

# Remembrances and diasporic visions that embody traumatic histories, specifically ...

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In my practice I am exploring remembrances and diasporic visions that embody traumatic histories, specifically transgenerational trauma. My work investigates forced silences, feelings of isolation and memory- diaspora through conscious and unconscious silences- within my culture and family. Similar to the artist I have chosen, Sharlene Khan, both of our practices look at Indian identity, the dislocated self and how the past allows for the construction and deconstruction of ' identity'. Further Khan explores socio-political post-Apartheid society and investigates the intersectionality of race and gender (' Artist Biography', n. d). Along the lines of fragmented identity I will also be looking at Zinaid Meeran's novel *Saracen at the Gates* (2009).

Sharlene Khan was born in Durban in 1977. Before moving to Johannesburg in 2003, where she completed her second masters' degree in Fine Art at the University of the Witswatersrand, she completed her BA (Fine Art) and MA (Fine Art) at the University of Durban-Westville. Khan has participated in many group shows in Durban, Johannesburg, Pretoria, Switzerland, India, France, USA, Sweden and Holland. She has also exhibited in solo shows in Durban, Johannesburg and Cape Town. Since 2002 Khan has been apart of international residencies and visual art programmes in Cape Town, Kwa-Zulu Natal, Johannesburg, Cairo, France and Italy.

In her earlier days as an artist her work focused on street trade and the informal economy in South African city centres (' Artist Biography', n. d). More recently Khan's work has begun to focus around issues of identity and family history. Although primarily a painter, Khan works with a variety of mediums, performances and installations that incorporate music, fashion and

video. Her series *What I look like, What I feel like* (2008) (Fig 1. 1-1. 5), Khan staged juxtaposed photographic portraits of what she thinks of herself versus how she thinks others view her. The duality of the images Khan created questions the idea of self and the representation of 'otherness'. This series aims to criticise ideas around of womxnhood, race, class and identity.

Khan has spent time working as a freelance writer and curator. In 2004 she co-curated the ID of South African Artists in Holland and has both participated and co-curated in the 10 Years, 100 Artists project. In 2008 Khan co-curated *Esikhaleni- Spatial Practices* exhibition as part of the Joburg Art Fair. Khan is a member of the Dead Revolutionaries Club, a non-profit collective who facilitate visual art classes, talks and run a website that engages with cultural production in Southern Africa ('Artist Biography', n. d). Khan has taught coordinated events for the Humanities Graduate Centre at the University of the Witwatersrand in Johannesburg from 2006 – 2009 and later lectured at The University of South Africa in the Department of Art History, Visual Arts and Musicology in Pretoria from January 2010 – September 2011 ('Artist Biography', n. d). Currently Khan is a PhD candidate in the Arts at Goldsmiths, University of London. Her research includes ideas on race studies, black-Afrocentric, feminist creative methodologies, post colonialism, South African art, performativity, blackface, African literature and decolonial aesthetics.

As a postcolonial strategy to interrogate her Indian and South African heritage, Khan looks at the constructed-ness of identity through education, art discourses, historical narratives and popular culture. Referring back to

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her photographic series *What I look like, What I feel like* (2008) (Fig 1. 1-1. 4), Khan interrogates the difference between how one looks and how one feels versus how brown bodies are perceived. What creates this tension? In society often our appearance does not communicate who we are and how we feel.

“ Role-play and masquerade is, and has been, one of a number of devices of playing with the constellation of inner self and its social face throughout the history of human cultures” (Asfour, 2010). Khan in this series looks at different ways of questioning conventional assumptions and its relation to how we construct our identity. Khan’s twenty-four photographic prints come in pairs of mixed media, cleverly juxtaposed, Khan shows the tension and how ideas around race, gender, class, education and religion are societal constructs. Further Khan’s work allows the viewers to question themselves how our reality/ idea of self is constructed through society’s eye. Each pair of work shows different perspectives on how the public image of self is formed and the concept of being an ‘ individual’ being based and determined according to social conventions.

There are many approaches when it comes to constructing and deconstructing one’s self, Khan’s work is rooted in her experience growing up in South Africa both during and post-Apartheid. She also uses tensions within her own culture- self vs. family, womxnhood vs. motherhood as well as looking at family history. The combination of public and intimate makes her work more accessible.

