establish a grounded understanding of this relationship, I will include a very brief history of slavery to add to the understanding of the racial ferment that led to the African native's position in the social hierarchy as it existed during my grandfathers time in Africa generally and thus in colonial Kenya.

### **Diamond smuggling, racism and coloniality**

The business of smuggling diamonds from the former Dutch colony of South Africa, through various routes, to Europe and the Middle East thrived in the early 20<sup>th</sup> century. The diamond business had been for some time solely in the hands of the De Beers Company. Famously founded by Cecil Rhodes at the beginning of the 19<sup>th</sup> century, with ruthless determination he made the company into a cartel that controlled the world diamond industry. By the middle of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, De Beers was successfully run under the auspices of Harry Oppenheimer, who had succeeded his father Ernest Oppenheimer in 1957, and who made sure the strictest possible control was kept on this monopoly in order to regulate world prices. From Edward Jay Epstein comes the following:

Through the brilliant financial maneuvers of Sir Ernest Oppenheimer, the diamond cartel had succeeded in gaining control of virtually all the diamond mines in the world by the early 1950s. It had made its arrangements with the government of South Africa, the colonial administrations in Angola, the Congo and Sierra Leone, and with Dr. Williamson in Tanganyika. It was fully backed by the British, Belgian and the French governments, and it was recognized by every other government concerned as the official channel for the diamond trade. There were still unofficial channels, however, that the

diamond cartel did not control: the smuggling routes that led from the diamond mines and diggings in southern and western Africa to entrepôts such as Monrovia and Beirut.<sup>26</sup>

Diamonds were easier to smuggle out of African diamond mines prior to the 1950s because it was difficult to implement effective measures to stop the smuggling.

Again from Epstein:

The methods ranged from using rubber band catapults to fling the diamonds over the barbed wire fences to having a surgeon hollow out a niche in an anklebone in which diamonds could be concealed under a bandage. The most common means was for individuals to simply swallow diamonds and then recover them once outside the compound. Because of the minute size of diamonds, it was virtually impossible to detect them except by X-raying the entire body. However, employees could not be subjected to constant X-rays without exposing them to lethal doses of gamma rays and thereby endangering their lives. X-ray examinations, therefore, could only be given to a small proportion of randomly selected workers each day. At best, the X-ray machine was a psychological deterrent to theft. Like the closed-circuit television cameras that conspicuously scanned back and forth at the mines, X-rays were another demonstration to black workers of the white man's magic. But once the employees understood that these electronic devices had only a relatively small chance of detecting smuggled diamonds, their value as deterrents was seriously impaired.<sup>27</sup>

The diamonds were initially stolen from the mines by the mineworkers, who sold them on to middlemen of many nationalities (though they were often Middle Eastern as there were major established smuggling routes to Monrovia, in Liberia, and on to Beirut). The actual carriage of the contraband became ever more elusive, in this case it was concealed in a fabled garment, tailored for this purpose by my grandfather and commissioned in Kenya as the distance was thought to make it almost impossible to trace back to its origin, as well as the fact that the family was known for their skill and entrepreneurial spirit from our days in South Africa.

Once the diamonds were out of Africa (from South Africa as well as other larger diamond producing West African nations such as Sierra Leone and the Congo), they were sold on to any of the many countries that had the facility to cut and polish them

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<sup>26</sup> Edward J. Epstein, *The Diamond Invention* (London: Hutchinson Publishing Group, 1982), 127.

<sup>27</sup> Epstein, *The Diamond Invention*, 129.

ready to be sold as an end product, as well as official dealers who had an interest in getting diamonds as cheaply as possible. An anecdote from Epstein refers to the operations of Sir Percy Sillitoe, a former head of counter-espionage at MI-5 who was hired to smash the smuggling racket:

Then through surveillance and intercepted mail, they traced the traffic from the diamond fields of Sierra Leone through the entrepôts of Liberia to the wholesale markets in Belgium. It turned out that reputable European merchants, who were also customers of the cartel, had been surreptitiously financing the African smugglers and one of the principal buyers of the smuggled goods was the Soviet Union, which then critically needed industrial diamonds to retool its factories.<sup>28</sup>

The suit jacket in question, which facilitated some of the smuggling carried out by the middlemen, offered various means of concealment and was constructed such that it had a double lining. The gathers in the pockets of the second lining had hid the diamonds in the pockets of the first. The stitching was highly finished but could easily be unpicked when necessary.

The concealed pockets became a trademark detail of the story. I clearly remember that the jackets my grandfather wore when I was a child had hidden pockets in them, particularly in the inner collar and in the inner sleeve. Needless to say, this suit jacket has taken its place in the orally transmitted mythology of my community. Tailors from that generation have now all but disappeared, but this legend has a legacy—such deceptive pockets were a standard fixture in many suits made thereafter by the Gujarati Darjis, as those in my grandfather's suits attest.

The suit succinctly encapsulates the enfoldment of celebration and trauma in the broader dialectic of concealment and display surrounding race and race relations in the Gujarati diasporic experience. Designing and tailoring this suit was a matter for celebration for the creation of such a successfully profitable garment. Unfortunately, the suit was not only used for purposes of misappropriation, but was also created in a hegemonic and symptomatically racist environment. European diamond mining necessitated the slavery of the native African, who was nowhere to be seen in the places where these diamonds ultimately arrived. The Indian was stuck in the middle

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<sup>28</sup> Epstein, *The Diamond Invention*, 131.

in a position where he belonged to neither group but inadvertently worked for one against the other. The relationships between the various races in this story, thus mirrored in the physical make-up of the jacket, indicates the complex hierarchical power structure between these various communities at this time, and helps explain the racial stratification in our community in Kenya, where my family re-located from South Africa between the 1930's and the middle of the 20<sup>th</sup> Century.<sup>29</sup>

### **Indian traders**

It seems that the British recognized and allowed the Indian penchant for business and trade to flourish. This is one of the main reasons so many remained after de-colonisation, as there was much money to be made even in the volatile and often violent environment that Kenya soon became. This penchant had been bringing Indians to Africa from India in fact for over 2,000 years:

One of the earliest recorded navigational accounts, *Periplus of the Erythrean Sea*, circa A.D. 80, mentions Indian as well as Arab ships trading along the coast [east African]. A Chinese geographical work, dating from about the thirteenth century, mentions Gujarati settlement in the same area. Professor Copeland (Sir R. Copeland, *East Africa and its Invaders*, London, Oxford University Press, 1938) has drawn attention to the long-standing Indian facility for trading. 'Much of the Ocean shipping', he writes, 'was Indian-owned and Indian-manned, and since Arabs in general seem never to have shown much aptitude for the technique of business, it is probable that the Indians were from the earliest days the masters of finance, the bankers and money-changers and money-lenders.' Marco Polo wrote of Indian ships "which visit the island of "Madeigascar" and that other of Zanghibar".<sup>30</sup>

In opening the discussion of race relations, (to follow later in the chapter) involving the Gujarati expatriate community in colonial Kenya, it is important firstly to understand that Indians especially from Gujarat had been migrating to South Africa for many generations in search of lucrative opportunities to trade, as determined above, and thus my family and sub-culture were treading a well trodden path when first my grandfather moved here at the beginning of the 20<sup>th</sup> century. It is also important to state at this time that Indians were moving from one centre of British

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<sup>29</sup> This timeline is an approximation by my mother from stories told to her by my father.

<sup>30</sup> George Delf, *Asians in East Africa* (London, New York & Nairobi: Oxford University Press, 1963), 1.

colonial rule to another and that it was a time when this rule was coming under scrutiny and calls for collapse due to its injustices and segregative practices.

As a founding point throughout this writing I should like to state the importance of trade to this community, historically, it was the Indian need to trade and build economic prosperity based on the particular skill set of tailoring tied up with its cultural relevance in a caste based society, that was the driver for this migration to Africa, and others to follow to Britain and then in the case of my own family to Australia.

Because of this business acumen, the Indian became a very important cog in the machinery of colonial Africa, and was vital to the efficient and successful running of these economies. Recognized many times in history, this fact is illustrated by Salman Rushdie:

Meanwhile the stereotyping goes on. Blacks have rhythm, Asians work hard. I've been told by Tory politicians that the Conservative Party seriously discussed the idea of wooing the Asians and leaving the Afro-Caribbeans to the Labour Party, because Asians are such good capitalists. In the new Empire, as in the old one, it seems our masters are willing to use the tried and tested strategies of divide-and-rule.<sup>31</sup>

Even though the colonial rulers did not give Indians complete freedom, racial equality does not seem to have been a primary aim for the Indian. More important was the need to trade independently as a means for social and economic betterment.

### **Social hierarchies in British colonies**

For my father's generation, there is a very strong nostalgia for what my father called the 'golden days' in Nairobi that come, I believe, from the natural human trait of forgetting the bad times and remembering the good. But over and above this there is the natural instinct of the trader to trade and be allowed to do so under any circumstances, thus to be able to enjoy the fruits of that labour I believe lead to a certain happiness whatever the situation might be for others in society. After all, though my generation has learnt the value of racial equality and fair treatment of all

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<sup>31</sup> Salman Rushdie, *Imaginary Homelands: Essays and criticism 1981-1991* (London: Granta, 1991), 138.

regardless of colour, creed or race, my father's generation of Indians hailed from an India mired in racial hierarchy based on the caste system, thus the forming of another such system probably brought no big surprises.

In Kenya in the 1960s, the British operated in the topmost tier in a three-tier state, in which my father and grandfather's generation of Gujarati Indians formed the second tier. The separation of society was reflected, for instance, in the public transport system. Public buses were divided into three sections: whites sitting at the front, Indians in the middle and Blacks at the back. The separation of the three communities also reflected in suburban life; there were sumptuously rich and highly manicured white suburbs, middle class and business-like living for the Indians and slum like ghetto settlements for the Blacks.

This position unfortunately intrinsically involves a very real part in the oppression of the third tier, the native black majority. Mugo Gatheru, an African native of the Kikuyu tribe, describes an example of this disparity: "The city of Nairobi was divided into several different locations according to the different races, which were living in it, the Europeans occupied the best sections, the Asians occupied the second best, the Africans the poor third."<sup>32</sup> The disparity did not end with geographical division, but extended to all aspects of life, including pay rates:

I found that the Africans working in the city (Nairobi), whether clerks or labourers, skilled or unskilled, were getting less wages and salaries than their European and Asian counterparts. I discovered to my utter amazement and horror that an African with a first class Bachelor of Science degree was getting \$15 per month, while an Asian with a senior Cambridge school certificate equivalent to the present Ordinary Level of the General Certificate of Education, was getting \$30 per month, and a European with a London University matriculation certificate was getting from \$45 to \$50 per month.<sup>33</sup>

The continued subordination of the native Africans served as a constant re-affirmation of the pseudo-middle-class status of the Indian population of which we were a part, a constant reminder that, despite living under the shadow of British Colonial rulers, the Indian community were a step up from the bottom tier which

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<sup>32</sup> Mugo Gatheru, *Child of Two Worlds* (London: Routledge & Kegan Paul, 1964), 73.

<sup>33</sup> Gatheru, *Child of Two Worlds*, 76.

they as a community occupied in India during the British Raj. It was also a reminder of various states of poverty that a large number of inhabitants faced at home, in the villages of Gujarat in India for instance where the Hindu Darji community, though not at the bottom-most tier of the caste system, certainly lived in poverty and financial hardship. The change from being at the bottom of the far more complex and stratified Indian class system to the middle level of a far simpler class system, although based on an abhorrent racial segregation, seems to have been an almost refreshing change (an assumption borne out by conversations I have had with those that lived through those times including both my father and father-in-law, who both have such positive memories of them). Opposingly, this challenge was not taken up by all in our society as I still have relatives in the villages in the area where my grandmother was born that deal with poverty and an often voiced wish to move to more economically lucrative destinations.

### **Role of Indians in British project of colonisation**

Colonisation, with its objective of conquering the nations and peoples of Africa, as well as many others, was based on the African people being less civilized than the European—thereby perpetuating a subjugative position through purposeful ignorance in Europe itself, as proven by the abhorrent slave trade, and the wealth of materials that could be gained from the African continent, a prime example being the diamonds in the story at the beginning of this chapter. The distortion of colonised societies and their incumbent codes of moral and humane conduct occurred through bloody violence and malicious and devious manipulation. The colonising rule of divide and conquer is well documented. Conn Hallinan, for example, describes the convenient role played by Indians in the British colonizing project:

Sometimes populations were splintered by religions, as with Hindus, Sikhs and Muslims in India. Sometimes societies were divided by tribes, as with the Ibos and Hausa in Nigeria. Sometimes, as in Ireland, foreign ethnic groups were imported and used as a buffer between the colonial authorities and the colonized. That is how large numbers of East Indians ended up in Kenya, South Africa, British Guyana, and Uganda.

It was “divide and conquer” that made it possible for an insignificant island in the north of Europe to rule the world. Division and chaos, tribal, religious and

ethnic hatred were the secret to empire. Guns and artillery were always in the background in case things went awry, but in fact, it rarely came to that.<sup>34</sup>

The subjugation of the native African through the importation of Indians/Asians by the British into the second social tier (thereby setting the two racial groups against each other) is a prime example of this strategy. Roger Ballard provides an illustration of this mode of segregation:

By then a tripartite form of social stratification had emerged throughout the region. Europeans ran the administration and practiced large-scale agriculture, the Indians ran the cotton, sugar and clove industries, and controlled almost all the small-scale trade and much at a higher level too, while most of the Africans were firmly at the bottom of the pile, scraping a living either as subsistence farmers or as unskilled labourers.<sup>35</sup>

George Delf has suggested that the British exploitation of Indian business acumen repeated the strategy adopted during the Arab managed slave trade of the 1800's, which also had Indian merchants working vital parts of its machinery:

Indian merchants used to finance many of the Arab trade and slave caravans in the interior of the mainland and thus played an important part in the East African slave trade. But as they were living in an age and country where slavery was taken for granted as a social institution, they merely fitted into a local pattern of behaviour. An Indian who collected customs dues for the Sultan, and also financed Arab caravans, was Jairam Shivji, who died in 1866 leaving a fortune of about \$ 650,000.<sup>36</sup>

Delf challenges the morality at work in the Indians' role in slavery. A similar turning of a blind eye to injustice in order to make a large profit seems at least partly present among the Indian community in colonial Africa. Here, I specifically refer to the position of the Indian in the middle tier, where they employed cheap black labour, profiting from mass exploitation of the black native. In this, a core value of unyielding ambition to profit is revealed, possibly a part of a strong work ethic fuelled by a desire to avoid the perils of the caste system left behind in India.

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<sup>34</sup> Con Hallinan, "Divide and Conquer as Imperial Rules," *CounterPunch*, last modified October 1, 2005, accessed November 14, 2012, <http://www.counterpunch.org/2004/07/14/divide-and-conquer-as-imperial-rules/>.

<sup>35</sup> Roger Ballard, *Desh Pardesh – The South Asian Presence in Britain* (London: Hurst & Co, 1994), 180.

<sup>36</sup> Delf, *Asians in East Africa*, 3,

The British had already learnt that Indians were very good at following a colonising socio-political system laid out in a grand and bureaucratic fashion during the colonisation of India. Indians seemed to enjoy being in a position from which they could trade and do business in their chosen profession, as was the case in my family. They could enjoy the fruits of their labour while having the black native do the menial and dirty work.

Although their white superiors laid out the laws of the land, Indians nonetheless had a degree of economic independence that was significantly better than in their previous lives under British rule in India. The members of my family, who remained in the village of Orna near the city of Surat in Gujarat (whom I mention above), did not possess the financial means to even travel beyond their own village. This contrast was fresh in the minds of my family, as my father recounts in a recent interview:

In India, we lived much like your relatives still do now, never enough money for a holiday [a great measure of financial stability for my father], *but in Africa*, we were able to take many holidays in the year, both because we had the money from our business, and because we always had workers looking after the business while we were away.<sup>37</sup>

Financial security enabled by a conflicted position of subordination enabled this generation to live and thrive.

Native Africans, in a position of total subordination, no doubt had the worst lot, and were considered to be savages, almost inhuman entities that were the antithesis to the cultured and sophisticated European. Indians do not seem to have held such a wholly negative view of the African native, though in the discussions I have carried out with elders in my community, their attitude does seem to present a definite disinclination to see them as equal in either cerebral or cultural sophistication. Though the origins of this particularly European view of the African native is an enormous subject and is far beyond the remit of this particular writing, going as far back as the beginnings of slavery by the Arabs in the 8<sup>th</sup> Century, in order to initiate a brief and basic

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<sup>37</sup> Kanti Natalwala (father), personal interview with author, February 2011.

understanding of the history of dominance over the African native, I present a brief appraisal of the way power changed hands in Kenya over the centuries below:

Arab dominance on the coast was eclipsed by the arrival in 1498 of the Portuguese, who gave way in turn to Islamic control under the Imam of Oman in the 1600s. The United Kingdom established its influence in the 19th century... The colonial history of Kenya dates from the Berlin Conference of 1885, when the European powers first partitioned East Africa into spheres of influence. In 1895, the U.K. Government established the East African Protectorate and, soon after, opened the fertile highlands to white settlers. The settlers were allowed a voice in government even before it was officially made a U.K. colony in 1920, but Africans were prohibited from direct political participation until 1944.<sup>38</sup>

The position of the Gujarati community in East Africa had begun centuries before British colonialism as we can see from the quote from Delf on page 22 in which he ends by quoting Marco Polo, as well as the example of Jairam Shivji the Indian slaver from the Delf quote on page 26. But there were those in East African history that accelerated that influx by design due to the qualities attributed to Indians. As my mother born and brought up in Zanzibar, it is interesting for me to research how her family ended up there, again from Delf:

The Arabs seem quickly to have recognised that it was to their advantage to tolerate Indian traders. In 1840 Sultan Seyyid Said moved his capital from Muscat to Zanzibar, taking with him many Indian traders. W.G. Palgrave, a Victorian traveler, records in a book published in 1865, 'Sa'eed knew that, whatever might be the energy and enterprise of his own born subjects, their commercial transactions would never attain real importance except by the cooperation and under the lead of Indian merchants, and accordingly used every means in his power to allure the Banians of Cutch, Gujarat, and the Concan of Muscat, and by absolute toleration, special immunities, and constant patronage rendered the port a half-Hindoo colony.<sup>39</sup>

This particular quote elucidates several points, firstly it underlines the concessions made by those in power at any given moment to profit by this vast skill base, it also hints at the readiness and ability to trade for the Hindu merchant.

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<sup>38</sup> Matt Rosenberg, "Berlin Conference of 1884–1885 To Divide Africa: The colonization of the continent by European Powers," *about education*, accessed January 23, 2015, <http://geography.about.com/cs/politicalgeog/a/berlinconferenc.htm>.

<sup>39</sup> Delf, *Asians In East Africa*, 2.

Another such moment came for the poor Indian in India to relocate to East Africa during the building of the Kenya-Uganda railway in 1895. Again from Delf: “Because of the lack of local manpower, it was decided to import Indian coolies. Over 32,000 were finally employed.”<sup>40</sup> I quote the above in an attempt to validate my earlier assertion of a well-established route from India to Africa in which the Indian population was growing. This was a journey obviously taken by both my mother’s and father’s families to South Africa, Kenya and Zanzibar, who perceived the opportunities there offered from a distance and took the chance through migration.

The celebration for the Indian in migrating to Africa and being successful in whatever trade they entered into, was entailed in lifting him/herself out of the mire of poverty in India, and their ability to better themselves through trade. The diamond smugglers coat being a prime example for my family and community, was a creative response to the upheavals and trauma caused by migration and reflected an insistent urgency for recognition in a new world where they could at least be seen, but were still effectively unrecognised by the colonizing society for their inherent skills and values. This stratification is the basis of our alienation from the white society we helped to service and our often traumatic relationship with the native African society we helped to subjugate, and though this subjugation might be seen as banal (in the sense that it seems to follow much of the historical attitude towards the African native as set out on Page 25 to page 28 above), it never the less attributed greatly to the unhappy bottom tier subject position of the Black African people. To research one contributing factor to this tripartite social system I offer the following regarding Mahatma Gandhi, whose political stance and actions are greatly tied up with our history in Africa and with the social stratification experienced by my grandfather’s generation in South Africa and later in Kenya.

### **The importance of Gandhi to Gujarati values**

Because of this moment in history (at the beginning of the 20<sup>th</sup> Century), a time when my family moved to South Africa seems to coincide with Gandhi’s fight for greater freedom for Indian trade and his initiating his philosophy of Satyagraha. For this reason it seems instructive to begin this discussion with some of Gandhi’s anti-colonialist actions, actions that were directly intertwined with the ability of my

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<sup>40</sup> Delf, *Asians In East Africa*, 11.

grandfather and his generation of Gujarati business people to trade freely and build wealth and prosperity within colonial Africa, the reason why they came to Africa in the first place. I hope through this discussion to firstly establish my characterization of the core value of the migrating Gujarati self-conception as staunch entrepreneurs (including my own family since they first left Gujarat in India); and secondly, it establishes how this spirit brought economic success to these migrants in colonial Africa and then in post-colonial Britain—which in turn led to a degree of social rejection in both those societies, discussed in the following chapter. It is important at this point to ground this discussion of Gandhi's influence on my community in core values arising from being followers of a Hindu faith, tradition and culture; a heritage that came with us from India and has stayed strong and resonant in our lives in Britain to this day. Simplification of the core values of this cultural heritage and belief system is impossibly difficult as Hinduism is, by its very nature, a phenomenon rather than a religion:

We are told that Hinduism is a way of life; it is a collection of religions. Hindus are not in the least interested in salvation. Hindus direct all their activities to the realization of salvation. Hinduism begins in the Veda and is consummated in the Vedanta. The Vedanta (the original utterances) forms the absolute standard of Hindu religion; Hinduism is religiously undogmatic. Hinduism is a highly organized social and religious system; it is the eternal dharma (set of beliefs); the religion of the Veda. On the other hand, it is a system to which neither caste nor belief in the authority of the Veda is essential. It is a system to which belief in rebirth is essential; a system to which belief in rebirth is *not* essential. Hindus are proud; yet as they are undogmatic they tend to be tolerant. Hinduism is primarily the means for Hindus to support and improve their multifarious existence in the world; on the other hand, realization of the deceptiveness of the world's multiplicity is part of the essence of Hinduness. And we may ask: Is there a 'fine essence' to the 'changeless ground' of Hinduism? In what sense is Hinduism 'one', yet a 'proliferating jungle'?<sup>41</sup>

It is obvious the shifting philosophical sands of Hinduism are open to interpretations and constant re-interpretation from within, as suggested by the quote above.

Mahatma Gandhi started life as a Gujarati Hindu whose famous struggle against British coloniality first emerged in South Africa, the very country where my family and cultural group settled, in the 1890s, when he first started his campaign of non-

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<sup>41</sup> Julius Lipner, *Hindus: Their Religious Beliefs and Practices* (London: Routledge, 1994), 4-5.

violent civil disobedience. Later Hailed by the moniker “Mahatma,” meaning a holy person or a sage, Gandhi was indeed a hero of the people. His willingness to suffer both physical and mental indignities under British rule in order to fight for the freedom of his people is legendary, and the examples of his selflessness and endurance to see right be done and help those in need was considered to be without precedence. I offer here two examples from early on in his time in South Africa at the very beginning of the 20<sup>th</sup> Century, the first, his willingness to help the Indian community during his time in Johannesburg, who at the time were compelled to live in an unsanitary and run down ghetto then called a ‘coolie location’. Having seen it deteriorating, the local authority at the time used this insanitation to justify the planned destruction of this district and thus get rid of this Indian population from Johannesburg. The settlers thankfully had proprietary rights in the land and thus a tribunal was set up to try the land acquisition cases, which Gandhi agreed to fight. In his own words:

Most of the tenants engaged me as their legal adviser. I had no desire to make money out of these cases, so I told the tenants that I would be satisfied with whatever costs the tribunal awarded, in case they won and a fee of 10 pounds on every lease, irrespective of the result of the case. I also told them that I proposed to set apart half of the money paid by them for the building of a hospital or similar institution for the poor.<sup>42</sup>

A later part of the same story includes the outbreak of contagious disease, which started at a nearby mine spread to this location and Gandhi, with the help of a few loyal followers and friends set about immediately installing a mock hospital in a disused house and nursing the 23 victims until the epidemic was over, and though he worked as hard as others, it was his moral standing and selfless spirit that prompted the action of the others, who he in turn applauded:

It was a terrible night – that night of vigil and nursing. I had nursed a number of patients before, but never any attacked by the black plague. Dr. Godfrey’s pluck proved infectious... The indefatigable zeal and fearlessness with which

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<sup>42</sup> Gandhi M.K, *The Story Of My Experiments With Truth* (Ahmedabad: Navajivan Trust, 1927), 213.

the youths worked [referring here to his 4 young clerks] rejoiced me beyond measure.<sup>43</sup>

Unfortunately many of these victims died but through his actions, and those of his compatriots, the apparent plague was stopped from spreading and stamped out in this area completely.

Gandhi, through these and other selfless and socially conscious acts, had striven to bring influence over the Indian community in South Africa and beyond, to act with a higher moral responsibility for its own freedom and betterment. One of the ways he achieved this on a wider scale was through a journal named *Indian Opinion*, which first began as a means of informing Indians in India of the plight of their countrymen in South Africa but soon became a tool for Gandhi to both set forth his philosophies and rally fellow Indians to the actions he proposed:

So long as it was under my control, the changes in the journal were indicative of changes in my life. *Indian Opinion* in those days was a mirror of part of my life. Week after week I poured out my soul in its columns, and expounded the principles and practices of Satyagraha as I understood it... I was inundated with letters containing the outpourings of my correspondents' hearts... It was as though the community thought audibly through this correspondence with me. It made me thoroughly understand the responsibility of a journalist, and the hold I secured in this way over the community made the future campaign workable, dignified and irresistible.<sup>44</sup>

It did not take long for Indian communities all over Africa as a whole, including my own community of Gujarati Darjis, to actively embrace much of his thought. Many Indians both in Africa and in India profoundly respected Gandhi's anti-apartheid actions during this time and beyond. For my grandfather and his generation, Gandhi's anti-colonial activities framed an issue that impacted upon their everyday lives throughout the first half of the 20<sup>th</sup> century. From the stories told by my grandfather, it is quite obvious to me that in his mind, Gandhi certainly lived up to

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<sup>43</sup> Gandhi, *The Story Of My Experiments With Truth*, 215.

<sup>44</sup> Gandhi, *The Story Of My Experiments With Truth*, 211.

his title of Mahatma, and was thus worthy of the veneration by our community. One such story that I always recall is in my grandfathers belief, during one of his bouts in a South African jail, Gandhi was able to at once appear on both sides of the bars of his cell. I never questioned this as a young person as it seemed to me a part of a wider myth of religion woven by my grandfather, which included amazing stories of heroism and magic performed by the characters from the great Hindu poems, the Mahabharata and Ramayana.

Gandhi was a scholar of the writings of many great religious teachers and thinkers from the past, from many religions including Hinduism, and used this background in his arguments against his contemporary situation. He was regarded as more than just an ordinary human being through historical reference, as we see from the quote below from Lipner. He was respected by many not only for his anti-colonial actions, but also for many others of his beliefs, including that of the necessity of eradicating religious and sectarian spirit, especially the hierarchical caste based system of society. And though respected for the changes that he prompted within Indian and especially Hindu society (notably including his belief in ending the unfair treatment of the untouchables—the lowest order of the caste system), these were changes that were so fundamental that they were hard to accept by many and are still being fought over today:

There can be no doubt that guiding elements in his [Gandhi's] views derived from the *Bhagavadgita*, [the holy book of the Hindus], and the Saint tradition, especially from Kabir and Narasimha Mehta, a fifteenth-century poet-saint of Gujarat (Gandhi's homeland). Gandhi makes significant references to Mehta. For example, in articles in Gujarati in *Navajivan* (5 and 12 December 1920), he quotes one of Mehta's lyrics, and concludes from this that it is *dharma* to reject untouchability.<sup>45</sup>

Lipner goes on to say that, "In suiting the action to the word Gandhi sometimes suffered life-threatening persecution. Regarded by some as a latter-day Sant (Saint), he gave a new name to the untouchables, 'Harijans', which means 'the begotten of God'."<sup>46</sup>

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<sup>45</sup> Lipner, *Hindus*, 122

<sup>46</sup> Lipner, *Hindus*, 122

This is an important point in the developing discussion of Gujarati negotiation between races present in South Africa who themselves had an unforgiving hierarchical system, with the African native at the bottom.

The influence of Gandhi on the mindset of the community under discussion cannot be overestimated. Indians from a variety of casts acted on Gandhi's instructions owing to their belief that he was able to fight the injustices they suffered under British rule. Robert Schwartz describes an early example of this tendency that occurred in South Africa in an action against what was commonly called the 'Black Act':

On 31 July 1907, the Asiatic Registration Act (commonly called the Black Act) passed in the Transvaal and was enacted in November of that year. The Act required all Indians to register with the Registrar of Asiatics and obtain a certificate. Failure to do so would subject the offender to a fine, imprisonment or to be deported. The government would then be able to monitor Asian residents by registering, finger printing them and requiring them to possess passes at all times. Gandhi announced that he would set precedence and be the first person to fail to register and subject himself to imprisonment. He also instructed other Indians to refuse to register and to wilfully accept imprisonment... Gandhi's efforts were successful and only 500 of the 9,500 Indians registered under the Asiatic Registration Act. Gandhi was arrested 10 January 1908 in a mass arrest for failing to register. After learning through a telegram that other Indians got three months hard labour for their non-compliance, he felt compelled to ask for the maximum penalty from the judge. He did plead guilty and asked for the maximum sentence, but was sentenced to two months simple imprisonment instead of three months hard labour.<sup>47</sup>

This action set a compelling precedent as the British were thereafter very careful in how they treated Gandhi, fearing that mistreatment would negatively affect their relationship with the Indians—further cementing Gandhi's importance to Indian communities in South Africa.

As for Gandhi himself, he refers to the title of *Mahatma*, and the adoration that involved, as one that was more burdensome than welcome, having had an altercation with a holy man in the temple of Kashi in Benares he describes the altercation thus:

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<sup>47</sup> Robert Schwartz, "Gandhi's Formative and Transitional Years in South Africa," *History* 489 (Fall, 2008), 16-17.

Since then I have twice been to Kashi, but that has been after I had already been afflicted with the title of *Mahatma* and experiences such as I have detailed above had become impossible. People eager to have my *darshan* [prayer] would not permit me to have a *darshan* of the temple. The woes of *Mahatma* are known to *Mahatma* alone.<sup>48</sup>

The above example of non-violent civil disobedience occurred early in Gandhi's career as an anti-British campaigner. Increasingly, there was no doubt about his threat to the British Empire. In 1914 Gandhi left South Africa for the last time and returned to India armed with the philosophy of Satyagraha and a decision to fight the British regime there. In 1917 he led his first Satyagraha campaign fighting for the rights of the Indigo planters of Champaran. In 1918 he undertook campaigns for the mill workers of Ahmadabad followed by a Satyagraha for the peasants of Kheda. In the following we can see that by this time his campaigning is well established in its impact and influence as Indians in their masses supported his beliefs and his actions, according to Judith Brown: "Excitement built up when Gandhi reached Kaira and Surat districts. At Nadiad, Kaira's largest town, his meeting drew a crowd of 20,000, many of whom attended from Bombay with 3,000 – 4,000 from Ahmedabad. At Anand he drew over 10,000, at Broach 15,000 and at Surat 30,000."<sup>49</sup>

Like many others around the world, my family and the wider Gujarati community in Nairobi felt that Gandhi's beliefs and actions were worthy of great respect and veneration. They were actions taken in the face of great adversity and injustice. Such veneration has, however, waned since the time of the suit with the hidden pockets especially through the migration of our culture to London following the end of British colonialism in Africa. As the memories of coloniality fade prompting an erosion of a state of post-coloniality, and the intense racism that went along with it when first we moved to Britain, a move towards a position of belonging has taken place, and along with that a loosening up of the adherence to the core values linked with belonging to the Gujarati Darji cast. In my generation and the one that has now

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<sup>48</sup> Gandhi, *The Story Of My Experiments With Truth*, 177.

<sup>49</sup> Judith M. Brown, *Gandhi and Civil Disobedience: The Mahatma in Indian Politics 1928–34* (London: Cambridge University Press, 1977), 104.

followed, I feel these core values have further eroded as very few if any still practice the craft of tailoring. Thus an eradication of the need for an anti-racist movement has inevitably lead to the eradication of the veneration formerly given to such a movement.

The effects of the non-violent protests instigated by Gandhi on Indian populations, firstly in Africa and then in India, were complex and open to diverse interpretations. The relationship of the average Indian in my community with Gandhi has changed since then, demonstrating shifting conditions of pre- and post-coloniality. The experience of the most recent generations of Indians in England exhibit yet more shifts in this relationship, not all of which are negative. The ability in the last generation or so of British Indians to have relatively equal and dialogical relationships with the native British population is due in large part to the near eradication of post-colonial adversarial conditions. I believe this shift in the social placement to be a major point of celebration as it has allowed a greater power through freedom and choice than has ever been enjoyed by the Indian community in Britain before. This is a shift that has firstly allowed me to become an artist, thereby braking out of my cast systems rules and regulations and enjoy a degree of success in that role, the ability to do so also being a relatively new phenomena as I will go on to discuss in later chapters.

### **Gandhi, Indians and native Africans**

The actions of Mahatma Gandhi had a significant impact on the views and actions of the Indian population in colonial Africa. His attitude towards the native African population therefore deeply influenced the attitudes of settler Indians towards this population. Having spent many years in Africa, Mahatma Gandhi had suffered negative experiences, thus formulating a negative opinion of the native African as we can see from the example below recorded by Jad Adams:

Gandhi suffered several periods of imprisonment during the campaign [against crossing state boundaries in South Africa approx 1908], including solitary confinement. The latter was more attractive to him than to some of the company he was obliged to keep, who were 'wild, murderous and given to immoral ways'. During a night in a crowded cell in Johannesburg two men threatened to rape Gandhi: they stared at the slight lawyer and mocked him, 'exchanged obscene jokes, uncovering each other's genitals'. Gandhi stayed

awake most of the night on guard. He elsewhere wrote that ‘many of the native prisoners are only one degree removed from the animal. His passive resisters he said, took particular objection to being given garments stamped with N for ‘native’: ‘We could understand not being classed with the whites, but to be placed on the same level as the Natives seemed too much to put up with.’ He successfully lobbied for separate lavatories for Indians, and that Indians should no longer be ‘lodged with kaffirs,’ though some apparently preferred it as they could trade for tobacco and other items.<sup>50</sup>

Marred by this extreme and traumatic experience in an African jail, Adams describes Gandhi’s opinion of the native African as inferior to the Indian, explaining his disinterest in including native Africans in his fight for Indian rights. Adams’ suggestion that some Indians preferred to be jailed together with natives in order to trade suggests that the inclusion of Indians in the same strata as natives was not unwelcome to trading Indians, and may have had positive consequences, if not culturally then at least materially.

The rights of Indians (especially in the state of Transvaal) to humanitarian freedoms generally, as well as those to trade, were slowly eroded by the Asiatic Registration Act of 1907, a law that required “every Indian aged eight and older to obtain a new certificate of registration, to provide finger and thumb prints and other identifying features. The police could demand these documents at any time and could even enter private homes to inspect them.”<sup>51</sup> This segregatory law was yet another example of the mechanism used by white colonial society to keep itself separate and above the Indian. It was a major impediment to continued Indian mercantile success, and as already stated above, this was of prime importance to this society.

Gandhi’s attitude towards the African struggle indicates the interwoven network of interests at play for Indians in the colonial economy:

The lack of concern in the campaign for the rights of the African natives was understandable in the circumstances, but unattractive. Gandhi showed sympathy for the rights of the Africans, but any more concrete alliance would have outraged the Europeans and would not have pleased Gandhi’s merchant constituency.<sup>52</sup>

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<sup>50</sup> Jad Adams, *Gandhi: Naked Ambition* (London: Quercus, 2010), 108.

<sup>51</sup> Adams, *Gandhi*, 95.

<sup>52</sup> Adams, *Gandhi*, 122.

Gandhi's actions resulted in the reinstatement of the eroded rights of the South African Indian population, with the introduction of the Indian Relief Bill in 1914: "The Indian relief Bill of 1914 abolished the £3 tax and cancelled arrears; non-Christian marriages were recognized. However, free movement across borders within South Africa was still restricted, registration was still required, and no more just administration of Indian commerce was introduced."<sup>53</sup>

His philosophy of Satyagraha (literally translated as insistence on truth, originally from the Sanskrit *satya-truth + agraha-fervour*), in other words non-violent or "passive" resistance first introduced as part of this struggle, and the changes it brought about, laid down the foundations for the racial social stratification of South Africa and the other Afro-British colonies, existent until the end of colonial rule; where Indians occupied the middle level of this racist three tier system:

The Indian trader's argument was that their race and financial status should guarantee rights to them, not that every Indian (or African) should have civic rights. Gandhi was pushing the racial state towards the form it was ultimately to take anyway: that of a buffer racial group of Indians and 'coloureds', with intermediate rights, between the whites at the top and the blacks at the bottom.<sup>54</sup>

Indians knew present and future prosperity could be acquired not just by working for the white man in whatever role he chose for them, and these were the days before race relations acts meant that people of all races had to be given a fair deal in the work place, but to go into business for themselves, using the trades brought with them from India, including ours of Tailoring. Thus the winning back of these rights to trade were a prime example of the African Indian's creativity and staunch insistence on trading at all costs. This was certainly a moment of celebration along the treacherous journey of belonging in a segregated society, but the trauma of uncertainty, based on the intense flexibility of the relationships they held with other racial groups, once again creates a negative flip side to this historical moment.

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<sup>53</sup> Adams, *Gandhi*, 122.

<sup>54</sup> Adams, *Gandhi*, 122.

## **Conclusion**

Having won the freedom of trade in South Africa, the Indian communities (including our own of Hindu Gujarati Darjis) later position in the middle of a three-tier apartheid like system in colonial Kenya, allowed him/her certain freedoms over the African and prosperity through trade. Mahatma Gandhi having experienced problems in the Indians ability to trade put into place by a white power afraid of the Indians superior ability in mercantile matters, fought to successfully reconstitute these rights and give back the Indians their own means of wealth production and hence success.

The suit jacket with the hidden pockets constructed by my grandfather, serves as an anchor to a particular moment in the migratory history of my ethnic subculture. The suit was perceived and constructed because of a particular set of circumstances in place prior to the end of British colonialism in Kenya. The complex conditions of this position created an opportunity to take part in the illegal and nefarious diamond smuggling trade, an opportunity which added another layer, a black market, to an immoral colonial white market, based on real oppression over all other coloured minority groups.

The image of the entrepreneurial Indian is hence woven into the historical fabric of Africa. From the Indian perspective, the Indian trader is a celebratory figure personifying a core value of resilience and adaptability. Other elements of persona emerge that are associated with this success in the face of great social inequality, including a palpable sense of celebration—which in some cases extends to a notorious heightened vanity. A flip side to this economic dexterity, one that I and many others of my generation now hate (but still lives within us to some extent) as we have grown up in the west, is the love of showing off this wealth, for instance by driving the latest and flashiest car, etc.

To conclude this chapter I turn once again to the suit jacket with the hidden pockets, created and constructed by the Indian, I argue is in some ways a poignant piece of creativity (maybe artwork) that through its layers and hidden gems, expresses the history of the Indian as a hidden but special cultural core value. It also succinctly expresses the intricacies of the hierarchical relationships we as a cultural group formed and were forced into during the later part of Afro-British colonial history.

Now that this garment has allowed me to articulate this specific history, I would like to turn in the next chapter to a second garment to help my appraisal of the Gujarati Darji community's enforced migration to Britain and the vastly different lives we have led there and the problems we faced as so called outsiders in the host nation of our former masters. The question that naturally arises now is over how the displaced Darjis set adrift into a postcolonial void, where a definite sense of belonging that came from a strictly hierarchical system has been replaced by something far less precise, reformulated by reference to further items of postcolonial objecthood.



*Fig. 2.1.* Me as a 7 year old boy in 1971, wearing the goatskin coat made by my grandfather in the garden of the family home in Finchley, North London.

### **A goatskin coat**

In London in 1971, my grandfather, a master tailor who learnt his trade in India and learned to use goatskin in Africa, made a goatskin coat to keep me warm through a very cold English winter (Figure 2.1). Unlike the suit jacket with the hidden pockets from chapter 1 nothing is hidden in this coat, in fact, the garment displays much of our culture. It reveals our history and the extraordinary skill of my family's trade of tailoring. It also reveals our ability to take on other cultural norms and weave them into our own. In this sense it is significant to my art practice as a paragon of postcolonial objecthood. This object's power to announce that we are not to be shunned and in fact offer great assets to the community particularly excites me. It also hints at the transformation of colonising cultures through the contributions of the minorities that live within them.

I begin this chapter with a description of the object illustrated above and through it transcribe the migratory journey from Africa to Britain taken by my Gujarati

ancestors following the end of colonisation of Kenya in 1962. The coat that I am wearing in Figure 2.1 acts as a screen for the positive projection of cultural forms that denote the cultural hybridization experienced by the subsequent generation, my generation of Gujarati migrant Darjis. Here, I outline this journey, the part we have played in the gradual changes that have occurred in British culture, and the changing relationship structures between races since de-colonisation. I will do this by laying out the history of my community in post-colonial Britain and the journey we have taken to reach our present state of belonging, sometimes fragile in the so-called multicultural society of contemporary Britain. I will also investigate some of the changes in British foreign policy, which encapsulate some of the traumas of the racism that was experienced by the migrant in British society, during my youth in the recent phase of this migration, and understand the societal shifts afoot that heavily influenced my early artistic career.

The improvisation necessary for survival and economic advancement that were present in Kenya as I have already discussed in the first chapter, once again helped forge a place for us in Britain over the course of my generation of Gujarati Darji migrants. Michel De Certeau gives us an idea of how the fractures in the rules of the “*operational schema*” can be utilised to make way and finally legitimize those on the periphery of society. “Just as in literature one differentiates “styles” or ways of writing, one can distinguish “ways of operating”-ways of walking, reading, producing, speaking, etc. These styles of action intervene in a field which regulates them at a first level (for example, at the level of the factory system), but they introduce into it a way of turning it to their advantage that obeys other rules and constitutes something like a second level interwoven into the first. These “ways of operating” are similar to “instructions for use,” and they create a certain play in the machine through a stratification of different and interfering kinds of functioning.”<sup>55</sup> Having followed up with an example of North African migrants in Paris, he suggests “Without leaving the place where he has no choice but to live and which lays down its law for him, he establishes within it a degree of *plurality* and creativity. By an art of being in between, he draws unexpected results from his situation.”<sup>56</sup>

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<sup>55</sup> Michel De Certeau, *The Practice of Everyday Life*, (San Francisco, London: University of California Press, 1984), P.30.

<sup>56</sup> Certeau, *The Practice of Everyday Life*, 30.

The reason for my family's move to Britain from Africa, in fact the reason for the mass migration from Kenya to Britain at the end of the 1960s, was because, up to this point, even though Kenya had stopped being a colony, Indians still had the right to hold a British passport and consider themselves British citizens. In 1968, this right was revoked and we were given the choice of either remaining as Kenyan citizens, or to move to Britain in order to keep our British citizenship. According to my father, he made the decision to move to Britain because he was uncertain of what circumstances would prevail under the government that led the country at the time, not that it would be necessarily bad, just uncertain. He and his contemporaries decided that in order to maintain the lifestyle and rights to trade and work they held under British citizenship they had no choice but to move to Britain.

### **Racism in postcolonial 1960s Britain**

With the attainment of independence in Kenya in 1962, the master narrative of colonialism was almost at a close and was being replaced by the newly formed community of the Commonwealth. With this demise came many micro-narratives, the creation of the BrAsian (British Asian) being one. It is of this particular narrative that my community of diasporic Gujarati tailors is a part. With us, came a polyglot culture and iconographies that were already taking on the traits of a hybrid. This culture already contained an advanced set of cosmopolitan modalities.

As an example of this plurality, by the time my grandfather moved to Britain in 1968 he not only had command of his native Gujarati, but also of English, Swahili, Hindi, Urdu, Punjabi and Tamil, having traded in Kenya for many years. He also brought with him a deep understanding of the ceremonies, motivations and day-to-day habits of these various cultures.

It is ironic that the most racist times in the lives of my community were when we initially moved from Kenya to England. Not having dealt with direct racial violence under the strictly controlled colonial regime in Kenya, it was a massive shift for my family and community to face direct racial verbal and physical violence in our new home of London. We arrived there in 1968 when an irate Enoch Powell (member of

Conservative Party from 1950 to 1974), fearful of what was to be the first wave of an East African Asian immigration,<sup>57</sup> gave his now infamous ‘Rivers of Blood’ speech:

As I look ahead, I am filled with foreboding. Like the Roman, I seem to see 'the River Tiber foaming with much blood'. That tragic and intractable phenomenon which we watch with horror on the other side of the Atlantic but which there is interwoven with the history and existence of the States itself, is coming upon us here by our own volition and our own neglect. Indeed, it has all but come. In numerical terms, it will be of American proportions long before the end of the 20th century. Only resolute and urgent action will avert it even now.<sup>58</sup>

This speech and the sentiments it reflected were for me and my community directly played out in the racist violence we faced on an almost daily basis. I remember very clearly the feeling of uncertainty brought about by the fear of racism brought in a climate where the politics of racism was becoming ever more right wing, in movements such as the National Front, founded in 1967, and later the British National party, founded in 1982. These had a very direct effect on our daily lives and meant that we dared not go out of our homes alone, and especially never at night. For me this meant receiving several beatings in my youth and often with the chant Paki (a racial slur short for Pakistani that which denoted all of a brown complexion of any hue). We, like the coat at the beginning of the chapter, could not and would not want to hide the difference in our cultural makeup and the signifiers to that culture that our iconographies and visual forms represented to us. As much as the form of the coat was reflective of its utility, these visual iconographies (including for instance the intense colours of our clothes which I will go on to discuss) were insistent and hence resilient markers of our existence within this community. We may have seemed like hybrid anomalies at the time to a racist British population, but with changes in the political and social fabric of British society, it would soon meet us half way.

Edward Heath, who was leader of Conservative Party at the time of Powell’s speech, subsequently sacked Powell from his post, judging his speech to be too

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<sup>57</sup> The second being from Idi Amin’s Uganda in 1974.

<sup>58</sup> Enoch Powel, “Rivers of Blood,” in *The Penguin Book of Twentieth Century Speeches 1992–3*, ed. Brian Macarthur (London: Penguin, 1993), 383.

inflammatory. Heath however, said of Powell 30 years later the "economic burden of immigration" had been "not without prescience."<sup>59</sup>

In Kenya, equilibrium had been reached between our community, the British overlords, and the oppressed native. Our community acted as a buffer between the British ruling class and the native Africans and enjoyed the privileges brought by a meagre degree of power over the native population. Even though we were judged as middle class and entrepreneurial by the mainstream political system, there was no understood hierarchy as there was in Kenya, hence fear of being overwhelmed by outsiders, as expressed in the Enoch Powell speech above, meant the white community was unwelcoming, already reeling from an influx of Afro-Caribbeans and South Asians after the Second World War. A general fear of the degradation of British culture by these coloured minority groups proliferated, evident in the customary xenophobic concerns about intermarriage and degradation of British society.

### **Second tier positions**

The goatskin coat is a paradigmatic object for this cultural group, as it carries once the skill and persistent ingenuity of the Gujarati Darji and shows how these skills are transferred in differing locations and circumstances. Similar to the trauma and celebration as refracted by the suit with hidden pockets in the last chapter, the coat manifests the lack of acceptance of the tailor skill base in a racist 1970s Britain but transcends this lack of cultural acceptance by so successfully fulfilling the function for which it is designed. Over the past 50 to 60 years Britain, like other former colonisers, has had to quell the urge towards racism, which we as a community had already experienced in both India and Kenya, and provide its former colonial citizens all the rights of democracy, freedom and fair play enjoyed by its native citizens. Although the newly arrived Gujarati tailor community suffered marginalisation alongside many other coloured minority groups (as reflected in the position of the goatskin coat), our situation was complex, for several reasons.

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<sup>59</sup> "Enoch Powell," *Wikipedia*, accessed November 25, 2014, [http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Enoch\\_Powell](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Enoch_Powell).

When the time came to up roots and move to Britain, the economic dexterity and placement on the second tier of society in colonial Kenya meant that our Afro-Asian community was able to start life in Britain on similar terms. Dilip Hero suggests that this was also true for other East African Asians, unlike West Indians, the other major coloured community migrating *en masse* to Britain in the middle of the last century:

Even though the authorities made no particular efforts to channel these immigrants into commercial activity here [referring to Ugandan Indians in Britain], a majority of them seemed to end up in retail trade. This, and their general familiarity with the English language in East Africa, meant that unlike their counterparts from the Indian subcontinent, most of them could be classified as lower- middle or middle-middle class in social terms as well as economic. With this, the Asian community became more sharply stratified, socially, than the West Indian, with a larger middle class than the other major racial minority.<sup>60</sup>

Though this stratification was obviously more convoluted than it was in the far more rigid and politically and socially structured one in Kenya, my family's beginnings in London mirrored this experience in that my father was able to buy a house immediately on arrival, and even found a job within the first few months due to his experience working for a British firm in Kenya.

I mentioned on page 41 that British culture would soon meet us half way, as a hint to how this has taken place since our arrival in Britain, I quote the following from Neil Kinnock,<sup>61</sup> (as it appears in Vron Ware's *Who cares about Britishness*), who describes the importance of former colonial immigrants to new and wider notions of British identity and core concepts of Britishness to those that set the political and social agenda of the nation:

We wanted participants in the project to examine a maxim of the cultural thinker, Stuart Hall: 'The re-invention of Britishness is just inescapably taking place on a global plane.'

On the face of it, that may seem to be a surprising claim, especially when some postulate an introverted nationalistic version of 'being British'. But Britishness has, in so many ways, been produced by the gathering of Celtic and English Nations, laced with Nordic, French and wider migrations, and shaped by World-striding centuries, it does seem to me to be appropriate to put the modern sense of identity into a realistically *global* context. As I have

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<sup>60</sup> Dilip Hero, *Black British, White British* (London: Grafton, 1991), 125.

<sup>61</sup> Elected labour party leader in 1983, then a European commissioner since 1992.

put it elsewhere: ‘There is so much of the world in modern Britain because Britain has for so long been in so much of the world’. Certainly, in this generation when travel is easier than ever before, when much of popular culture is transnational, when labour markets are more liberalized and globalised, when English is the main global language, when barrier-free Europe has arrived and is enlarging, narrow views of ‘Britishness’ are myopic to the point of being economically and culturally disabling.<sup>62</sup>

### **Migration of Kenyan culture with Gujarati**

Like most other families in our community, the Gujarati Darji culture marbled with Kenyan culture came with us. Our language still contains some Swahili; our diet includes dishes and ingredients from African cuisine. Importantly for this project, African iconography is also one of the few things that still remain. Many objects in our house in London were of African origin, everything from letter openers to clocks, from blankets to footstools: we not only had a liking for African goods and design, but consider them a part of *our* cultural heritage.<sup>63</sup> It is therefore not surprising that the goatskin coat was made with a typically African material that my grandfather used instinctively as a part of his own repertoire. This was not only the case for the Indian community but also for other communities that had spent a considerable time in Africa, including the British, as described by Niall Ferguson, who much like the Indian experience above, also set up what I might call a *little post-colonial museum*:

And although we finally came back to the grey skies and winter slush of Glasgow, our house was filled with Kenyan memorabilia. There was the antelope skin on the sofa; the Masai warrior’s portrait on the wall; the crudely carved but exquisitely decorated footstool that my sister and I liked to perch on. Each of us had a zebra skin drum; a gaudy basket from Mombasa; a wildebeest-hair flywhisk; a Kikuyu doll. We did not know it, but we grew up in a little post-colonial museum. I still have the carved wooden hippopotamus, warthog, elephant and lion, which were once my most treasured possessions.<sup>64</sup>

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<sup>62</sup> Vron Ware, *Who cares about Britishness?: A Global View of the National Identity Debate* (London: Arcadia, 2007), ix.

<sup>63</sup> Strange as it may seem, in my household and in many other East African Asian households I visit in England articles asserting a past and present heritage of African descendency continue to be proudly displayed on shelves and fireplaces. Although still present in my generation, I am sure these parts of our visual vocabulary will fade away as generations are born and brought up in Britain with a much stronger belief in their Britishness than my own, simply for the fact they will never have known any different.

<sup>64</sup> Niall Ferguson, *Empire: How Britain made the modern World* (London: Penguin, 2008), xv.

In the early days in Britain, my community and its nomadic visual culture were very important to me because of the need for insularity brought about by the racism in general society at that time. This meant spending a lot of time surrounded by the domestic environment, which was full of the iconographies of India, Africa and those few recently acquired in London. Much of this iconography, which, to me, represented my personal culture, seemed at odds with the outside world, the surrounding British culture at first seeming rather alien. Objects we used, such as the brightly coloured and patterned duvets known as kantha quilts which are made with off-cuts and stuffed with cheap wadding, the saris then regularly worn by the women of my family, and the highly coloured and patterned pictures of Indian gods to name but a few, were later refracted through my British art school education as iconographies that I introduced into my own art work alongside the western modalities taught to me in my Eurocentric art education and experience. Objects such as the suit jacket with the hidden pockets and the goatskin coat acted as catalysts for thinking about how a personal culture could develop from an inner dialectic of visibility and concealment of positions and experiences.

These colour-laden iconographies themselves were shunned within the mainstream ocular regime as European sensibilities have for centuries demanded that the higher forms of visual culture, and hence cultural practice, centred on a more monochromatic viewpoint or at least a far narrower chromatic focus—one diametrically opposite to the Gujarati Darji visual iconographies I discuss here. This shunning of a cultural iconography, much like the experience of the goatskin coat, becomes yet another remnant of a past cultural heritage that the western culture surrounding us is not yet ready to accept. David Batchelor discusses how polychromy has historically been judged from the Eurocentric eye as belonging to a lower order of culture:

It is, I believe, no exaggeration to say that, in the West, since Antiquity, colour has been systematically marginalized, reviled, diminished and degraded. Generations of philosophers, artists, art historians and cultural theorists of one stripe or another have kept this prejudice alive, warm, fed and groomed. As with all prejudices, its manifest form, its loathing, masks a fear: a fear of contamination and corruption by some thing that is unknown or

appears unknowable. This loathing of colour, this fear of corruption through colour, needs a name: chromophobia.<sup>65</sup>

Batchelor links this historical chromophobia in art to a fear of peoples of colour:

Since Aristotle's time, the discrimination against colour has a number of forms, some technical, some moral, some racial, some sexual, some social. As John Cage notes in his vast historical survey of colour theory, colour has regularly been linked with other better-documented sexual and racial phobias. As far as Pliny, it was placed at the 'wrong' end of the opposition between the occidental and the oriental, the Attic and the Asian, in a belief that 'the rational traditions of western culture were under threat from insidious non-western sensuality.'<sup>66</sup>

It is interesting to note Batchelor then remarks on Kant and Rousseau (philosophers from the age on enlightenment) on the subject of colour:

For Kant, colour could never participate in the grand schemes of the Beautiful or the sublime. It was at best 'agreeable' and could add 'charm' to a work of art, but it could not have any bearing on aesthetic judgment. In a similar vein, Rousseau maintained that:

colours nicely modulated, give the eye pleasure, but that pleasure is purely sensory. It is the drawing, the imitation that endows these colours with life and soul, it is the passions which they express that succeed in arousing our own, the objects which they represent that succeed in affecting us. Interest and sentiment do not depend on colours; the lines of a touching painting touch us in etching as well: remove them from the painting, and the colours will cease to have any effect.<sup>67</sup>

Fear of both the colour of our skin (also refracted in the alien concept of the goatskin coat), and the colour of our culture was obvious to me from a very early age. It was made yet more obvious to me during an art school education where the majority of western tradition, seemed colourless in both form and content. With time, I grew to love some of Western art's more contemporary methodologies, as I will unfold in the next chapter.

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<sup>65</sup> David Batchelor, *Chromophobia* (London: Reaktion, 2011), 22.

<sup>66</sup> Batchelor, *Chromophobia*, 29.

<sup>67</sup> Batchelor, *Chromophobia*, 29–30.

### **Immigrant responses to racism**

Having moved *en masse* to England from Kenya, our community took not only the Gujarati culture with which we arrived in Africa, but also elements of the African culture: vocabulary, cuisine and iconography. Already so hybridized, our visual culture became more so with our move to England. We had to re-suture our society onto a stridently conservative British culture of the late 1960s, 70s and 80s. South Asians had already started to migrate to England before our arrival in England in the late 1960s. The majority of this migration was from India, Pakistan and Bangladesh, many of whom survived under difficult circumstances by operating quietly “under the radar.” Unlike the West Indian immigrants, Bangladeshi and Pakistani peoples were generally not interested in assimilating into the British society around them. Dilip Hero describes this self-imposed segregation in *Black British, White British*:

However, being unaccustomed to the Western way of life, most of them did not visit dance halls or clubs. They did not seem interested in dating white women. Therefore such limitations as a colour bar at a dance-hall or club did not disturb them, At the time of the national controversy over a colour bar operating at a Wolverhampton dance-hall in 1958, Rashmi Desai, an academic researcher, noted that the Indian immigrants to whom he talked ‘did not admit any great feeling of corporate indignation... they considered the privilege of dancing to be of doubtful value... Outside the economic field, the average Asian had no aspirations or expectations. He had come to Britain knowing white people were culturally alien, quite apart from his own. And he had neither the inclination nor the intention to participate in their social life. It was therefore not surprising to the PEP survey team in 1966 to find that ‘a coloured community in a West Riding town’ – in fact, Pakistanis in Keighley – complained the least about racial discrimination. This was so because the Pakistanis had only minimally exposed themselves to situations where they might be discriminated against. ‘By avoiding notice the Pakistanis hope to avoid trouble,’ explained a Pakistani leader in Nottingham.<sup>68</sup>

Nevertheless, those early days presented difficult times; with jobs hard to come by, employment became a thorny issue, as secure employment at the level of one’s training in the native land was almost impossible. Higher-level jobs were more attractive to the local population and discriminating employers were not likely to give such attractive positions to Asians when there were white candidates keen to take them up. Additionally, the ability of many migrants to carry out any particularly

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<sup>68</sup> Hero, *Black British, White British*, 118.

skilled work was hampered by poor language and communication skills and a lack in understanding of local customs. Hero argues that:

The language barrier had individual and collective consequences for Asians. For instance, lack of English excluded the average Asian immigrant from employment on public transport. He therefore sought, and found, work in factories where gang work, or menial tasks, were offered; that is, where demands on his English were minimal.<sup>69</sup>

Those with a higher education who were not able to secure professional employment at their level of education and skill became resentful:

Most of the bitterness in the Asian community came from English-speaking and educationally qualified persons. And that too was mainly in the sphere of employment. They almost invariably found it a waste of time to follow up job advertisements in newspapers and professional journals. Either no interview calls came or, when they did, British employers often treated their university degrees and professional experience as worthless.<sup>70</sup>

Asian entrepreneurial independence and a yearning for self-advancement through self-employment soon grew out of the frustrations of the discriminatory situation. They were familiar with the necessity to work together to achieve, having already done so both in India and in East Africa, and they were willing to do so again in Britain, as shown by Hero:

In some cases, business-minded Asians soon realized that buying a house could also prove a worthwhile investment, and acted accordingly. For instance, ten Indians in Handsworth, Birmingham, formed a mortgage club. Each member paid 10 pounds a week into the pool. Thus in ten weeks they accumulated 1000 pounds. With this sum, they bought outright – in the name of one member - a short lease property, where there was very little competition from white Brummies. They then rented out the house. Shortly, with the rent money and their own savings, they purchased another house in the same street in the name of the next member on the list. And so on until, in less than eighteen months, each of them had a house of their own plus income from rent.<sup>71</sup>

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<sup>69</sup> Hero, *Black British, White British*, 117.

<sup>70</sup> Hero, *Black British, White British*, 119.

<sup>71</sup> Hero, *Black British, White British*, 120.

Solomos suggests that problems in employment and social acclimatisation had different effects on the South Asian and West Indian communities for many different reasons:

Immigrant minorities were forced into a series of reactive/defensive political strategies. This process took different forms in the Asian and the West Indian communities. In Asian communities it resulted in concentration on capital accumulation and social mobility. In the West Indian community it took the form of complete withdrawal from competition and the construction of a black identity.<sup>72</sup>

For all these reasons the Asian communities generally took up self-employment, and the drive for 'capital accumulation' began in earnest. Self-employment, as I stated earlier, was a tried and tested formula for success in an unkind western environment. The example of those Asians forming mortgage clubs occurred early on, but success followed success and our communities were quick to take up trading opportunities:

The gradual expansion of the Asian community and the corresponding growth in the demand for Indian spices, pickles, vegetables and chapatti flour led some enterprising Asian settlers, with previous business experience, to become traders. Often such an immigrant began by importing groceries in bulk from India or Pakistan, and engaging his recently arrived family in packaging goods in small quantities. To build a clientele, he delivered groceries by van to Asian households. At first, while he held his factory job, he limited deliveries to weekends; but as his clientele grew, and with it his business, he gave up his job and became a full time retailer.<sup>73</sup>

Asians successfully entered almost every sphere of trade and business:

The result was that by 1965 in Bradford there were 105 immigrant owned commercial and business premises. These included grocers, butchers, cafes, restaurants, travel agencies, photographic dealers, booksellers, car-hire firms, drapery shops, sweet shops, electrical goods stores, estate agencies, banks, dry cleaners, coal merchants, furniture dealers, tailors, car driving schools and barbers.<sup>74</sup>

This hard working, entrepreneurial ethic set up the future prosperity of my own family. My grandfather, along with my mother, set up a tailoring business, making

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<sup>72</sup> John Solomos, *Race and Racism in Britain* (London: Palgrave Macmillan, 2003), 20.

<sup>73</sup> Hero, *Black British, White British*, 120.

<sup>74</sup> Hero, *Black British, White British*, 121.

wedding dresses. Another aspect of Gujarati family kinship, the concentrated effort on the part of parents to educate the children in order to enter the professional world, and hence move up yet another social rung, also played out in my family.

### **Gandhi and the waning of post-coloniality**

My grandfather, like many in the Gujarati diaspora of his era, mythologised the actions of Gandhi and told tales of his heroism and stalwart, non-violent, stand against the British (as illustrated by the story included at the bottom of page 29 in chapter 1). To my grandfather, Gandhi represented non-violent and non-conformist solutions for the difficulties faced in white society. Although my grandfather discussed these actions so frequently during my youth in London, my father never mentioned Gandhi or his part in the resistance to colonialism, and thus Gandhi's beliefs held far less import to my generation and me in the postcolonial Britain of my youth. I make this point in order to underline my assertion of the shift in the British Indians' thinking and social awareness as one from colonial to post-colonial finally in recent years to a place where neither seem to hold the import it had to the generations just past. Of course like all journeys, this one from a place of un-belonging to one of hyper belonging took some time and included many traumas along the way, some of which I will attempt to discuss in the following writing.

The fact is my children now have no idea of who Gandhi was and why he might be so revered, just as they had no idea of my family's journey through colonialism and beyond. British Indians have left behind many such teachings because of their irrelevance to their present cultural and social surroundings—the vast struggles of colonialism and de-colonialism so complex left dematerialized and void. It is a strange dichotomy that it is now the British school system, which now teaches my children about Gandhi, his philosophy and its importance on world history. Ware describes this disparity of cultural heritage specifically in terms of Gandhi:

One of the government's immediate responses to the 7<sup>th</sup> July bomb attacks in London [on buses and trains by local Muslim extremists in 2005] was to commission an investigation into the teaching of British values in schools. When the report on Diversity and Citizenship was published it began with a quote from Mahatma Gandhi. 'The ability to reach unity in diversity will be

the beauty and the test of our civilization,' he said, although he was probably not thinking about the British national curriculum at the time.<sup>75</sup>

There is a parallel to this situation in the post-colonial environment in Africa as we can see in the following from Achille Mbembe as quoted from Arif Dirlik who provides an examination of the state of postcoloniality in sub-Saharan Africa in the generations following the end of colonisation, asking why there is less and less of a mental connection to a colonial state of being. Achille Mbembe suggests that “the younger generation of Africans has no direct or immediate experience of colonization, whatever role it may have played in African history.”<sup>76</sup> Dirlik goes on to suggest that, “Postcolonial, in other words, is applicable not to all of the *postcolonial* period but only to that period after colonialism when, amongst other things, a forgetting of its effects has begun to set in.”<sup>77</sup>

### **1970s – Racial violence during my youth**

In the British society of my youth, things got worse before they got better. On an everyday level, violence through fear and discrimination against those who were obviously different went on unabated. I was bullied both verbally and physically throughout my lower school days, and during a recent conversation, my father revealed that he had once been physically beaten. Every day, a group of white youths would shout ‘Paki’ at him, a racist slur used to demean all with brown coloured skin. Eventually my father shouted back at them: “I am not a Paki, I am a Hindu”, at which point, he was set upon. Strangely, since hearing this story I am convinced that I remember seeing my father come home with a bleeding mouth. I can vividly see the shape of that trickle of blood. Although he also received a black eye and a broken rib, I am obsessed with that trickle of blood; so much so, that in 2010 I made a series of artworks based around that trickle that showed at Gallery Reis in Singapore (examples of which I shall introduce in the next chapter *Figs. 3.5 and 3.6*).

My father also told me that there were times when he had expected violence in Kenya but never actually experienced it. Strangely, he had to come to Britain to

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<sup>75</sup> Ware, *Who cares about Britishness?*, 223.

<sup>76</sup> Achille Mbembe, quoted in Arif Dirlik, “The Post-Colonial Aura: Third World Criticism in the Age of Global Capitalism,” *Critical Inquiry* 20, no.2 (Winter 1994), 339.

<sup>77</sup> Dirlik, “The Post-Colonial Aura,” 339.

experience what he had expected for so long. However, he did tell me that our life in Britain was very different to our life in Kenya. He was convinced that his relationship with the white man had somehow shifted, although he was uncertain of the exact nature of this shift and what it would lead to. This change was based on his seeing white people working on buses and cleaning streets and serving in shops in London, which he found very alien when first he stepped off the plane:

I was talking to a Trinidadian Civil Servant who had come to take some kind of course in the ways of bureaucracy. A man about forty-five, intelligent enough to be in the senior grade of the Trinidad Civil Service which is by no means backward, a man of some substance among his own class of people. We were talking in a general way about life among the emigrants. The ship was now steady; the tugs were coming alongside. Suddenly there was consternation in the Trinidadian's expression.

'But . . . but', he said, 'look down there.'

I looked, and since I had lived six years in England, I failed to see anything of particular significance. I asked him what he had seen; and then I realized what was happening.

'*They* do that kind of work, *too*?' he asked.

He meant the white hands and faces on the tug. In spite of films, in spite of reading Dickens – for he would have had to at the school which trained him for the Civil Service – in spite of all this received information, this man had never really felt, as a possibility and a fact, the existence of the English worker.<sup>78</sup>

This perceived shift was unfortunately no indication of better things to come. Confusingly, those of my generation were not able to physically identify with a sense of rootedness or belonging, even at a distance, to either Africa or India. This loss of belonging brought on a feeling of either belonging simultaneously to two worlds or to none at all, well articulated by Rushdie as 'falling between two stools.' Although, as Rushdie suggests, this could have been an interesting place from which to create, in the short term and without the luxury of hindsight, it was a very difficult place from which to manoeuvre a sense of place, as the cultural sands shifted in ever more unpredictable ways.

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<sup>78</sup> George Lamming, *The occasion for speaking, The pleasures of Exile* (London: Michael Joseph, 1960), quoted in Bill Ashcroft, Gareth Griffiths and Helen Tiffin, ed., *The Post-Colonial Studies Reader* (Oxford: Routledge 2006), 15.

As a young person growing up in this environment I felt many and varied emotions. The dichotomy of feeling like an alien on the one hand and wanting to be white in order to fit in on the other was one of the most confusing. As a result of the western gaze I felt no more comfortable on home ground, as my grandfather had in the India of the Raj, or my father in colonial Africa. As a community, we became insular as a means of self-protection. For me art became a means to investigate some of these feelings and relationships.

The harsh realities of the outside space occupied by the Indian community in post-colonial Britain up to this time are particularly well laid out by John Solomos who also quotes from J. Rex and S. Tomlinson:

In the study conducted by Rex and his associates in Handsworth during the mid 1970s (Rex and Tomlinson, 1979) the aim was to explore the degree to which immigrant populations shared the class position of their white neighbors and white workers in general. Their analysis outlines a class structure in which white workers had been granted certain rights won by the working class movement via trade unions and the Labour Party. The result was the establishment, in the 1970s, of a state of class truce between white workers and dominant social groups. Immigrant workers and their children were excluded from this truce and experienced discrimination in all the areas where the white workers had made significant gains, that is, employment, education and housing. It follows from this that immigrant workers were placed outside the working class as an 'underclass':

The concept of underclass was intended to suggest ... that the minorities were systematically at a disadvantage compared with their white peers and that, instead of identifying with working class culture, community and politics, they formed their own organisations and became effectively a separate underprivileged class.<sup>79</sup>

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<sup>79</sup> John Solomos, *Race and Racism in Britain* (London: Palgrave Macmillan, 2003), 20, who also quotes J. Rex and S. Tomlinson, *Colonial Immigrants in a British City: A Class Analysis* (London: Routledge and Kegan Paul, 1979), 275.

### **Racism in 1980s Britain**

Solomos aptly explains the position of the outsider in Britain during my youth, when the issue of race and the problems my colour brought about were real and ongoing.

The goatskin coat is a metaphor for the situation of those post-colonial Kenyan-Indians that arrived *en masse* in England at the end of British governance in Kenya, when the only way to hold on to our British passports was to move to the land of our former colonisers. Like the coat they arrived, ready to get on with the job at hand, but they were not accepted in kind by the native populace. The coat may have offered protection from the weather, but it did not provide camouflage against the racism that followed.

Salman Rushdie vividly explains the intricacies of everyday living up to this point in an essay written in 1982, where he argues that England became a ‘New Empire’ for blacks (an inclusive term for all coloured minority peoples) living in England following de-colonisation:

This isn’t the England of fair play, tolerance, decency and equality-maybe that place never existed anyway, except in fairy-tales. In the streets of the new Empire, black women are abused and black children are beaten up on their way home from school. In the run-down housing estates of the new Empire, black families have their windows broken, they are afraid to go out after dark, and human and animal excrement arrives through their letter-boxes. The police offer threats instead of protection, and the courts offer small hope of redress.<sup>80</sup>

This is a situation that continued well into the 1980s when both institutional and social racism finally start to show sign’s of shifting to a more positive one for the Indian in British society (which I will cover in Chapter 3).

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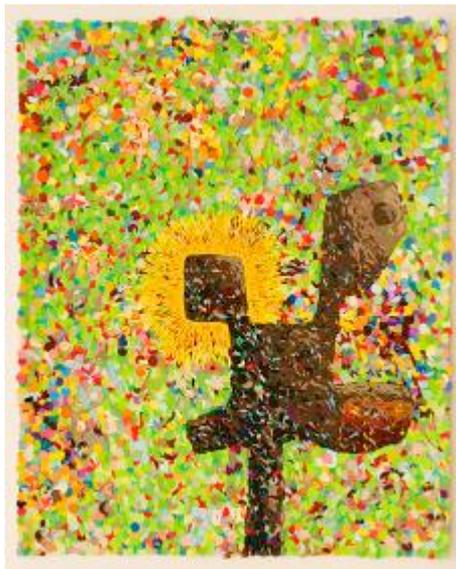
<sup>80</sup> Salman Rushdie, *Imaginary Homelands: Essays and Criticism 1981-1991*, (London: Granta, 1991), 134.

## **Conclusion**

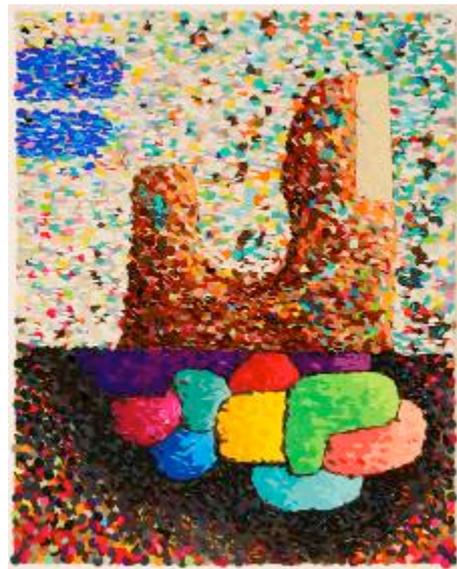
The migration from Kenya to Britain was again thrust upon my community, this time because of Post-colonial British politics, and thus again full of uncertainty. And even though we ended up here through a convoluted and subjective journey, in the guise of a welcome to British citizens from abroad, it was far from a welcome with open arms. In fact, we arrived in a Britain rife with racism and becoming more so in a climate of fear generated by right wing conservatives such as Enoch Powell.

Though lumped in with other minorities to begin with, we once again took on the challenge of economic and social betterment in a harsh and unwelcome environment armed with our skills and tenacity to succeed. We were also armed with a specifically hybridised iconography that wove the Gujarati Darji cultural identity with which we migrated to Africa from India, such as the sari, mixed with the African iconography we took on in Africa. A prime example which included the goatskin coat with which I started this chapter, and which still remains as a vivid example of my community's insistence on generating a phenomenon of celebration at this time (encapsulated within the production of a coat made of a material that is unusual at this time and in this place, but which functions very successfully), though once again one that arrived hand in hand with a position of trauma in the uncertainty of our subject position in British society at this time.

### Chapter 3 The image in the confetti



*Fig. 3.1*  
*The Emperor's old hand*, 2013  
Gouache on collage on paper  
40 x 32 cm



*Fig. 3.2*  
*Lost foundation*, 2013  
Gouache on Collage on paper  
40 x 32 cm

Having taken the traumatic journey with my family and cultural group to England from Africa, I struggled to find an identity that cohered to British society without some friction. A British art school education in the 1980s was proudly Eurocentric which had a lasting influence on me but in which I was unable to see my own experiences or aesthetic history. The remnants of those western oeuvres continue to influence my artwork, along with others I have since acquired. After leaving art school in the 1980s, I found a parallel to my own experiences in those of the Black Arts Movement (formed by artists of colour in the United Kingdom in response to a lack of representation). The 1980s was also an artistic climate of renewal and possibility associated with the Young British Artists (YBA) movement and their formation of a personal, hybrid visual vocabulary, which was a guiding light for a young artist of colour such as myself. In addition, the representation of coloured professionals had been improving in London since the 1970s. This improvement has continued up to the present moment, gaining momentum with shifts in race politics that have seen major artists of colour enter the mainstream, for instance Chris Offili in the 1980/90s and Hew Locke in the 2000s, amongst others.

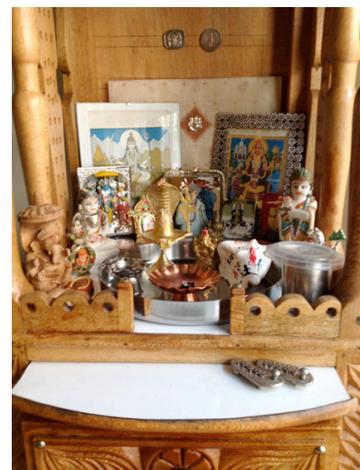
I developed my personal iconography during the 1980s in response to this milieu and my personal and familial history, which included some of the tailoring techniques

taught to me by my grandfather and father. These techniques transferred the system of pattern making, cutting and stitching together of cloth to the preparation, cutting and restructuring of collage to make artworks. Such techniques become less important in my most recent works as distance in time and shifts in subject placement have occurred as my community becomes embedded into mainstream society. As an artist, I constantly examine and reflect on my environment and my place in it, which necessarily changes my reasons for and methods of making.

In this chapter I trace parallel trajectories of art (including two recent examples from my own practice, shown in *Figures 3.1 and 3.2*) with the social shifts in England from multiculturalism/assimilation in the 1980s, where all non-whites were ‘othered’ into the category of ‘Black’, through to a post-modern/cosmopolitan embracing of diversity in the 1990s and beyond. I finish this chapter by looking at recent works and consider the reasons behind the newfound agency evident in artists of colour, including changes in both society and the art world that enabled it to happen.

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I would like to begin this chapter by introducing an example of a pivotal cultural iconographical form that for me bridges many of the gaps between my various cultural identities as propagated through the many and varied environments I have lived through, especially that of carrying form through migrations.



*Fig. 3.3.* My grandfather in front of our family shrine, Collection of the artist.

*Fig. 3.4.* Shrine set up by my mother in law, Collection of the artist, 2014.

The link from the suit and the coat to my own artwork takes a route through the chromatic sensibility present in specific cultural practices of this migrant Gujarati Darji community. An abundance of colour characterises the forms of little temple shrines set up in our homes—visual focal points for the offering of prayers on a daily basis, something my grandfather, a very religious man, had my family do every night before the evening meal (*Figures 3.3 & 3.4*). The cultural practices which originally came with us from Gujarat, with which many of the object forms I was so influenced by were intimately tied up, were once again taken up and carried on in London as a means of sustaining cultural identity.



*Fig. 3.5*  
*How about me.* 2010  
 gouache on collage on digital print  
 47.5 x 43 cm



*Fig. 3.6*  
*Moon river.* 2010  
 gouache on collage on digital print  
 37.5 x 33 cm

The two images above (*Figures 3.5* and *3.6* earlier referenced in chapter two regarding my father's experience of racial violence) are earlier incarnations of the images at the beginning of this chapter and link directly to the Gujarati Darji imagery described above, referencing the colour palette drawn from my experience of it. These collages and their physical means of production directly reflect the way I would tailor a shirt, and thus are an example of the transference of the Gujarati Darji visual culture through to my generation of this cultural group. These collages, very much like the process of tailoring, require firstly the designing of a pattern and transferring onto a piece of tracing paper. Then preparing the dotted surface, very much like the material with which one would tailor a piece of clothing and cut the

dotted surfaces to the required sizes and shapes. This would then be finished by sewing, but in my case here involves gluing these shapes together as per the original pattern.

As an explanation of the work above and how it relates to my personal experience, my artwork provided a means to engender a personal sense of belonging; even a personal sense of place, though not always one rooted in the local culture, but certainly one that was founded upon the visual culture that came with us from Africa, and articulated in the garments described in the last two chapters. Using the sensibility that created these garments and extending it as a starting point to my own creative processes, for example by using tailoring techniques, has enabled me to develop a personal visual language that takes on board both an Indian and African visual awareness, colour palette and sensibility, while still developing a contemporary visual vocabulary that can be considered seriously by a western audience as having relevance to a modern multi-cultural society.

### **Multiculturalism in 1980s Britain**

Zadie Smith's novel *White Teeth*,<sup>81</sup> from the year 2000, articulates well the pressures of my generation of migrants in the 1970s and 80s, and the confusion of cultural loss and gain more broadly. She underlines a sort of cultural void in subjective experience experienced in the relationships between characters of varying cultural backgrounds (Jamaican, Bangladeshi and 'white' English). Molly Thompson writes regarding *White Teeth*:

... the text suggests that, as a result of belonging to different generations and holding a diversity of cultural beliefs, the possibility of feeling at 'home' in this multicultural world is unlikely. The experience of many in the text is of "an ever present anger and hurt, the feeling of belonging nowhere that comes to people who belong everywhere"<sup>82</sup>

Interestingly, Smith refers to London as a "Happy multicultural land", a contested term amongst commentators, as can well be expected as the experiences of many minority groups at the time were far from happy. Thompson exposes the irony

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<sup>81</sup> Zadie Smith, *White teeth* (London: Hamish Hamilton, 2000).

<sup>82</sup> Molly Thompson, "'Happy Multicultural Land'? The Implications of an 'Excess of Belonging' in Zadie Smith's *White Teeth*," in *Write Black, Write British*, ed. Kadija Sesay (London: Hansib, 2005), 123.

loaded in the term, as well as the fallacy entailed in the ethos of multiculturalism itself:

By problematising the notion of ‘multiculturalism’, as Smith undoubtedly does, she is in accordance with many postcolonial critics and theorists who have contested the term and who believe it may obscure a different reality – one with more sinister connotations. According to Salman Rushdie ‘multiculturalism’ is a fake panacea, a new ‘catchword’. And ‘the latest token gesture towards Britain’s Blacks.’ He says, the term “ought to be exposed, like ‘integration’ and ‘racial harmony’, for the sham it is”. For those second and third generation children of migrants in this country, who possess what Alison Donnell and Sarah Lawson Welsh have called “multi belongings”, ‘multiculturalism’ may indeed carry negative associations. Ontological uncertainty, coupled with conflicting societal influences, paradoxically results in experiencing both a lack of belonging as well as what one critic has defined as an “excess of belonging.”<sup>83</sup>

Salman Rushdie once again comes to the rescue of the culturally lost and discontented post-colonial in the quote above.

With respect to my experience as a young artist in this climate, the term ‘multicultural’, though expressing a noble intention, seems to be attempting to give a place to those without one, specifically in a time when colour was seen as a problem, more often than it is now. As those of colour move further into the mainstream, and the bias of perceived migratory problems shifts (to encompass more recently those from Eastern Europe), the need for new terms, or indeed a space where no terms are needed, becomes only more necessary. It is an ahistorical and ever-renewing situation. Indeed, many who have irrevocably become an important part of the social fabric, as I feel my community have become, thus move beyond the confines of such terminology or the thinking it represents.

The “excess of belonging” described by Thomson above was highly applicable to a state of hyper visibility experienced by my family and many other coloured post-colonial migrants. For me these two terms are both tied up with the former minorities precarious journey to belonging in western society, for in a state of wanting to re-address the balance of the former position of being pushed sometimes violently to the periphery, the present state might be for white society to over emphasize the positive

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<sup>83</sup> Thompson, ““Happy Multicultural Land’?”, 123.

aspects of these former outsiders, thereby creating a state that these terms reflect. Visibility for such communities, from my experience of working in the Gujarati diaspora, has come full circle from invisibility in the early postcolonial era, through negatively charged racism, as described in the story about my father towards the end of the last chapter, to an almost covetous over-emphasis on the cultural capital and iconographies of coloured postcolonial migrants by the mainstream and the establishment. Interestingly, much of the personal culture with which my family came to Britain, initially used as a means of racial segregation: for instance, slurs such as ‘garlic breath’ and ‘greasy head,’ a reference to the coconut oil that my grandmother insisted on putting in my hair everyday before school, has entered popular culture (garlic is now an ordinary ingredient in white kitchens and the health benefits of coconut oil are commonly understood). Members of my generation have often jettisoned many cultural forms, practices and iconographies from our everyday lives because of the negative connotations they hold for us. However, many former minority visual cultural iconographies are starting to re-emerge in the contemporary discourse of a global cultural heritage, and as I discuss, have greatly influenced my work throughout my career and continue to do so.



*Fig. 3.7*  
*Portrait 2, 2006*  
Collage on paper  
38 x 33 cm



*Fig. 3.8*  
*Portrait 3, 2006*  
Collage on paper  
38 x 33 cm

Though the white British community around us was not yet ready to accept our culture, we had already started to assimilate: we watched British soap operas and

Hollywood movies, listened to David Bowie and Bob Marley, and wore drainpipes and winkle pickers. Figures 3.7 and 3.8 show two of a set of artworks in which I attempted to retrospectively describe this dilemma. These works represent my three aunts, who were big Doris Day fans. When they got married they had then very trendy short and bouffant hairstyles. They looked amazing, dressed in full Indian attire with the heavily embroidered saris and lots of gold jewellery but with western-style hair and makeup. Ironically, these very same aunts now spend most of their time in tracksuits and trainers while the west has taken on the sari and the bindi.

These works use the collage technique I have developed that uses skills akin to tailoring. This technique has enabled me to layer all the differing cultural iconographies from my family history and others that inspire me. Often discarded by their original communities but embraced in general society, these iconographies enable me to adopt an ethnographic ethos, akin to the ways ethnographic communities use discarded cultural materials, entwined with an awareness of contemporary artists that work with the discarded and the throw away including those belonging to the YBA collective as described above.

The relationships we enjoyed with our native white contemporaries were forever changed, at least for the young Asian male, by the television screening of Hanif Kureishi's *Buddha of Suburbia* in 1993 (a television series made from the book by Roger Michel), which was a massive hit. As a book it was revelatory as the position and attitude of Karim Amir, the main character of the novel, strongly mirrored my own:

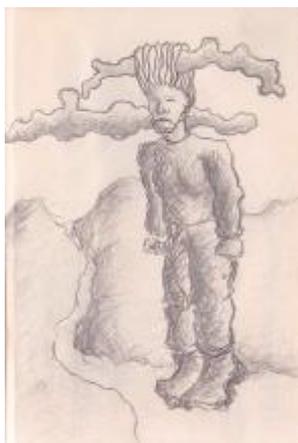
My name is Karim Amir, and I am an Englishman born and bred, almost. I am often considered to be a funny kind of Englishman, a new breed as it were, having emerged from two old histories. But I don't care – Englishman I am (though not proud of it), from the South London suburbs and going somewhere. Perhaps it is the odd mixture of continents and blood, or here and there, of belonging and not, that makes me restless and easily bored. Or perhaps it was being brought up in the suburbs that did it. Anyway, why search for the inner room when it's enough to say that I was looking for trouble, any kind of movement, action and sexual interest I could find, because things were so gloomy, so slow and heavy, in our family, I don't know why.<sup>84</sup>

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<sup>84</sup> Hanif Kureishi, *The Buddha of Suburbia* (London: Faber & Faber, 1990), 3.

Here Karim describes his suburban life as “gloomy, slow and heavy,” but he does not know why. Having lived a parallel existence in a North London suburb through the 1980s, I have a good idea. The incongruities of living two separate lives, one Indian and the other British, the first inside the home, and the other outside of it, were often oppressive and confusing. Although a cultural cosmopolitan awareness was blooming in mainstream British culture, after all this was the centre of London, my artistic sensibility was still dominated by an overwhelmingly Eurocentric art school education. Subconsciously, the culture of my Gujarati Darji home was definitely distinct from and subordinate to the exterior, dominant western culture. In hindsight, this perception was a vestige of my family’s post-colonial subjugation.

Having embarked on my art school education in 1986 and with a working knowledge and love of Western art history, I started making artwork that reflected the loneliness and despair I had felt at many moments in my youth. The feeling of being trapped in a place where I was unwanted came to the fore in a series of drawings I produced throughout 1986 and 1987 during the early years of my degree (*Figures 3.9 & 3.10*). These drawings featured tormented figures in horrific circumstances, tethered by their very long hair, reflecting a cultural claustrophobia and a lack of freedom of self expression, as well as the trauma of having to cut my own very long hair short at the age of 14 to comply with the school I then attended.



*Fig. 3.9*  
*Untitled, 1986/7*  
Pencil on paper  
15 x 10 cms



*Fig. 3.10*  
*Untitled, 1986/7*  
Pencil on paper  
15 x 10 cms

More positively, at a time when British attitudes towards me as a minority were starting to shift, my sense of the possible was also expanding at a phenomenal rate. Like Karim, the “trouble, movement...and sexual interest” I was looking for came when I entered art school in central London. Finally, I could not only follow my major interest, namely art (which had been denied me in an Indian family that saw art as a path to definite failure), but I could start to experiment with my place in wider society and my relationship with it. I was free to make whatever artwork I wanted to at this time, a position that I celebrated as a hard won freedom of expression. I was unaware of the trauma that was to come after leaving the rather protective confines of art school as a result of the lack of opportunities available due to my racial position in the social and artistic establishment.

At this stage of my career my paintings were based on Europeanised art forms: establishment artists that inspired me at the time included Hughie O’Donoghue, Georg Baselitz and Christopher Le Brun. These paintings were the mainstay of my practice, but I also made a second strand of works that re-configured the sensibility gained through my experience of objects from my background, like the goatskin coat, my tailoring heritage and the home shrines described towards the end of the last chapter. These works entwined these experiences with my newly acquired knowledge of collage and assemblage in the work of Western artists such as Kurt Schwitters and Eduardo Paolozzi.

Even before entering art school, I had already started to realize the importance of the objects around me, as culturally loaded and significant in their impact on my social placement and sense of cultural belonging, or indeed as markers of a (lack of) belonging. I made works that fused such objects from so-called minority cultures, and those that I experienced and collected from the wider society surrounding me. The drawing from 1983 shown in Figure 3.11 presents such a merging. This piece juxtaposes an Ancient South American god figure with a piece of wood from my garden in Finchley, North London, shaped rather like a piece of a jigsaw puzzle. The drawing re-orientates these objects into a new ethnographic jigsaw.



*Fig. 3.11*  
*Figure and wood, 1983*  
Charcoal on paper  
88 x 54 cm

The drawing shown in Figure 3.12 was done in my first year at St Martin's when I was only 20 and is an amalgamation of a life drawing of a small sculpture of the Hindu god Ganesh behind a character which was very much a part of my repertoire at the time. This work was inspired by a school of Scottish figurative painters very popular in the early 1980s that included David Band and Peter Howson (*Figures 3.13 & 3.14*), amongst others, whose work I found extremely inspirational within the Western European/British canon. I love the way the figures are rendered so freely and the way in which the backgrounds were used to such dramatic effect both abstractedly and conceptually, a way of working which allowed me to visually render both my experiences and ideas at the time (as in *Figure 3.12* below).



*Fig. 3.12*  
*Falling*, 1986  
Charcoal on paper  
88 x 54 cm



*Fig. 3.13*  
Record sleeve for Spandau,  
Ballet's 'highly strung'  
David Band, 1984



*Fig. 3.14*  
*Lowland hero spurns the cynics*  
Peter Howson, 1985

In my late teens during the 1980s, when I started working and then entered higher education, I noticed shifts in my inferior subject placement. I not only made friends with people of a white English background, but also started to date girls of that group, amongst others. The multicultural society that was London suddenly opened itself up to me. However, although society had started to move forward in leaps and bounds, the establishment generally was slow to follow. The Race Relations Act, first introduced in 1974, meant that we as a minority group could not be discriminated against. When I first attended St. Martins School of Art (London) in 1986, I was often told sarcastically by other students that I was there to fulfil a minority quota, not because of my artistic skills. In amongst approximately 30 students in my year, three Asians, three Afro-Caribbeans, and one Armenian represented this minority quota. It would be easy to be paranoid and think this was intentional (after all the art school like other establishments might have been going through the same changes in its policies as other institutions), but maybe the reality was that this simply reflected the demographic of London at the time. Whatever the case, it not only enabled a good start to my artistic career, but also indicated the beginnings of a more accommodating establishment.

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## **The Black Arts Movement**

Exhibiting work as a professional artist in the late 1980s seemed an impossible task in an art establishment that was slow to react to the swelling tide of ‘minority’ voices. I was told several times to approach the Black Arts Gallery, a specialist institution set up for only coloured minority artists. This suggestion appalled me as firstly I was not ‘black’, and secondly, having had a completely Eurocentric Art school education, the works that I intended to exhibit did not consciously reflect a minority perspective, despite the separate and (then what I thought to be) minor strand of my practice that carried traits and characteristics of a particular minority cultural identity described above. Another Asian artist with whom I had attended art school was a Pakistani by background. He had exactly the same experience as myself and took the same course of action: squirreling his art away in boxes and no longer attempting to exhibit.

The Black Arts Movement (of which the above Black Arts Gallery was a part) was first conceived in the early 1980s. Its relevance to both Black and Asian voices in early 1980s Britain is demonstrable as described by Rasheed Araeen, from INIVA’s (Institute of International Visual Arts – London) *Shades of Black*:

What is particularly significant about what was described by its first practitioners in the early 1980s as “black art” was its ability to respond critically to the social and political forces of the time and to set an ideological framework for a militantly radical arts movement... It was in this sociopolitical milieu – when most mainstream artists, deprived of their role as the progressive conscience of Western liberalism, turned to their inner selves, cynicism, and language games – that the Black Arts Movement in Britain gave us “a voice of humanity,” as I wrote in 1982, “that refuses to be brutalized.”<sup>85</sup>

Araeen, an artist himself, was most impressed by the work of the earliest proponents of this movement (namely Eddie Chambers and Keith Piper) and writes the following of his viewing their first exhibition together in 1982 at the Africa Centre:

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<sup>85</sup> Rasheed Araeen, “The Success and Failure of the Black Arts Movement,” in *Shades of Black*, ed. David A. Bailey, Ian Baucom and Sonia Boyce (London, Duke University Press, 2005), 22.

As soon as I entered the exhibition, I was overwhelmed by its visual impact. It was unique. Nothing similar had I seen in the mainstream art world. I immediately decided to write. “What is really significant is the presence of tremendous energy, the sense of full commitment and definite direction...The work may be loud and noisy. But then, it is partly deliberate. The attempt is to express anger and frustration...The furiousness is about the world in which hypocrisy, smugness, cynicism, self-exaltation, self-righteousness, etc., have become norms.”<sup>86</sup>

A little while after this first exhibition a conference in Wolverhampton (in the British Midlands) formalized this group and attracted interest from many Black and Asian artists from all over Britain. It was at this conference that Araeen first initiated the use of the term “Black” in British Socio-Politics to encompass all from various coloured minority backgrounds. He wrote “My point was that if we argue that the basis of black experience is white racism, then this experience was not confined to African and Afro-Caribbean people. Racism was a legacy not only of slavery but also of European colonialism, which subjected all non-white peoples throughout the world. It was therefore appropriate to use the term “black” for people both of African and Asian origins”.<sup>87</sup>

It is certainly true that by the time I left art school in 1989 “black” had become an encompassing term, attested to by the fact that it was suggested to me so often by many in the mainstream art world that I confine myself to the Black Arts Gallery. Shying away from any involvement in an art institution that inherently wanted to pigeonhole me on the basis of my un-belonging was, I still believe, the best course of action at the time. Although I vividly understand the legitimacy of a movement borne of the frustrations of those early Black pioneers, I subconsciously understood that allowing myself to be cornered in this way would mean being further perceived as somehow inferior, subjugated, born of a peripheral social order and not worthy to stand within the Western pantheon.

Araeen expresses similar frustrations in the early 1970s having become frustrated at having courted no interest in artwork he felt was historically significant, he expressed his scepticism thus, “I went through a personal crisis losing all hopes of becoming a successful artist. What really bothered me was not that I had not yet become a

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<sup>86</sup> Araeen, “The Success and Failure of the Black Arts Movement,” 22.

<sup>87</sup> Araeen, “The Success and Failure of the Black Arts Movement,” 23.

successful artist but the institutional indifference towards a work that was central to the development of modernist sculpture in the mid-60s”, after which he gave up making art for a while and turned to political activity instead”.<sup>88</sup>

Having put myself into a similar place at that time, I can understand the feeling of isolation that Araeen expresses: the pain of being ignored by a seemingly ignorant world to which I felt I had the right to be included. I am reminded not only of the moment when I first decided to refrain from taking part, but also of the time in my youth when I first realized my place in society was very decidedly on the outside.

My decision to abstain from the mainstream art world seems to have also been expressed in the actions of Anish Kapoor, an Indian born sculptor now of world repute, who infamously refused to be in an exhibition at the Hayward Gallery in London, curated by Araeen and titled *'The Other Story,'* in 1989. Gilane Tawadros describes the reception of *'The Other Story'*:

Perversely, the only artist whose career appears to have benefited from *The Other Story* is Anish Kapoor, and he refused to take part, arguing that his participation would deny him any serious attention as an individual artist. Kapoor's reluctance to participate in the exhibition commanded much media attention, as several quality newspapers reported with relish Kapoor's quoted or misquoted profession to want to be seen as “an artist first and Asian second.”<sup>89</sup>

As implied by Tawadros, while Kapoor went on to international stardom, the majority of the artists that took part in *The Other Story* quickly disappeared into obscurity. The mere fact that a collective of artists who had come together in order to undermine the system on the basis of its own shortfall seems to have been too great a challenge for commentators at the time, who undermined its relevance and used the example of Kapoor's success as a gauge to measure the impotence and lack of quality of *The Other Story* and its artists. As Tawadros argues:

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<sup>88</sup> Rasheed Araeen, quoted in Stuart Hall, “Assembling the 1980s: The Deluge—and After,” in *Shades of Black*, ed. David A Bailey, Ian Baucom and Sonia Boyce (London, Duke University Press, 2005), 9.

<sup>89</sup> Gilane Tawadros, “A Case of Mistaken Identity,” in *Shades of Black*, ed. David A Bailey, Ian Baucom and Sonia Boyce (London, Duke University Press, 2005), 124.

Identity is something that could be mobilized by art critics and institutions at one and the same time as a marker of both authenticity and inauthenticity. Kapoor was more genuinely both Indian and an artist because, according to the critics, he had made his cultural identity “a servant” to his artistic identity. On the other hand, the artists who agreed to take part in *The Other Story* were clearly inauthentic, inauthentically ‘Other’ as well as inauthentically artists. As Brian Sewell from the Evening Standard put it, “Having either no traditions of their own, or traditions so exhausted that no nourishment is to be drawn from them, these artists parrot Western visual idioms that they do not understand. Their third-rate imitations of the white man’s cliché must seem outrageous to all who care to judge by quality.”<sup>90</sup>

The institution INIVA was set up in the early nineties as a focal point for ‘other’ artists, and filled the void left by the Black Arts Gallery, among others. As described by Kobena Mercer, the ethos of INIVA was more pluralistic than that of the institutions of the 1980s and more inclusive than the mainstream arts establishments.

In 1994 the Institute of International Visual Art (INIVA) was established by the Arts Council in the aftermath of a failed attempt to convert London’s Roundhouse into a black arts centre. Seen from abroad, INIVA is unique. Unlike European countries in which multicultural arts policy is either non-existent (Germany, France) or only relatively recent (Holland), it shows how far UK policy has come in what Gavin Jantjes [artist and tutor at St. Martins School of Art when I attended in 1985] optimistically described as ‘the long march from ‘ethnic arts’ to ‘new internationalism.’<sup>91</sup>

As Mercer argues, despite its attempts, an institution founded on the inherent separation of those seen as ‘other’ and thus not worthy to enter the mainstream arts arena was problematic:

Closer to home, however, INIVA has been ignored or disparaged either on account of its state subsidy which is at odds with entrepreneurialism, or more importantly, on account of the vagueness with which it has implemented its mission to ‘promote the work of artists, academics and curators from a plurality of cultures.’<sup>92</sup>

The other epic show of the period, Damien Hirst’s ‘Freeze’ exhibition of 1988, was a sure-fire success for the majority of the artists included, none of whom were of a

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<sup>90</sup> Tawadros, “A Case of Mistaken Identity,” 124.

<sup>91</sup> Kobena Mercer, “Ethnicity and Internationality: New British Art and Diaspora-Based Blackness,” *Third Text* 13, No. 49 (1999), 54.

<sup>92</sup> Mercer, “Ethnicity and Internationality,” 54.

<sup>93</sup> Mercer, “Ethnicity and Internationality,” 51.

coloured background. A massive cultural shift underway at this time was reflected in the emergence of this so called ‘young British artist’ (YBA), who spurned all that was revered in the current system and retrospectively turned to old British ways of seeing in order to add irreverence through irony and nationalistic sloganism and iconography. Mercer provides a synopsis of this oeuvre:

Viewed as an artistic phenomenon, New British Art was neither new nor British. Loosely defined to include renewed interest in painting (Gary Hume, Richard Paterson) and sculpture (Anya Gallacio, Jake and Dinos Chapman), it was characterized, above all, by neo- or post-conceptualist approaches to the installation genre. The choice of medium, whether film (Douglas Gordon), video (Gillian Wearing) or photography (Sam Taylor-Wood), was secondary to the provocative and irreverent ‘attitude’ whereby, as Micheal Bracewell observed, ‘the new generation of British artists had taken irony and punning – on materials, roles and titles – as the keynote of their projects.’<sup>93</sup>

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### **Pluralism and hybridity in 1990s Britain**

Through the 1980s, opportunities for ‘other’ artists were few and far between, apart from *The Other Story*, known exhibitions include the *Contemporary Indian Art: Festival of India* at the Royal Academy of Arts in 1982, The Horizon gallery (in Marchmont Street, London), showed artists such as Avinash Chandra, whilst the London based and Gujarat born gallerist Kapil Jariwala organized exhibitions by artists such as Bhupen Khakhar and Dhruva Mistry, though closer to the end of the 80s and the beginning of the 90s, and of course there was Anish Kapoor, who started exhibiting with the Lisson gallery [London] in 1982.

In society generally the late 1980s and early 1990s was a pivotal point of change in the lives of many minority groups. The effects of multiculturalism finally started to creep into the system, although with many coughs and splutters along the way, as it is inevitably difficult to change an attitude that has held sway for so long. It felt to me, and others from my community, that institutions were slowly but surely starting to take on the true import and spirit of the Race Relations Act, and those from a coloured minority background were beginning to be judged for their skills and not

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just tokenistically.<sup>94</sup> Others noticed a trend towards a spurning of the iniquitous old world value systems, as described by A.A. Gill:

It subtly altered its methods and its membership as society changed its demands. It came up with new frustrations, and then, without any of us noticing – some time in the late eighties – the Establishment stole off into the night.

It was as if we'd all grown out of it, stopped believing in it. The trappings of the Establishment are still there: the titles and the clubs, the royal societies, the conventions, the dining-room, the Members Only bars, but they no longer broker power or influence. The Establishment may have disappeared in one incarnation, but the collective need for something like it is still here, and in many ways the role has been taken on by the monstrous battalion of celebrity.<sup>95</sup>

This altered state of affairs in the workings of society's hierarchies through the 1990s and beyond, allowed the 'other' to not only enter the more visible and influential parts of British society, but was also accepted as having been treated unjustly.

Convergence of these societal changes with similar changes in the art world towards the end of the 1980s and the beginning of the 1990s produced a slightly more receptive environment for British artists of colour, although there was still a long way to go. As Araeen describes:

When the Black Arts Movement began to draw institutional attention in the late 1980s, the institutions no longer represented a white establishment. The system had already recognized the absence of black people and had opened its doors to those who were happy to help it implement its own cultural agenda and program. These people were able to enter art institutions, not on the basis of their knowledge of arts and the history of black contribution to the mainstream, but as an institutional response to the rhetoric of complaints and appeals. Their ethnic or racial identity was enough, in most cases, to enter the citadel of power and join in the celebration of its newly acquired cultural diversity.<sup>96</sup>

Unfortunately, the ways art institutions and government bodies dealt with artists of colour and the issues of their integration into the mainstream were haphazard and

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<sup>94</sup> For instance, Indian doctors began to be given positions as specialists in hospitals, not just the ubiquitous position of GP.

<sup>95</sup> A.A. Gill, *The Angry Island: Hunting the English* (London, Phoenix, 2006), 22.

<sup>96</sup> Araeen, "The Success and Failure of the Black Arts Movement," 30.

without sensitivity. Throwing money at anyone of colour and hoping for a better result for coloured artists proved to be a flawed approach:

It was therefore not the traditional power of institutions that black artists faced when they tried to enter institutional space but artistically ignorant and illiterate black functionaries. What they encountered was not a body of institutionalized mainstream discourse, which they wanted to confront, but its multicultural façade. In fact, the discourse of black art was stopped at the threshold and its power defused by mixing it with other things of an ethnic nature.<sup>97</sup>

These anomalies (regarding the establishments flawed attempts to readdress the balance in equality), can also be seen in the efforts of arts institutions to enter a more rational and balanced dialogue with the arts of other, non-western forms of art by bringing major exhibitions from those countries to major national galleries in Britain. It was a noble aspiration indeed and a hugely welcome one, especially to my generation of coloured artists; welcome, because I had not seen new art from many of the countries represented (except historical versions collected by colonisers in the British Museum). Exhibitions such as *Art from Argentina: 1920-1924* (Museum of Modern Art, Oxford, 1994), *New Art form Cuba* (Whitechapel Art Gallery, London, 1995) and *Africa 95* which included the epic *Seven Stories From Africa* exhibition (again at the Whitechapel gallery) to take just three examples from the early 1990s. Unbeknown to me at the time, these were “rarely curated by curators from those countries or reflecting the critical voices of their critics”.<sup>98</sup>

Although there were inherent flaws in the system by which this newly emerging art from around the world arrived at our doorstep, I had access to art work that I could not have seen before, and, more importantly, cultural iconographies that I could add to my growing visual language of the iconography of the ‘other’.

In this newly receptive environment, in which local artists of colour were given platforms never before open to them, art stars started to emerge from differing cultural backgrounds who were also grappling with the same cultural dualities that I have dealt with for many years. One such was Chris Ofili, an artist of African

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<sup>97</sup> Araeen, “The Success and Failure of the Black Arts Movement,” 30.

<sup>98</sup> Tawadros, “A Case of Mistaken Identity,” 127.

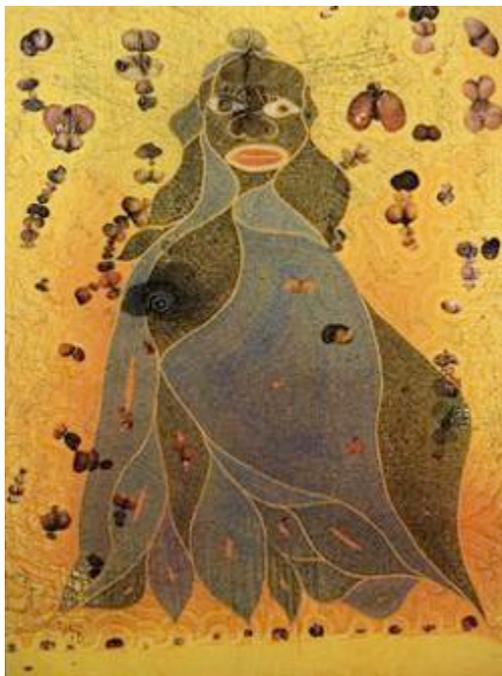
extraction, born and brought up in Manchester in the British Midlands. Ofili's meteoric rise to fame began in 1989 when he won the Whitworth Young Contemporaries Prize and his superstardom was firmly established when he won the Turner Prize in 1998. Ofili constructed artworks that, like my own, were strongly rooted in the traditions of otherness, and, interestingly for me, used dots, among many other visual forms, to create a diasporic art that encompassed African and Western visual histories. His use of dots resonates with me for the reason that it was initially inspired by a wall of prehistoric dots seen at the San caves in the Metobo Hills in Zimbabwe, asking why it was different to the archetypal figures and beasts it was surrounded by, he was told: "The supposition was that this might have been painted by someone who did not go on the hunt but stayed behind and worked in the cave, perhaps in a meditative state, in which music may have played a part."<sup>99</sup> I remember a similar moment when asked to run a workshop in the Aboriginal section at the Art Gallery of New South Wales in Sydney where I had the opportunity of speaking to one of the Aboriginal curators who told me, upon my asking about the use of dots, that, for her, they represented the ebb and flow of nature, and thus they are used to make up the overall image including both the background space of the works but also the foreground action and main subject of the work. This was enlightening for me and foreshadowed my dot worked collages that attempt a similar use of the dot, as a motif that makes up the whole image both background and foreground and in a way that does not shy away from the accusation of being decorative but is celebratory in its insistence of beauty, and in so doing reflect ethnic iconographies especially those viewed in India (examples of which are *figures 3.5 & 3.6* above).

Ofili, who started his career making self-portraits and abstract paintings in a Western gestural style, (though loaded with a second nature awareness of African iconographies), won acclaim for works that were a more overt cross pollination of African, African-American and Western historical art forms, after having spent time in Africa. This hybridity is apparent in works like *The Holy Virgin Mary* (*Figure 3.15*) from 1996 and *Afrodizia* (*Figure 3.16*) also from 1996, in which the controversial use of African elephant dung portrayed some sense of an experience of Africa, having been discovered while Ofili was on safari in Zimbabwe, where

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<sup>99</sup> Judith Nesbitt, *Chris Ofili* (London, Tate Publishing, 2010), 10.

trackers would judge what animals were near by and could be seen by the dung they left behind. The graphical rendering of the Virgin Mary figure is African in its simplicity, but also Afro-American in its opulent use of colour. The glorification of the Afro hairstyle seems a very African-American gesture with its awareness of the graphical iconography of the Blaxploitation genre, whereas the use of collage has its roots in Western modernism. These traditionally separate forms come together to effectively mirror Ofili's personal cultural journey back and forth, and also the new found place and perceived importance of the self-conscious, hybrid state of identity in a modern Western and multicultural society.



*Fig. 3.15*  
*The Virgin Mary*, 1996  
Chris Ofili



*Fig. 3.16*  
*Afrodizia*, 1996  
Chris Ofili

Ofili and 'others' who have earned great success and even notoriety in the contemporary Western art world since the 1990s have received criticism, however. According to Araeen, not only did those artists involved in the 'Black Arts Movement' of the 1980s give up their urgent call for entry into the art system, but also newcomers sold themselves short, by pandering to the rules of the system in order to gain entry:

I ask myself: why have the ‘Black Arts Movement’ Protagonists allowed the radical aims and objectives of Black Art to be absorbed and undermined by everything produced under the banner of ‘black art’? Why are they now silent or meekly accepting whatever is offered by the society they wanted to change? Has anything changed, besides some black artists having won the Turner Prize? Is this what Black Art wanted to achieve? If this is what the movement wanted, why was there talk about white oppression? Has this oppression ended?<sup>100</sup>

Araeen’s concerns also stir at the core of my investigation and developing a more self-critical dimension is imperative to the development of my own project. He goes on to say the following of these artists’ production: “The authenticity and legitimacy of their artworks now becomes entirely dependant on their showing some signs of their racial or cultural origins in Asia or Africa.”<sup>101</sup>

Niru Ratnam, art critic, gallerist and presently Head of Gallery Development at *Art14 London*, a new art fair that had its inaugural inception in 2013, “profited greatly from being South Asian.”<sup>102</sup> In explanation, he continued, “I was on the board of trustees at both the Whitechapel Gallery and the Chisenhale Gallery and half the time I didn’t understand what was being discussed, it was obvious they just needed an Asian presence.” In describing the changes that have occurred since he went on to say, “it’s now become less useful as the art world in Britain is now more diverse and it’s become less so a free ride.”

If Araeen is correct, one might ask: “is Ofili playing to this pre-ordered level of self-determination by using elephant dung?” Or equally, “was Anish Kapoor pandering to this same criteria when he first came to the attention of the art world when he placed heaps of coloured powder on the gallery floor to assimilate the colours in an Indian market stall at the Holi festival time?”—although absurd (as on the one hand it seems too obvious a critique, and on the other it might seem like stripping the artist of his cultural heritage), it is wise for a contemporary artist of colour to anticipate these propositions in the critical response to their work.

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<sup>100</sup> Rasheed Araeen, “The Success and the Failure of Black Art,” *Third Text* 18, No. 67 (2004): 147.

<sup>101</sup> Araeen, “The Success and the Failure of Black Art,” 151.

<sup>102</sup> Niru Ratnam, in discussion with the author, 2013.

Araeen posits that the rules by which Black artists gained mainstream success during the 1990s may have arisen with the demise of the initial ‘Black Arts Movement’:

Thus the theories of ethnicity and cultural difference not only ignored and undermined the historical importance of Black Art, and led it to its eventual demise, but also produced a specific post modernist framework for the production and legitimization of art for artists of non-white racial groups. The tropes of irony and self-parody that we notice in the work of successful black artists in the 1990s is the product of an institutionally legitimized and pre-determined framework, by which their significance is controlled and contained within the larger spectacle of multiculturalism. They may deal with the issue of ‘race’ but the methodology deployed in their work poses no threat to the power of Eurocentric status quo.<sup>103</sup>

This disdain for the status quo reached by contemporary artists of colour and the art establishment, and the assertion that the old world Eurocentric idol still holds firm commanding subordination, holds dread for former coloured migrant artists such as myself. According to Araeen, we are pushed once again to the periphery and hoops still have to be jumped in order to gain access to the hallowed halls of the western art world. He implies that new halls must be built, with new architecture, in response to newly acknowledged groundswells of cultural forces—with ethnic subcultures as part of the picture from its inception.

Coloured artists from the beginning of the 1990s started working in ways more akin to those of the YBAs, using both ‘irony and punning’ to articulate ideas both of cultural loss and cultural gain and to align themselves with then current modes of contemporary art making. By doing so, like the YBAs, they were shedding the burden of responsibility felt by the former generation of Black artists—the burden to articulate the lack of agency of their cultures in British society. Although it could be argued that these artists turned their backs on their responsibility as members of a minority group, the culture around them had changed a great deal by this time, as Araeen himself noted when he suggested that by the time the artists from the Black Arts Movement started to garner institutional interest, they were entering an art system that was already opening its doors to those from minority backgrounds. Kobena Mercer agrees, stating the following:

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<sup>103</sup> Araeen, “The Success and the Failure of Black Art,” 151.

Considering the discrepancy between YBA localism and INIVA's pluralism, we get a glimpse into the perplexing conditions occupied by Diaspora artists such as Steve McQueen, Chris Ofili, Hamad Butt and Perminder Kaur. Making artistic choices fully congruent with the return to the 'crux' of Pop, Minimalism and Conceptualism, their highly individualized projects mark out a strong contrast with the collectivise ethos of the Eighties, as writers such as Stuart Morgan noted. However, to reduce such generational shifts to a before-and-after story about the fate of identity politics is to fail to recognize that the goalposts of cultural practice have themselves radically shifted. Individual choices are conditioned by structural changes in institutional policy and ideology, and such altered art world outlooks have arisen, in part, because the critique of multiculturalism debated so vehemently in the Eighties was not entirely unsuccessful, even though the resulting consequences were entirely unpredictable.<sup>104</sup>

Divya Tolia-Kelly and Andy Morris further explain the changes under way:

The 1980s is characterized as a time when it offered 'critique of the way blacks were positioned as the unspoken and invisible "other" of predominantly white aesthetics and cultural discourses'. As a consequence, the shift away from this position to the one of a 'hyper-visible' multicultural normalization has created the need to acknowledge that 'we all speak from a particular place, out of a particular history, out of a particular experience, a particular culture, without being constrained by the position as "ethnic artists"'.<sup>105</sup>

My own career path led me into gallery education throughout the 1990s and beyond and roles within the education departments of many major galleries in London, allowing me to carry on my art practice. As well as being a very positive experience for me personally, this is another example of the concealment/display dialectic discussed previously. As an educator and member of a coloured minority, I was certainly on display not only to the children whom I taught, but also to an art viewing general public in major art institutions such as The National Portrait Gallery, The Whitechapel gallery and Tate Britain. My career as an educator culminated in my inclusion in an exhibition at the Whitechapel gallery of artwork made by the artist-teachers, chosen by the children taught at the gallery. The artwork of mine chosen for the show consciously used the tailoring skills taught me by my grandfather, the master tailor. This work, *Cross 1* (shown in *Figure 3.17*), was made with the tailoring skills my grandfather had taught me at the age of 18, as discussed at

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<sup>104</sup> Mercer, "Ethnicity and Internationally," 54.

<sup>105</sup> Divya Tolia-Kelly and Andy Morris, "Disruptive Aesthetics?: Revising the burden of Representation in the Art of Chris Ofili and Yinka Shonibare," *Third Text* 18, No. 2 (2004): 158.

beginning of chapter. Although it was wonderful to see my work alongside others from the established London art scene, it still seemed impossible to enter the gallery system.



*Fig. 3.17*  
*Cross I*. 1999  
Felt, suede, mdf, wadding  
58 x 48 cm



*Fig. 3.18*  
*Targets*. 1999  
Felt, suede, mdf, wadding  
30 cm Diameter each

Wall sculptures that use my traditional tailoring skills, such as *Cross I* and *Targets* (Figures 3.17 & 3.18), begun in the 1990s represent for me a move away from just painting and the beginning of a more multi-material based research. These works reflected the beginnings of my positive experiences of the art world and for the first time reflected what I thought of my place in society and my experiences due to that placement. *Targets* are exactly what they seem to be and reflect the way I often felt as a young person growing up in a racist environment. They also indicated the positive targeting I was beginning to experience in my educational career. Learning from my grandfather was the genesis of my love of manipulating material to creatively construct objects, something that created a dichotomy later in life when I struggled between my very conservative Indian father, who wanted me to become a professional, such as a doctor or accountant, in order to produce a good marriage and a secure financial future, and my desire to follow in my grandfather's footsteps and become a more creative professional. These wall sculptures allowed me to make art that investigated a serious and sometimes traumatic period in my life in a way that was not overtly narrative and left plenty of room for further discoveries and later critical analysis.

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### **2000s Diaspora**

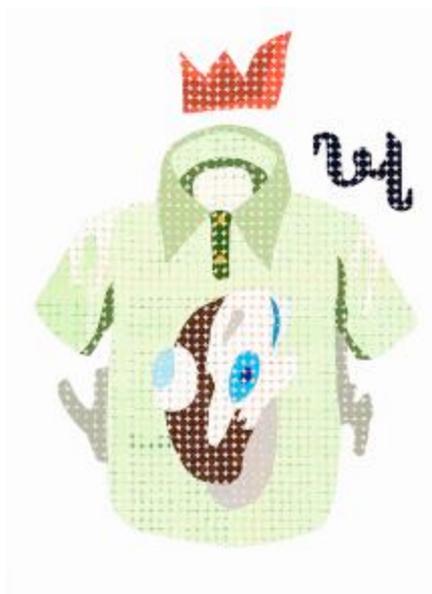
Changes continued to occur in all strata of society into the 2000s both politically and socially. With the Labour Party well established in power at the time, politics at all levels became far less right wing than under the former conservative rule that held sway for so many years right up to 1997. Having held prime ministership for one term, Blair was ushered back in 2001, and Labour's lenient and inclusive rules towards coloured minorities in all stratas of society became more embedded. A national wind of change seemed to be happening and the term 'Cool Britannia' was coined. With the falling away of the old Establishment, Britain finally opened its doors to those former outsiders who had been awaiting significant change in civil society. Not only were Black and Asian faces suddenly in visual culture, noticeably in the media, but more and more minority voices were heard and considered by institutions who were becoming more savvy to the needs of fair play for all in modern multi-cultural British society. The dogma of race did not have the stranglehold on this new order of celebrity as it did on the old guard. A greater sense of belonging began to emerge and greater display became possible in the dialectic of concealment/display. However, as I will discuss, celebration occurred again hand in hand with trauma, linked to the problems that come with 'hyper visibility' and over acceptance.

In chapter two, I described how the umbrella term "black" was used to define anyone of colour in the Britain of my youth. An 'us and them' mentality was well and truly established, but unexpectedly differentiation between cultural groups became a reason for celebration. Unfortunately, trauma was the flip side of this celebration: that of personally establishing ones level of belonging, as compared with other groups became inevitable. Overall however, I felt that my place was becoming intrinsically more self-determined—a journey from outside a society to belonging inside.

As I have no memory of Africa or indeed India I have relied on oral stories and physical objects in my community to hand down cultural history. However, I have also had to rely on mainstream interpretations of my community. These interpretations have shifted from deliberate oppression, as previously described by Rushdie, to more open acceptance and inclusivity. Consequently, I had to cultivate a flexible cultural position that was stable enough to not leave me feeling culturally lost. I managed this balance partly through making art works that reflected my inherently varied cultural layers, works that directly mirrored the ‘third space’,<sup>106</sup> all layers simultaneously, with some positivity.



*Fig. 3.19*  
*Le Brun, 2008*  
 Collage on paper  
 40 x 34 cm



*Fig. 3.20*  
*Basquiat, 2008*  
 Collage on paper  
 40 x 34 cm

The above layering is evident in a set of works I made for an exhibition at Gallery Nature Morte, New Delhi in 2008. This set of works use as their starting point details from art works by major western Artists, for instance Christopher Le Brun (*Figure 3.19*) and Jean Michael Basquiat (*Figure 3.20*), overlaid with illustrations from the ‘Balpothi,’ a Gujarati alphabet primer, a way of working that once again allows me to make an art that reflects both the western and eastern parts of me simultaneously. I have loved these illustrations since my childhood when my grandfather first taught

<sup>106</sup> The ‘third space’ referring to Homi Bhabha’s articulation of a place that sits between western culture and my original culture, generated by living within both.

me to read and write. These works also included, Gujarati text for the first time, which until recently I felt shame about knowing. The bright sensual colours of an Indo/African colour palette in these works mirror a contemporary western imagery, consciously articulating my personal hybrid state. Rushdie eloquently articulates my position in this creative journey of cultural blossoming:

Art is a passion of the mind. And the imagination works best when it is most free. Western writers have always felt free to be eclectic in their selection of theme, setting, form; Western visual artists have, in this century, been happily raiding the visual storehouses of Africa, Asia, the Philippines. I am sure that we must grant ourselves an equal freedom.

Let me suggest that Indian writers in England have access to a second tradition, quite apart from their own racial history. It is the culture and political history of the phenomenon of migration, displacement, life in a minority group. We can quite legitimately claim as our ancestors the Huguenots, the Irish, the Jews; the past to which we belong is an English past, the history of immigrant Britain. Swift, Conrad, Marx are as much our literary forebears as Tagore or Ram Mohan Roy... it is perhaps one of the more pleasant freedoms of the literary migrant to be able to choose his parents. My own- selected half consciously, half not- include Gogol, Cervantes, Kafka, Melville, Machado de Assis; a polyglot family tree, against which I measure myself, and to which I would be honored to belong.<sup>107</sup>

I take great comfort and pride in having at hand the western visual language taught me by my British art school education. This knowledge, mixed with my experience of all the other cultures that exist in Britain and those I have experienced elsewhere, as well as the culture of my Gujarati Darji community, enables a diasporic artist such as myself to construct a visual equivalent of the peripheral, migrant journey of the post-colonial. This knowledge, understanding and skill with the western visual vernacular most effectively enables the construction of the 'third space'. Following Rushdie, I claim as my artistic parents, Kurt Schwitters and Robert Rauschenberg, Philip Guston and Georg Baselitz, amongst many others.

I would like at this point to introduce the recent artworks that are the visual fulcrum of this chapter: *In the ear of the ancient one* (Figure 3.21) and *Once were great (after Chevalier)* (Figure 3.22). These works encompass much of what is described above regarding my present sense of belonging and freedom to create. They also encompass

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<sup>107</sup> Salman Rushdie, *Imaginary homelands: essays and criticism, 1981–1991* (London: Granta Books, 1991), 20.

a sense of the change in British society since the physical assault on my father (described at the end of chapter two). The tailoring skills used in those early works are beginning to filter out of my making process, a sign of my diminishing need to be so circumspect regarding past trauma and my readiness to engage in a more balanced involvement in society.



*Fig. 3.21*  
*In the ear of the ancient one*, 2013  
Gouache and collage on paper  
40 x 32 cm



*Fig. 3.22*  
*Once were great (after Chevalier)* 2013  
Gouache and collage on paper  
40 x 32 cm

These works overlay Eastern and Western iconographies in both abstract and figurative fashions and work with historical iconographies in order to compare past relationships to those in the present. In these semi-abstract works, African masks (examples of which have been in my family for many years), ritual Inca headgear seen in the British Museum collection, Maori ritual paraphernalia, and Heraldic English forms seen while visiting historical houses around Britain, amongst others, are overlaid with each other. The pieces are based on stories and incidents that pertain to ethnographic materials, and the ways in which these stories expand historical knowledge. For instance, *In the ear of the ancient one* (*Figure 3.17*) merges African, ancient Incan and slightly more recent Maori sculptural styles. The two forms at the bottom left of the picture ‘have the ear of the ancient one’, referring to the way in which ancient styles supply knowledge of the past. This work alludes to the intermingling and transformation of cultures.

*Once were great (after Chevalier)* (Figure 3.18) is based on Heraldic sculptures seen at Arundel castle in Sussex, Southern England. The title of the work refers to a 528 year old mystery, the unearthing of the body of the last Plantagenet King, Richard III in the early part of 2013 in a car park in the city of Leicester in England.

The colours in the backgrounds of such works are usually based on either Indian or African textiles owned by my family, in fact, the background of *Once were great* was drawn from a sari worn by my wife.

The background in my earlier tailoring works was made of a flat ground of coloured dots which emulated pattern cutting: a single layered artwork was cut and constructed in these recent works, however a multi-layered composition is constructed from the remnant off-cuts of dots from the making of the earlier works. This aesthetic celebrates a presently inclusive multi-cultural society.

The sustained interest in ethnographic materials is especially important for me in these works. In the early part of my artistic career these materials emphasized feelings of cultural loss, but now they represent their cultural proliferation in the mainstream. Trauma turns to celebration and concealment to display, not only for the original materials, but also for my artworks showing in a western gallery environment. I examine the importance of the ethnographic both in my artwork and its changing status in British society in the next chapter.

The Gujarati visual culture that was, in my grandfather's time, overlaid with the African culture re-emerges layered with the western traditions that come through my time in Britain, celebrated because of its ability to adapt and traumatic because of its fundamentally uncertain placement in society. I again shift my personal cultural repertoire due to the changing face of my relationship with the cultures around me, as my grandfather and his forebears did with the coat made for diamond smugglers. This paradigm of success through adaptation, obviously true in Africa, has again played out in Britain, where the rules and regulations against Indian trade, creativity and professional advancement have been relaxed and abolished over the past forty to fifty years. The cultural capital of the modern British Indian has far greater value than their ancestors might have imagined.

## Conclusion

The present generation of British artists of colour, having been through the experiences of post-colonialism and racism, would naturally produce projects that reflect these experiences. Highly personal projects also allow the greatest articulation and interaction with the individual cultural tropes of our individual pasts, in my case the visual iconography of the Gujarati Darji cast. Trying to re-assert a position of ‘us and them’ at this place in history would negate the work of the generation just gone in opening up ‘third’ spaces for us to legitimately inhabit.

Guyanese-British artist Hew Locke (son of Donald Locke, who took part in the original ‘Other Story’ exhibition) responds to the notion that his art is pre-determined by acceptability thus:

I make exactly what I want to make, though when it comes to exhibiting, I certainly have my audience in mind and sometimes even what is expected in any given environment when deciding what to show and where.<sup>108</sup>

The position of diasporic artists such as Chris Ofili, Hew Locke and myself is more nuanced than a simple Araeen type reading could possibly articulate. We sit between two highly volatile sites: the state of multiculturalism, whose original ethos is being speedily worn away as we gain more distance from the political environment in which it was first vaunted, and the precarious position of belonging, which is now seen as almost taboo to discuss, as it is presumed to have happened. We are thus expected to move on—another trauma that comes hand in hand with cultural acceptance, as we are expected once again to smile and accept our new belonging. Mercer suggests “One of the distinctive features of the contemporary international art world is that although cultural difference is now more visible than ever before, the unspoken rule is that you would be a bit dumb if you made a big issue out of it.”<sup>109</sup>

However, belonging to a western platform is no longer a necessity, or indeed a privilege, I need acquire. Western culture has changed to such a degree that I now

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<sup>108</sup> Hew Locke, in discussion with the author, September 2013.

<sup>109</sup> Mercer, “Ethnicity and Internationality,” 54.

belong to a whole new emerging cultural make up, especially in a highly cosmopolitan centre such as London, where many minority groups hold a parallel place alongside those of the original English culture, where a normative place of belonging with very little personal cultural loss is eventually reached with every new influx. Freedom of expression for all our multi-cultural selves, without fear of harassment, has finally been reached in the current British art establishment.

The unpredicted consequence of multiculturalism as discussed by Kobena Mercer came about due to two opposing forces in the national and international art circuits: firstly, an over visualization of the minority artist in the newly involving and over inclusive British Art Establishment, in shows such as Araeen's *The Other Story* and *The Decade Show* (a similar exhibition of minority artists that took place in New York in 1990), and secondly, the ever increasing impact of biennales (and now art fairs) on localised art markets. Mercer argues:

On the one hand, the over-inclusive mega-exhibition became paradigmatic for the expanding circuit of biennales, which extended beyond the Euro-American axis to include geopolitical spaces in Australia, Latin America, South Africa, Korea and Turkey. In this respect, the outward face of globalization installed an ideology of corporate internationalism whose cumulative effect was to *sublate* the discourse of multiculturalism. Cultural difference was acknowledged and made highly visible as the sign of a 'progressive' disposition, but radical difference was gradually detached from the political or moral claims once made in its name, such as the demand for recognition at stake in Eighties debates on 'black representation'.<sup>110</sup>

Far from feeling over-located, I actually feel, like Hew, a freedom to make whatever work I want to make, with of course an appreciation and awareness of my audience and its expectations. I have been a part of the circuit of international art fairs, the likes of which Mercer discusses, for many years, having shown in Hong Kong, Singapore, Korea, Melbourne and Sydney. The work I make for these fairs tackles both the issue of my post-colonial British past as well as my interest in ethnography.

Within this environment of 'hyper visibility', it falls to the individual artist to investigate their personal history within the greater struggle. Now that artists of minority cultures have reached a state of belonging and inclusivity, an interesting

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<sup>110</sup> Mercer, "Ethnicity and Internationality," 54.

question for me is what impact if any does our emerging oeuvre have, and whether we are yet in a position to claim an oeuvre for ourselves (as a means of judging our impact on an international art scene as it emerges through the art fair system and beyond). Hew, who is a highly visible mainstream artist, who I suggest is at the forefront of creating such an oeuvre, had this to say on the subject:

Yes, I feel there is certainly some truth in that, there is internationalism to the work of diasporic artists that comes from simply being from more than one place and the travel that constantly broadens our horizons and our visual language. When I make, I constantly travel between the Caribbean and the British that lives within me, and then comes in visuals like Rococo design that I come across on my travels.<sup>111</sup>

Hew's experience parallels my own, the specificities of past cultural iconographies are carried over generations to inform present modes of making, whether it be Caribbean or Gujarati culture.

Certainly, the individual projects of many diasporic artists show similar tendencies to disrupt Araeen's 'status quo,' in which the Eurocentric arts establishment still brokers power over artists from minority backgrounds. Diasporic artists re-assert their own cultural perspectives, which may not have been reflected in mainstream culture before now. Hence, we come again to a major instance of the dialectic of celebration and trauma. Diasporic artists create artwork that investigates cultural past with cultural presence, bridging coloniality and post-coloniality with the aid of the fracture of the 'third,' if still problematic, space.

It is certainly the case that artists from both Black and Asian backgrounds are starting to enter the mainstream art world. In fact, social changes have taken hold most strongly in the commercial gallery sector. However, the underlying tendency is not a racially philanthropic one towards the minority, as Niru Ratnam argues:

The reason so many mainstream commercial galleries now represent Indian artists is not theory driven but purely because of money. As Europe gets poorer and there starts to appear more and more buyers from the East, so galleries are trying to woo them by showing how culturally inclusive they are. They have also been forced into being less parochial because of the

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<sup>111</sup> Hew Locke, in discussion with the author, September 2013

internationalism of the art-fair circuit, which demands inclusivity for the same reasons.<sup>112</sup>

Doubtless parts of the system still hold to hegemonic tendencies, but generally, the artist ‘other’ is closer to the cultural centre. Indeed, as a diasporic artist, I am now able to enjoy a level of success impossible even 20 years ago when I first left art school. This success can be achieved by making art that encapsulates critical statements regarding the trauma and frustration of racism we faced in Britain in the late 1960s. Most importantly for me, I am able to continue a cultural history of transmutating visual iconographies innately carried within and new iconographies encountered through multiple migrations.

I work in this way partly because I am not interested in forming a militant visual stance towards former oppressors, and partly because I want my work to question both the celebration and the trauma that I have discussed thus far. As important as it is to not forget the difficulties we have faced as a culture, it is equally important to plan ahead with positivity, otherwise social fractures will only be cleaved open further. Jawaharlal Nehru, first prime minister of independent India following the demise of the Raj in 1947, suggests something of this duality, as he contemplates the past thus:

Yet the past is ever with us, and all that we are and that we have comes from the past. We are its products and we live immersed in it. Not to understand it and feel it as something living within us is not to understand the present. To combine it, with the present and extend it to the future, to break from it where it cannot be so united, to make of all this the pulsating and vibrating material for thought and action-that is life.<sup>113</sup>

The position of my community as outsiders has changed over time, and by teaching those around us what it is to be the other through a slow and deliberate process of amalgamation via face-to-face experience, we can break down the barriers built on historical misapprehension and fear of difference. Establishing the ‘third space’ position as described above, goes some way to breaking down these barriers and establishing further relationships between the mainstream and former outsiders, as well as new platforms for artists such as myself in newly emerging art arenas.

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<sup>112</sup> Niru Ratnam, in discussion with the author, December 2012.

<sup>113</sup> Jawaharlal Nehru, *The Discovery of India* (London: Oxford University Press, 1985), 21.

Though I now look forward to an even brighter future for diasporic artists like myself, as Nehru suggests, I cannot forget the acute racial segregation we as a community have faced in the past, but now reformulate it, marbling such issues with the assimilation we now enjoy. To this end the practice has shifted focus and the emerging oeuvre I discuss above regarding Figures 3.17 and 3.18, (early examples of which I shall introduce in the next chapter) starts to deal with issues of ‘otherness’.

The historical iconography I work with and discuss above (*Figures 3.21 & 3.22*) is ethnographic in origin, and in the next chapter I expand discussion of the change in status of many ethnographic forms, illuminating how, theoretically at least, they have escaped their former conceptual confines of the ethnographic museum. I use creative production to hypothesize that these objects have entered the arena of contemporary visual culture, in a journey running parallel with that of many formerly ‘othered’ communities. As a former ‘other’ artist transparently referencing the iconographies of all the cultures encountered in my migratory journey thus far, I turn my gaze beyond the ethnographic object itself toward its means of presentation in the contemporary western museum—as a culmination in the questioning of the changing relationship of the diasporic maker to western society.



*Fig. 4.1*

*One rupee*, 2013

Mixed media on wood assemblage

24 x 19 cm

### Introduction

*One rupee* (Figure 4.1), was made during this research project and was formulated to reflect the collection of two-dimensional images that are usually pasted at the back of the personal shrines (often with small statues of various gods and goddesses placed in front), in the homes of Hindus all over the world, such as the one introduced toward the end of Chapter 2. This work also references the aesthetics of the museological display tied up with an awareness of the cultural iconography and visual vocabulary of my culture and its journey in a western context in both colonial and post colonial eras.

I begin my investigation with the *Wunderkammer* (the historical cabinet of curiosities) and trace its development into the modern museum. The ethnographic is presented differently in the *Wunderkammer* than in the modern museum,<sup>114</sup> and I reveal these differences with reference to history and the evolving wider cultural milieu that allowed them to occur. There are various reasons why the modern

<sup>114</sup> The ethnographic here is in reference to objects made by and collected from the peoples of former colonies.

Western museum is important as a carrier and conservator of the cultural heritage of the 'other', one such reason being the fragility of some 'other' nations, and the often wanton destruction of cultural heritage in such fragile nations, examples of which I shall introduce. I also provide an example in which this may once have been the case but is no longer so. Thus arguing the need for the modern museum to carry original versions of ethnographic materials, which are inevitably static, and wonder if they may not be instantiated by good quality representations.

For centuries artists have been interested in and inspired by the ethnographic, from Gauguin (who lived and died in the south seas) and Picasso (who was highly influenced by African sculpture, to Henry Moore and Eduardo Paolozzi (who were both influenced by many visits to both the British Museum and the Museum of Mankind in London). I study how artists have reacted to and worked with ethnographic objects and the museum as a means of display. Alongside an awareness of how my own culture deals with such objects (such as the domestic shrine), this study has inspired a series of three-dimensional works such as *One rupee (Fig. 4.1)*. *One rupee* is a response to both my personal involvement with the visual vocabulary of my living and evolving culture, especially its artifacts, as well as an interest in the changing relationship of the west with the iconography of my culture, as well as other minority cultures. I chart the physical formulation and metaphoric frame of reference of this artwork with regard to the main focus of my exegetical writing by again placing it within a historical context of hybridization. Here I map the multiple migration of Hindu Gujarati Darji culture, alongside the journey of the ethnographic object in a western context. This artwork illuminates the cultural fracture created by hybridization, particularly when contextualised with artworks of other artists of the post-colonial Diaspora, who have an interest in the ethnographic and its means of presentation. The inception of this work, like that of much of my work, lies in the re-formulation of many of the iconographies of both east and west that I have personally encountered.

Through coloniality to the present day, the static and subordinate position of the ethnographic, 'othered' by the exoticising western gaze, still seems to be in place. I look at how and why this might be the case, and at how this might parallel my own journey as a former outsider who is never going to truly fit in. As a means of suturing

rather than closing this gap, I make artistic links that introduce platforms for both to work together side by side.

### **Ethnographic objects and colonisation**

From the earliest days of colonisation, Europeans hungry for the exotic have collected ethnographic materials from all over the colonised world. There are many such examples still stockpiled in myriad museums in almost every city in the western world. Taking Great Britain as an example, such objects are held in minor museums such as the John Soames museum (London) and The Pitt-Rivers Museum (Oxford), as well as in the internationally acclaimed British Museum. Whether these objects of curiosity originally represented the cultures from which they derived was not of major interest during their collection. In fact, their means of presentation in the *Wunderkammer*, literally an all in one exhibition format, seemed to strengthen the misconceptions regarding ‘other’ cultures proliferated throughout history by those who wished to profit from such wonders.

Collected ethnographic materials were originally presented alongside other curios in the *Wunderkammer* (a cabinet of curiosities) as a means of display and presentation of the exotic for a fascinated few.

A Cabinet of Curiosities, or Cabinet of Wonder, and in German *Kunstkammer* or *Wunderkammer* (wonder-room), were encyclopaedic collections of objects where categorical boundaries were yet to be defined. In Renaissance Europe, the ‘cabinet’ was a reference to an entire room rather than just a cupboard – and they were often famous collections of rulers and aristocrats wishing to create a microcosm of their own world or a theatre of memory. Nowadays, we would pigeonhole the objects included as belonging to natural history (sometimes faked), geology, ethnography, archaeology, religious or historical relics, works of art (including cabinet paintings) and antiquities.<sup>115</sup>

The ethnographic material in this incarnation of the *Wunderkammer*, reflect a controlled and static position in a contained environment made to reflect the wonder of strange and exotic places. In this position of curiosities to tickle the fancies of the curious, these objects of the ‘other’ seem to reflect a subordinate position to those

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<sup>115</sup> Jennie Syson, “Wunderkammer,” *Nottingham Visual Arts*, last modified September 15, 2010, accessed February 22, 2015, <http://www.nottinghamvisualarts.net/articles/201009/wunderkammer>.

that hold the gaze over them, mainly those of the west, and thus one would conjecture a position running parallel with the subject placement occupied by the peoples who had produced them. Away from the environment in which they were produced and the culture that gave them context, their presentation was second hand, a manipulation that stripped them of their context and meaning and one which lasts a long time over history. To bring this view up to date and present the moribund position of this western mainstream view over the ethnographic, I look at the pioneering view and work of Eduardo Paolozzi, who's western gaze on such materials holds curiosity, but one that goes way beyond a static and sterile one.

It must be emphasised that Paolozzi's interest in exotic cultures is not confined to the life of supposedly uncorrupted tribesmen living far from the influence of the West, or to the arts of long vanished cultures. While these fascinate him he is equally, perhaps more, interested in change and adaptations. He has a constant preoccupation with re-creation, with trying to establish areas of constancy and of transformation. Whereas many artists have taken fragments from exotic cultures to incorporate in their own work, Paolozzi is also interested in seeing these societies as dynamic, evolving cultures. He is thus especially eager to seek knowledge of changing cultures and incorporates this into his own image of the world beyond Europe.<sup>116</sup>

Paolozzi's interest is very much akin to my own in that it is of cultures that were formerly considered ethnographic, but because of both political and societal changes in the status of the 'other' are now accepted as living breathing cultures with momentum and a capacity to metamorphosise.

I still find it strange to see objects displayed in museums that I have used in my home and that are still carried with us on our migratory journeys as objects of utility and veneration.

The modern museum, which evolved out of the wonder and intrigue of the *Wunderkammer*, has carried on a tradition of bringing and presenting the ethnographic to a western gaze. There are of course differences in the ideology and physical presentation of the modern museum to that of the *Wunderkammer*, which had a tendency to present objects from many places in a mish-mash without context

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<sup>116</sup> Malcolm McLeod, "Paolozzi and Identity," in *Lost Magic Kingdoms*, ed. Eduardo Paolozzi (London: British Museum Publications, 1985), 17.

or singular awareness. The foremost modern museums, such as the British Museum (which I still visit time and again, especially now with my children), categorise objects according to function and the culture from which they came, usually with as much context as possible. During a recent visit to the *Ethnologisches Museum* in Dahlem (Berlin), I saw familiar objects from India and Africa and many that I had never seen before. I realised that the means of presentation of the objects aspired to a strange neutrality, worthy of deeper investigation.

As I stood and admired African ceremonial masks of Benin, I did not feel the African heat on my back, nor smell the sweat of the dancers who wore the masks. As I looked longingly at the textiles from India, I did not hear the shouts of the vendors who originally sold them, nor did I smell the spice, which would have been sold alongside them. Any attempt to recreate this origin in the museum would be at best self-defeating. And, why should the people of Benin, if they wish to look at the objects of their own cultural heritage, have to come here to Berlin to do so?

Museology's highly creative methods of visually supporting ethnographic objects and its tools elevate these objects to almost ceremonial status. Such veneration gives fresh power and meaning to the cultures they denote in this clinical and yet hostile context. In the Dahlem Museum, I began to see this re-contextualising as something to be problematised in this part of this study. Is a full and proper contextualisation that can educate a viewer about the history surrounding these objects possible? The chaos of the *Wunderkammer* environment is problematic, to say the least because of the haphazard presentation and its lack of individual attention and status to both the object and the culture from which it originated. On the other hand, it is obviously impossible to provide a perfect context. Why is it important to provide such a history to a western audience through the presence of ethnographic objects? Can we understand such objects as new totems of cultural history? Or do they belong in the place of their origin, to be enjoyed, to educate and to carry on a rich tradition and heritage back in Benin or India?

The safety of the object is a central concern, as is the more subjective question of cultural heritage that belongs to all citizens in the world. Colonial interests have invoked these points for centuries, as illustrated in the dispute over the Elgin

Marbles, a set of friezes taken from the Parthenon in Greece at the time of Turkish rule in 1806, by Lord Elgin. The British Museum still hold the friezes and refuses to return these priceless relics to the Greeks, claiming that Greece does not have the resources to properly care for them. This claim is cast into doubt since a specialised museum was built in 2009 on the site of the Parthenon to house the artifacts from the ancient site, including those from the British Museum. The “New Acropolis Museum won the British Guild of Travel Writers' (BGTW) prestigious global award for the Best Worldwide Tourism Project for 2010,” inspiring Yiorgos Nikitiadis, deputy minister of culture and tourism, to declare that “the return of the Parthenon Marbles should now just be a matter of time.”<sup>117</sup>

The British Museum takes its role as preserver and presenter of historical material of world heritage very seriously, and argues against the return of the Marbles in the following statement from the Museum’s own web site:

The British Museum tells the story of cultural achievement throughout the world... The Parthenon Sculptures are a significant part of that story... They are a part of the world’s shared heritage and transcend political boundaries.

The Acropolis Museum allows the Parthenon sculptures that are in Athens (approximately half of what survive from antiquity) to be appreciated against the backdrop of ancient Greek and Athenian history. The Parthenon sculptures in London are an important representation of ancient Athenian civilisation in the context of world history.

The Trustees are convinced that the current division allows different and complementary stories to be told about the surviving sculptures, highlighting their significance within world culture and affirming the place of Ancient Greece among the great cultures of the world.<sup>118</sup>

The British Museum’s ethos of preserving culture as world heritage is indeed honourable, but it glosses over two very important points: firstly, the lack of choice of the original culture in the decision, and secondly, the underhanded and typically imperialistic way in which these treasures were first collected. The call of the Greeks to have these artifacts returned is well documented, as is their ability to look after

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<sup>117</sup> *The New Acropolis Museum*, accessed September 23, 2014, <http://www.parthenon.newmentor.net/museum.htm>.

<sup>118</sup> British Museum Trustees, “The Parthenon Sculptures: What is the British Museums Position?,” *The British Museum*, accessed September 23, 2014, [http://www.britishmuseum.org/about\\_us/news\\_and\\_press/statements/parthenon\\_sculptures.aspx](http://www.britishmuseum.org/about_us/news_and_press/statements/parthenon_sculptures.aspx).

them. In addition, although Lord Elgin, like so many other imperial treasure seekers, called on his right to collect for preservation and for England's good, it becomes obvious from researching the history of the event that Elgin's intentions were not so philanthropic, and as such the ways and means he used to acquire were equally underhanded. Having gained permission to make drawings and to excavate around the building to remove some few pieces, he went much further than prescribed and demolished part of the building in order to remove what we know as the Parthenon Friezes presently held by the British museum.

The story of the Parthenon Marble shows that the lives of ethnographic objects are both fragile and transitory, and thus parallel those of their creators. The forming and re-forming of hybridised cultures dialectically reclaims their forms nonetheless. Cultures, such as my own, have migrated many times over, and through that migration have lost links with the mother country. But cultural forms and iconographies have been carried, and often doggedly held on to in a kind of cultural bubble. As they entrench themselves more and more so in a culture such as the African or British, they have held onto much of this culture, hence the reclaiming that happens through every migration. But interestingly, through the last migration to Britain, and the multicultural milieu that has emerged, it is the west that is enabling much of the carrying of our cultural forms and iconographies in both the museum and through the interest of the general culture in forms such as the sari and the bindi as discussed in the last chapter. It could be argued that the hybridization of prior cultural forms into present day culture provides some insurance against the total disappearance of iconographies of lost cultures. The wonton destruction of the relics of Baghdad during the invasion of Iraq in the war of 2003 is a case in point:

“In the city's most important museum, the mob has turned upon its own heritage, stealing and systematically smashing priceless antiquities that once were the glory of Iraq,” wrote Robert Fisk in the *Independent on Sunday*. “Our feet crunched on the wreckage of 5,000-year-old marble plinths and stone statuary and pots that had endured every siege of Baghdad, every invasion of Iraq throughout history-only to be destroyed when America came to ‘liberate’ the city. The Iraqis did it. They did it to their own history, of the Assyrians and the Babylonians, the Sumerians, the Medes, the Persians and the Greeks.” In darkness, Fisk tipped over statues and stumbled into broken winged bulls. “When I shone my torch over one far shelf, I drew in my

breath. Every pot and jar- '3500 BC' it said on one shelf corner-had been bashed to pieces."<sup>119</sup>

While looking at objects in ethnographic museums such as *Dahlem*, I wonder to what extent they could be *instantiated* by the provision of high quality copies surrounded by as much supportive material and information as the best museums now furnish. A prime example of this being the Lascaux Caves near the village of Montignac in the Dordogne region of France, where world renowned pre-historic cave paintings have been closed to the public because of increased deterioration due to large numbers of tourists, as well as mildew and fungus introduced by tourism and bad management. Visitors can now only visit high quality re-constructions. Could ethnographic objects be similarly supplanted with replicas and returned to their original cultures where possible? Could this be a viable way forward, returning objects from all over the west to Benin, India or Greece? I am sure it would be most welcome by the Greeks, but safety issues and concerns may still remain in more fragile nations, illustrated by the Baghdad museum example.

### **Artists and Ethnographic objects**

Many ethnographic objects are the bounty of both colonial and imperial looting, as discussed above. They may have been taken under the guise of research, cultural preservation or in well-intentioned exploration, but failing a fair exchange, the question of theft casts a shadow over many of these objects. The interest in ethnographic forms and the presence of such objects in the museological world is a result not only of the desire to educate present and future generations in the west of the lasting and effective power of non-western cultures and their material forms, but also to stoke the fires of imagination. As discussed by Jean Fisher, this more creative possibility has been and still remains important for many artists:

...the most important Black artist in London of the interwar decades was Ronald Moody (1900-1984), who, although he arrived in 1923 from Jamaica to study dentistry, was so overwhelmed by the Egyptian collection in the British Museum (1929) that he turned to sculpture. During the same period Henry Moore also frequented the British Museum, in his case drawn by Mayan sculpture. Hence, as Araeen points out, both artists occupied and

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<sup>119</sup> Dilip Hero, *Secrets and Lies: The True Story of the Iraq War* (London: Politicos, 2005), 288.

responded to a common spatio-temporality and artistic ethos belonging to the history of British modernism.<sup>120</sup>

Art can ask: what is our ability to view the objects of ‘tribal’ cultures from a wider perspective and is there a legitimate cause for celebrating it in present and future art practices of hybridisation? Modernism has a chequered history of appropriation of the imagery of tribal cultures. Paul Gauguin referenced the art of Polynesia and most famously Pablo Picasso invoked African sculpture to great and sustained critical applause. Neil Cox writes:

Picasso found his solution that summer (of 1907) through a free interpretation of African and Oceanic artifacts...It is likely Picasso did not acquire his first example of ‘tribal’ art until 1908, but he clearly adopted something of the visual character of African and Oceanic art for *Demoiselles* [referring to the then infamous *Les Demoiselle d’Avignon* of 1907].<sup>121</sup>

The west’s notion of inferior ‘tribal’ art persisted despite tendencies of new or modern art by artists such as that of Picasso. This was emblematic of historical notions of superiority over ‘others’ and their visual cultures. As Cox suggests:

The ‘primitive’ sources that Picasso used were in fact not at all ancient, but were widely regarded as equally remote from self-consciously civilized Europe...Picasso’s ‘primitivism’ is thus marked by dubious notions of cultural superiority and inferiority. Describing Picasso’s work as Aztec or, as Salmon did in 1912, as inspired by ‘African and Oceanic enchanters’, thus carries a whole range of related ideas, such as ‘crude’, ‘inferior’, ‘uncivilized’, ‘immoral’ and at the deepest level ‘inhuman’.<sup>122</sup>

These notions of ordinate and subordinate start to shift in western art later on in the 20<sup>th</sup> century, as we see from the example of Henry Moore, and the inspiration he gained from the art of the Mayans at the British Museum. Unfortunately, the example of Henry Moore is not common and does not reflect the general tide of understanding at the time as Eduardo Paolozzi describes:

And when I eventually got to the Slade [Art school in London] there was no encouragement either – the teaching was rather like the Royal Academy Schools [the foremost British Art school located in London] now – a

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<sup>120</sup> Jean Fisher, *Exhibitions and the world at large* (London: Tate Gallery, 2009), 3.

<sup>121</sup> Neil Cox, *Cubism* (London: Phaidon Press, 2000), 79.

<sup>122</sup> Cox, *Cubism*, 80.

Professor for Anatomy, a Professor for Colour Theory, for perspective, but there is never a Professor for the Museum of Mankind which is just next door. This neglect of the primitive was, I feel, part of a wider English insularity. It is that insularity, for example, which still feels that such things are – with the exception of Henry Moore – not part of the history of modern art. There was, and is, a dislike for both the primitive and the modern.<sup>123</sup>

Paolozzi's 1985 exhibition *Lost Magic Kingdoms and Six Paper Moons from Nahuatl* at the Natural History museum in London was ground breaking as it exhibited his work in the vitrines alongside the ethnographic objects themselves, thereby shifting the position of the ethnographic object closer to the west's notion of fine art. It ran parallel to the understanding of the western artifact as the higher form of creative activity. Paolozzi flipped the original ethos of the Museum of Mankind's creators on its head, giving reverence to objects enslaved in the vitrine that were otherwise tokens of idol curiosity, to be gaped at—and carnivalesque. The artist respected both the beauty of the objects as well as the skill of their makers, and was evidently fascinated by the cultures from which they came.

### **Artists and museum display**

Fascination with the museological visual sensibility is an important part of modernism itself, from Kurt Schwitters' *Merzbau* concept from around 1933 (collections of objects housed in specially designed environments, *Figure 4.2*) and Marcel Duchamp's *Boite-en-Valise* (Portable Museum, *Figure 4.3*) from 1941, to Damien Hurst's objects placed in museum quality vitrines (glass display cases), such as *Dead ends died out, explored* of 1993 (*Figure 4.4*). Such artists have tried to re-interpret and often usurp the wonder and curiosity produced by the *Wunderkammer*—whose curiosities were typically collected by European individuals during colonial times. James Putnam argues:

A natural starting-point for examining the relationship between artists and museums is the cabinet of curiosities or *Wunderkammer*, which existed in Europe from the sixteenth to the eighteenth century. This early ancestor of the museum possessed a special quality in tune with the creative imagination, a quest to explore the rational and the irrational and a capricious freedom of arrangement. It is this lack of rational classification, with its bizarre sense of

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<sup>123</sup> Paolozzi, *Lost Magic Kingdoms*, 9.

accumulation and juxtaposition that makes the *Wunderkammer* concept aesthetically so appealing.<sup>124</sup>

Artists have taken the vitrine that housed the cabinet of curiosities, self-reflectively, providing not only a means of collecting objects of alternative histories and cultures, but also questioning the meaning of collection and display more acutely. A good example of this phenomenon is Joseph Beuys' prolific use of the vitrine, which he filled with residual objects of his personal history. The largest collection of this work is the 1970s made *Beuys Block* set up in the *Hessisches Landesmuseum*, Darmstadt, (Figure 4.5).



Fig. 4.2 Kurt Schwitters, re-construction of Hanover *Merzbau* (1981-83)<sup>125</sup>  
Built from photographs of original



Fig. 4.3 Marcel Duchamp, 1941, *Boite-en-Valise*<sup>126</sup>  
made in 1933.

<sup>124</sup> James Putnam, *Art and Artifact: The Museum as Medium*, (London: Thames & Hudson, 2001), 8.

<sup>125</sup> Isabel Schulz, ed., *Kurt Schwitters: Colour as Collage* (New Haven & London: Yale University Press, 2010), 119.

<sup>126</sup> Putnam, *Art and Artifact*, 19.



Fig. 4.4 Damien Hirst, 1993  
*Dead ends died out, explored*<sup>127</sup>

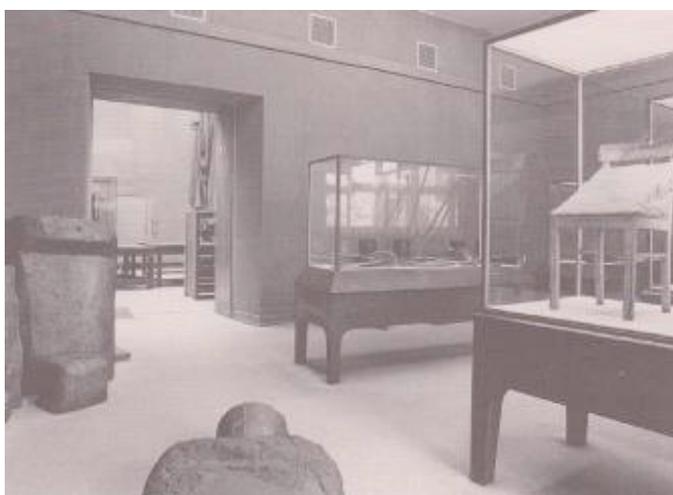


Fig. 4.5 Joseph Beuys, 1970  
*Beuys Block* (view of room 3)<sup>128</sup>

It is the original objects of curiosity in their very exoticism that set up the visual paradigm of wonder that these artists have exploited, to great effect. Such ethnographic objects, though denigrated to the ‘other’ camp for much of the last century and beyond, retain their aesthetic power. My artwork asks: how does the status of different cultural objects change as the western world changes? Do these changes parallel those of the peoples from these cultures in their movements from the periphery to inclusivity in a culture that confuses notions of ‘us and them?’

The gradual move away from reading non-western art forms simply ethnographically, which the critics of Picasso did in the example above, seems to be

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<sup>127</sup> Putnam, *Art and Artifact*, 35.

<sup>128</sup> Putnam, *Art and Artifact*, 17.

taking a long time to unravel. Frank Willett (in the 1970s) describes how, even though critics might still wish to see such ethnographic forms as subordinate, the interest of some in the west (including the author), denote a historical shift in such a flat and single layered reading of these art forms:

We have the writings of many artists and critics to help us to look at and to enjoy African sculpture in particular. Yet they are in some respects fallible guides, for they start from the premise of Western ideas of beauty and all too often express themselves ethnocentrically, as when Margaret Trowell wrote of the BaYaka and BaPende as having ‘elaborate masks of the scarecrow variety’ (because of their use of dried grasses and raffia). Her entire assessment of the art of the Ashanti was that it had ‘little to commend it as of serious interest. The ingenious little goldweights, although pleasing in their wealth of representation of local proverbs, must be relegated to the class of collector’s trifles, while the small fertility figures known as *Akua Mma* with their curious plate-like heads are of more real interest to the ethnologist than to the artist.’ This has certainly not been my own experience: both artists and art students whom I have introduced to Ashanti gold weights and dolls have found them exciting.<sup>129</sup>

Willett argues that appropriation of ‘other’ imagery also enables a breakaway from the baggage of European Art and Art history:

For the art historian and for the serious art connoisseur or collector, this art has certainly very important advantages over the study of other traditions. For one thing there is not the vast bulk of historical and analytical literature, so that it is possible for the individual to exercise his own powers of perception and analysis without any fixed attitude to direct or curtail his observations. In other words when dealing with primitive art, the scholar and the art connoisseur can with all freedom express their own aesthetic interpretations and judgments.<sup>130</sup>

There is clearly a change in the status of ethnographic objects noted, which seems to run parallel with shifts taking place in the status of the migrant British (whose cultures originally produced these objects), but at this stage it certainly serves to underline the importance of the profound impact that the material presence of ethnographic objects have had on artists, their art and the systems by which both are judged. Indeed, the western museum is itself a rather peculiar ethnographic object.

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<sup>129</sup> Frank Willett, *African Art*, (London: Thames and Hudson, 1971), 139.

<sup>130</sup> Frank Willett, *African Art*, 139.

Artists have certainly led the way in re-interpreting the ethnographic for a new generation of visually savvy and culturally aware multi-ethnic communities. As a formerly ‘other’ artist, I have joined the European artists that have gone before me in rallying the status of the ethnographic in general society as well as in the charged environment of the ethnographic museum.

### **My work and Museology**

Considering the issues above, my premise was to make a set of sculptures that venerate the physical modes of presentation used by museums to hold ethnographic objects. However, I sought to make sculptures that mirrored the craft and detail with which many ethnographic objects are imbued (rather than sterile and neutral). I also sought to reference two issues in museological practice: 1. the possibility of repatriating objects, and 2. telling the story of an object without their physical presence—a perfect challenge for my own diasporic identity, which was constructed from vicarious immersion in often physically distant cultures. I also considered how to bring life to objects and cultures that have been lost to the dim and distant past, or at least to somehow hint at their physical forms, and most excitingly for me, to imagine new and historically fictional hybridities. I am also motivated by a necessity to keep alive, or at least to visually catalogue cultural practices and their object formulation, such as the domestic shrine. In this way, I am able to hold on to this particular practice, not only for my immediate family, in particular the generations to follow, but to maintain a constant insistence in the host culture of the importance of such cultural practices and iconographies and how their presence contributes to defining a culture.

A fascination with museology and artifacts and the reworking of object paraphernalia to make art, has been an ever-present strand in my work. Early examples are the building blocks for the second project developed during this research, Figure 4.6 and 4.7 were made in the late 1980s and were constructed with a diverse range of objects found in a western environment and re-formulated through a working knowledge of western art practices of assemblage and collage.

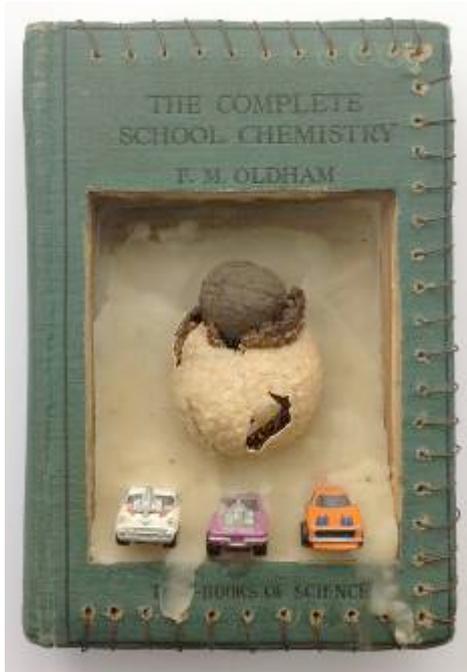


Fig. 4.6  
*F.M. Oldham*, 1988  
 Book, wax, wire, golf ball and model cars  
 19 x 13 cm

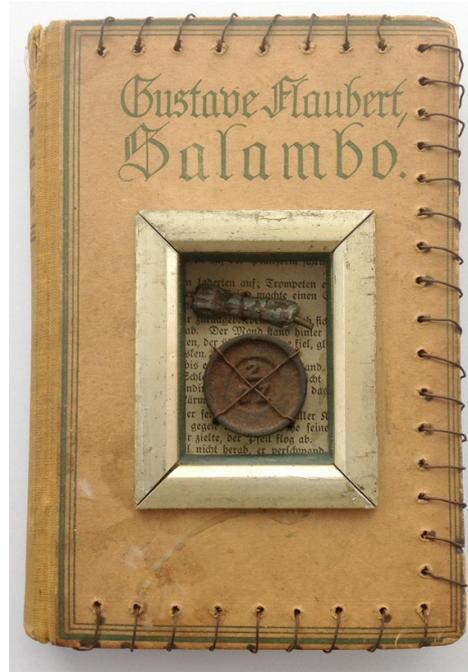
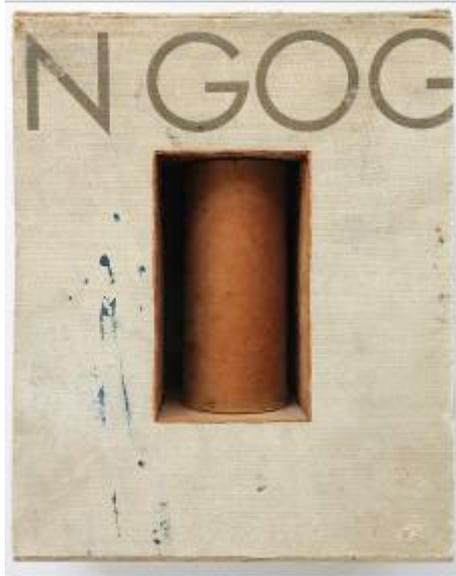


Fig. 4.7  
*Salambo*, 1988  
 Book, wire, wood, sculptural hand,  
 metal weight  
 19 x 13 cm

In another set of works made just before starting my PhD and which further this particular vein of sculpture (shown below in *Figures 4.8 and 4.9*), I use the box, that hallowed foil of the museologically inclined artist, as a repository of magical paraphernalia, similar to that described by the poet Benjamin Peret:

The ancient magician and the modern artist are in a sense situated face to face in relation to the world they scrutinise. The image presented by the former corresponds to that contemplated by the latter, but the one is inverted in relation to the other. Inexhaustible desire animates them. Real is hardly more distinguishable from imaginary than morning from evening. One can only consider them as two states of the same phenomenon. The sorcerer seeks to transform it by direct action, the second by ricochet.<sup>131</sup>

<sup>131</sup> Benjamin Peret, quoted in Dawn Ades, "Paolozzi, Surrealism, Ethnography," in Paolozzi, *Lost Magic Kingdoms*, 61.



*Fig. 4.8*  
*N G O G*, 2009  
 wooden structure, book-cover,  
 suede  
 21 x 15 cm



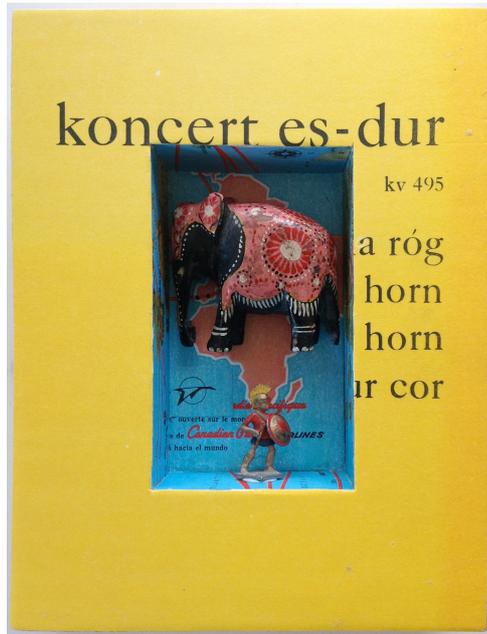
*Fig. 4.9*  
*All Star*, 2009  
 wooden structure, canvas shoes,  
 nails  
 21 x 15 cm

*N G O G* comes from the cover of a book about Vincent Van Gogh while the inner structure attempts to invoke the majesty of the now lost Bamiyan Buddhas. In the second work (*Figure 4.9*), I use an old pair of basketball boots while on the inside are the nails used by African Artisans to fetishise ceremonial objects.

Figures 4.10 and 4.11 below are part of the new series shown alongside the above in my PhD presentation and are made in a similar fashion but now rework materials from both a western and eastern environment. In the case of *The elephant in the room*, the work is made up of a toy elephant bought in Rajasthan (India), and a toy soldier found in a street in London, amongst various other bits originating from both eastern and western environments. The elephant in this case hovers ominously above the European soldier to mirror the shift presently taking place in economic fortunes on a global scale.

The second piece is based on the rather old fashioned idea of the executive wash room being for the chosen few-belonging to the upper echelons, the metaphor in this case representing the western culture holding sway at the topmost tier of the cultural hierarchy, but, by using a key found in a hotel in Thailand as taking centre stage in this work and an advert from an Indian magazine behind it, I hope to disenfranchise

this former hierarchy. Thus mirroring the cultural shift away from the highly Europeanised hierarchy that is being played out in western societies right now and that have been formerly described in my own experiences in London.



*Fig. 4.10*  
*The elephant in the room*, 2015  
 Wooden structure, book-cover,  
 old airline ticket, toy elephant  
 and soldier  
 21 x 15 cm



*Fig. 4.11*  
*The key to the washroom of western culture*, 2015  
 Wooden structure, Indian advertisement  
 key, suede and elastic band  
 21 x 15 cm

In these works I rekindle the disparate amalgamations of the *Wunderkammer* in the spirit of Paolozzi, rather than with the original subordinative colonial instinct of its originators. In both *One rupee* (Figure 4.1) and the two works above (Figures 4.10 and 4.11), I recall Paolozzi's counterbalance of Eastern and Western materials, balancing the cultural resonance and import of both, thereby pushing this means of assemblage a little further in my own work. I re-introduce my innate Gujarati Darji visual sensibility of the domestic shrine in this case, in order to negotiate that place between.

My use of formerly disparate materials implies the link between these two cultural counterpoints but within the same history, that of my living culture handed down

through generations (the ceremonial magic of the shrine) morphed by my contemporary art making skills. These pieces carry a very strong sense of the innate love of tailoring and textiles carried through from my cultural past.

The use of the aesthetics of my tailoring skills in my artwork was important to me for many years, especially as a carrier of cultural capital at a time when we as a community had such a subjective place in society at the beginning of my artistic career. It was important not just due to our place in the wider western society, but also as a means of keeping our identity as specifically Afro-Indian Hindu Gujarati Darjis, alive and separate. As that fervent necessity wanes, with my community's amalgamation into a larger and more inclusive western milieu, my need to hold on to this methodology and iconography has also diminished, as attested in the confetti artworks introduced in the last chapter. This does not mean that I no longer see myself as a Gujarati Darji; I very much do, in the sense that wider society accepts me as such. I however, no longer feel any urgency to refer to a tailoring past in defiance of my father's denial of this tie (he wanted something better for us). As one of a very few members of my cultural circle who still carries on any kind of creative activity (as the majority became doctors, lawyers and accountants), I have endeavoured to make artwork that reflects all the changes undergone by my community. I have included many differing issues in my work over the past few years, which I discuss below.

A cultural flexibility develops in us former outsiders as a result of the hybridity that ensues from the multi-migrations in Indian communities. This flexibility has enabled a new found sense of belonging and prosperity in contemporary western societies throughout the world. *Coyote* and *Cobra* (Figures 4.12 and 4.13) reflect this sense of belonging by hinting at a positive mixing of cultures, western iconography from the 1960s and 70s depicts mixed race interactions that would have been considered taboo in the societal milieu of the time. These recently painted works are cathartic reminders of the newness of this large scale cross pollination of cultures, and that not so long ago, even though Indians were a working and tax paying part of British culture, we were sidelined and ignored by the majority of the political and social systems. The figures referenced for these works from illustrations of that era are obviously lovers, but I have replaced one of the figures with a portrait of either

myself or my wife, as indicators of the position that we as a culture now enjoy, and also of the historical positions from which we were kept absent.



*Fig. 4.12*  
*Coyote*, 2011  
Oil paint on digital print on paper  
124 x 74.5 cm



*Fig. 4.13*  
*Cobra*, 2011  
Oil paint on digital print on paper  
113.5 x 78 cm

By making work such as this, I visualise the burgeoning cross-cultural dialogue now taking place and hence make it possible to further promote our right to belong. In addition, the Indian in British society has been pigeon holed for too long as being quiet and hard working, he is so often a businessman, accountant or doctor. Through the proliferation of a more heterogeneous view of Indian culture, this view is fast breaking down, and thus I disseminate an Indian glamour not present thus far and that runs parallel to a presently emerging multi-dimensional subject placement. As these works have been exhibited on an international platform (shown at the Melbourne art fair in 2012), I not only experiment with my own place in society, but also force that uncertainty into a wider circle of discussion.

Though I have experimented with differing materials and ways of working throughout my career, as I have already stated, my interest in ethnographic materials has been an ongoing concern. It is partly because of their changing place in western society, but also for a simple and deepening love of the ingenuity and wonder entailed in these materials. Although I have a love for western art tradition, the otherworldly magic and mysticism of ethnography is enchanting and beguiling. I realize that my curious gaze may be an extension of the exotic gaze of the west, however, I hope it is one that comes from an equal, respectful and subjectively parallel place.

The thorny issue of belonging and the place of ethnographic objects is no less problematic today as it was in the days of Elgin and the Parthenon Marble confiscation. Arguments between representatives of ‘old world’ cultures and the archaeological institutions of the west carry on unabated, but the dichotomies of celebration and trauma persist now that ethnographic objects have left the museum and entered a globalised cultural consciousness. However, is the place that such objects have entered truly situated within the mainstream in a way that allows understanding and appropriate contextualization? Who is the new audience and how do they relate to objects of ceremony, utility or cultural practice? How far are we from the exotic gaze symbolised in the 18<sup>th</sup> century *Wunderkammer*? The otherworldly mystery and magic is an implicit part of the appeal of such objects to a western audience—an audience that has lost much of its own belief in mythology. As can be seen from the appearance of such objects in western home decoration

magazines (*Figures 4.14 and 4.15*), the only real difference between this re-incarnation of the fascination for ethnographic objects and the *Wunderkammer* might just be the lack of the cabinet or the vitrine.



*Fig. 4.14*  
African and Indian objects<sup>132</sup>



*Fig. 4.15*  
Turkish, Chinese and Thai objects<sup>133</sup>

Here again, two worlds collide juxtaposed next to each other, that of contemporary western culture, and the less historically documented, but magic infused world of the ethnographic object. Much like the collections of ethnographic forms kept by artists such as Picasso, these two worlds, it seems, must at least for the present, survive side-by-side. Yet, they seem so far apart. Hans Belting describes this disparity thus:

There is the question whether tribal culture-yes, dare I say it- has no art, even while its images display the highest artistic skill. They served other purposes like religion or social ritual, which may be more significant than creating art as we understand it.<sup>134</sup>

It may be the fundamental difference between these two polar opposites that keeps the fracture alive, and certainly one can place these iconographies side by side as Paolozzi, or indeed the publishers of the above home decoration magazines have

<sup>132</sup> *ELLE Decoration (UK)* 245, January 2013, 159.

<sup>133</sup> *Inside Out (Australia)* 68, July-August 2007, 88.

<sup>134</sup> Hans Belting, *Art History After Modernism* (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 2003), 67.

done. However, does the attempt to merge the two, flatten them? It can be argued that Paolozzi's Pop Art is invested with more criticality than these magazine spreads.

What then of contemporary artists like myself who also work between these two points—not being of a western tradition, I am in no position to articulate on behalf of western art history, and I am also losing touch with my own culture more and more. However, ethnographic images, like the people who produced them, can live alongside artifacts of the west, but without a common history, there will always be a tension in the juxtaposition. This is the duality that lies at the heart of Belting's description. As the 'other', should we, or our descendants, want our cultural craftsmanship to be in the museum of western art history? Are the ethnographic museums and museums of western art themselves now ethnographic objects, amenable to plundering by a postcolonial condition that sets all adrift in recognition of a broader and more rootless condition of contemporary culture? In the following, Belting describes how western culture through this duality of undermining its own relevance by ignoring the emerging art and history of the 'other' (as in the example of the international art fair above), is not only keeping the fracture alive, but at a time when it could heal those historical rifts, seems to be undermining itself through a surreptitiously exclusive agenda. Over acceptance without criticality is leaving the 'other' without its former title, and thus with an uncertainty of belonging through a lack of an essential bridging through understanding:

The revisions in conceiving culture, now on the agenda in many societies, are more contradictory than it appears at first glance. Western culture, which once felt up to the task of representing all ethnic cultures via exploration and exploitation as collection, is now proclaiming the future of a world culture in which it again claims the leading position. Non-Western cultures, on the other hand, are retreating in a kind of countermovement into their own histories in order to rescue a part of their identity. To Western eyes, such moves make them look nationalistic - a telling misconception. But while Western culture fosters its global ideas, its own cultural unity is disintegrating: that very unity that was supported by the educated class of bourgeois culture has long ceased to survive as a common ideal or canon.<sup>135</sup>

The over-representation of minority arts at the all-inclusive modern day international art fair and its lack of deeper critical appraisal of former political racial fractures is

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<sup>135</sup> Belting, *Art History After Modernism*, 70.

certainly tied in with Belting's Western "misconception." The Western belief I have come up against all my life: that I, as part of a minority culture, should aspire to belong to or blend into the western culture that surrounds me, is still alive and well, but falters under its own forward arrow of history. Through experience I have grown to understand that the environment of the international art fair is nothing but a market place, and thus has often felt to me devoid of true cultural relevance in any meaningful way. It allows me as an individual a selling point for my artwork, but if non-western cultures are shying away from such a commercial phenomena, it can only be because of an understanding that it takes part at the risk of losing its individual identity.

The home decoration phenomenon has returned to the all things at once sensibility of the *Wunderkammer*. As the use of chilli in an English recipe represents cultural 'fusion,' such an inclusion of ethnographic objects in the home acquires a complex and perhaps problematic value from difference. Although the ethnographic objects in the home decoration magazines may be admired only for their exoticism, it is my job as the artist of a diasporic culture to introduce links within the visual and metaphoric fracture that exists between the poles of Eastern and Western iconographies, allowing common ground to form and accumulate between these two points of departure. Such links allow a laxing in the "them and us" dichotomy, as well as allowing a place in which to create artwork that mirrors our place in this fracture. Belting argues:

Minorities are now filling the void left by the "canon" with the "invention" of their own brand of art history, in which artists can meet an audience whose sympathies match their own. Where no minority can articulate itself, topical issues produce consensus and justify the production of art, whose topics are more important than its artistic creeds.<sup>136</sup>

As is the case with those objects in the home decoration pictures, I belong by virtue of not belonging. By retaining my identity, the culture around me begins to accept my cultural expression and give it a platform. By reflecting on my personal history here however, I preserve it from the absorption represented in the magazine illustrations—uncritical, superficial and de-contextualised. This is a daunting, but

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<sup>136</sup> Belting, *Art History After Modernism*, 70.

endlessly exciting place to inhabit. This is also the work of this thesis, to lay bare the history of how this position has come into being, and thus postulate on how this position may develop into an expansively creative future.

## **Conclusion**

The research and writing of this exegesis has enabled a new found knowledge and awareness of not just my place in a vastly convoluted cultural paradigm, in which power structures of old have been reformulated through changes in political and racial belief systems, but a fresh understanding of my culture's place in a global contemporary art world. The changes my community has undergone, and those it has enabled in the societies around it have a lasting resonance for me in whatever society I find myself. This project represents a personal journey that is tied up with the greater story of the multi-migrations through coloniality, post-coloniality and beyond of the Gujarati Darji community. It describes a physical journey of a particular family from India to Africa, looking for better opportunities for trade during a mass migration that took place during colonial times. Urged to move to Britain during another mass exodus in the middle of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, they struggled to find belonging in an initially hostile and racist environment. As this environment slowly but surely changed through political and societal pressures, it enabled such minority cultures greater access to the western society, even enabling my entry into a morphing art world that was also taking a journey from being exclusive to inclusive in regards to those from minority cultures.

'Black' artists, a term that included Indians as well as Afro-Caribbeans, were forced to initiate their own artistic institutions at a time when European society had not yet opened its doors to those from coloured minorities, which left artists like myself disenchanted and withdrawing from making any effort to enter. Acceptance into the citadel of western art has come about at an alarming rate towards the end of the 20<sup>th</sup> century and the beginning of the 21<sup>st</sup>, partly due to a burgeoning multi-racial stance in wider society, but also because of a resurgence in the economies of the East, which now broker an increasing power over the economies of the west. Money talks and philanthropy comes hand in hand with the ever present need for economic survival on the part of the western art establishment.

Within this greater story, I have been able to reflect on and visually articulate many of the positive and negative aspects of the above journeys, while more recently also making works that suggest ways forward by linking the seemingly polar opposites of eastern and western iconographies. These works include sculptures that combine western artistic styles (collage and assemblage) and materials from my own culture, and reverential forms of making reflected in ethnographic materials (such as the domestic shrine). It is uncertain how long the visual culture of my Gujarati Darji caste can be carried forward to future generations, as the relevance of a need for cultural difference starts to wane just as the state of post-coloniality has done in my generation.

Another theme woven into this writing is that of the balance between incidents of trauma, often brought about by the oppression of racism, and the celebration entailed in a burgeoning world culture which now allows minority cultures like my own a greater sense of agency and belonging. Along the journey there have been many such instances, but this writing has enabled me to notice that the distance between points of parity are shortening, and the subjectivity involved in the former ‘us and them’ position is receding, although I would not want to see these two points converge. I would like to keep hold of the sense of the ‘other,’ not because I do not want to belong, but because I like the freedom to choose. Through both the making and writing processes, I have explored both recently developing moments of celebration and the ways in which they overlap with the artwork of other migrant minority artists, thereby establishing the existence of an oeuvre as a category into which we ‘othered’ artists might fruitfully create.

I was offered this platform in Australia—a place where I was lucky enough to have my work appreciated for its craftsmanship, colour and visual and intellectual value systems. The migration system in Australia has been one that we have experienced with relatively little trauma. It is interesting indeed to contrast the lives my family and others of the Gujarati community in Australia with those I have discussed. As a family, we have now been ‘triple filtered,’<sup>137</sup> and though we still align ourselves

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<sup>137</sup> Drawing from Salman Rushdie’s reference to being ‘double filtered’ by his migration from Bombay to London *Imaginary Homelands*, 24.

strongly with our original Gujarati culture, the remnants of the other cultures we have imbibed, as well as our ready embracing of the new culture that surrounds us, takes us another step away from the culture my forefathers left behind in Gujarat. I feel that the place that gave birth to my forefathers could never be home again for me, my sense of belonging has been too skewed by our multi-migrations and expanded far beyond a happy settlement back into the Gujarati community, as it exists in India.

I hope this project stimulates further reflections and resonances between formerly dissonant cultures, and further interminglings and thus new formulations of third spaces. Hew Locke describes his relationship with the art community thus, “I feel at odds from it, I should feel a part of it, and in many ways I am, but don’t feel like I completely belong.”<sup>138</sup> I argue that it is not always a necessity to belong, that there is much advantage in un-belonging that can be strategically creative and culturally advantageous. In re-generating this third space through my artwork, I keep the fracture between cultures alive.

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<sup>138</sup> Hew Locke, in discussion with the author, Sept, 2013.

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