Khan uses photography as an extension of her performance work and as documentation, “transforming different fields of social interaction which are laid out to be experienced by black female subjects” (Asfour, 2010). Khan dresses up in many costumes and places herself in different scenes; Khan explains it as donning the bodily realities of each situation. In the photographs Khan is generally off centre and the shots are not conventional as often they are not in focus or the lighting is off. This gives the series a sense of urgency and intimacy. The photographs are printed on cotton rag emphasising the rough quality. Khan’s work has layers as on the prints she has added embroidery work and drawings. “By performing a variety of stereotypical social roles and situations she engages in an activist dialogue with her environment, making visible the condition of being a black woman in South Africa today” (Asfour, 2010).

Khan often refers to herself as a black womxn as a form of empowering herself and uses the term ‘black’ to mean a non-white womxn as it was used during Apartheid. She uses the term to talk about previously disadvantaged groups- womxn of colour, “...it led me to question my Indian identity, its ‘authenticity’. I realised I am an Africanised Indian who is also westernised. Understanding the African-ness is important” (“Being the Subject”, n, d).

In a recent group exhibition *Re-membering: Memory, Intimacy, Archive* (2017), Khan along with artists Reshma Chhiba and Jordache A. Ellapen explore the ‘Indian’ experience through notions of memory, race, class, gender and sexuality in post-Apartheid South Africa. Khan through a series of work, *When the Moon Waxes Red* (2016) (Fig 1. 6), she again uses mixed

media such as video, photography and embroidery to create “ visual textured narratives” (KwaZulu Natal Society of Arts [KZNSA], 2018) which tell a story of the different circumstances migratory womxn face. In Chhiba’s work titled *Kali* (2008) (Fig 1. 7) and *Two Talking Yonis* (2013) (Fig 1. 8) she makes reference to Hindu iconography and mythology. Ellapen’s *Queering the Archive: Brown Bodies in Ecstasy* (2016/17) (Fig 1. 9), he uses black and white photography to produce assemblages critiquing heteronormative ideas of family, community and nation. Together their work speaks of everyday experiences that shape identities through tensions of culture, family history, love, loss and mythologies. Further their take on the ‘ Indian’ experience add to a part of South African art making and history that is lacking.

Khan’s *When the Moon Waxes Red* (2016) and Ellapen’s *Queering the Archive: Brown Bodies in Ecstasy* (2016/17) both refer to the migration of Indians in South Africa and they make use of historical experiences to better understand belonging and subjectivity post-Apartheid. The use of the archive plays an important role in each artist’s project and are interpreted differently by each. Allowing for alternative perspectives on the media idea of being Indian, the artists look at their family archives. This family archive acts as a “ intimate archive” (KZNSA, 2018) which the artists use for varied visual expressions, Khan “ intimate archive” looks to oral traditions such as story-telling and how family history and memories are passes down generation to generation. A lot of Khan’s influence comes from stories told while growing up in an Indian township in Durban, stories about Indian indentureship, about womxn, family and community who burnt, hung and drowned themselves to

escape their conditions, but at the same time stories of community and overcoming hardships. When the Moon Waxes Red, Khan uses lace embroidered portraits, which emphasises the “ texture narrative”, looking to “ capture the spirit rather than the truth” (KZNSA, 2018).

Ellapen’s Queering the Archive: Brown Bodies in Ecstasy project draws influence from their family photo album and documents, such as Indian pass documents collected by parents and grandparents. Ellapen looks at portraits taken of his early ancestors who were brought to South Africa by British colonies. His work aims to challenge conventional ways the Indian experience is archived and portrayed. In his archive Ellapen found an intimacy within the photographs of men- his grandfather and father. Ellapen uses this intimacy to create assemblages where he reimagines masculinity and sexuality in relation to history, memory, race and desire. Further he looks at the erotic to deconstruct heteronormative notions of race, gender and sexuality.

Lastly Chhiba uses her family history as a creative springboard, exploring goddess Kali through her maternal grandmother who is a central figure in her thinking and work. Like Khan and Ellapen, Chibba is influenced by intimacy within family spaces and an alternative archive- by using memories of her grandmother told by her mother. Both works Kali and Two Talking Yonis use elements of mythology to explore issues of identity (referring to classical Indian dance), violence, sexuality and protest (use of tongue and yoni). Chhiba is able to investigate womxnhood and how the brown female body is depicted in contemporary South Africa.

All three artists are focused on memory and archive/recovery work, “ by using their own bodies in a postcolonial masquerading in order to trouble stereotypes of ‘ Indian-ness’ in South Africa by focusing on the intersectionalities between class, gender, ethnicity, nationalism and homoeroticism” (KZNSA, 2018).

Relating Khan’s work and the concept around constructing and reconstructing identity, I am looking at Zinaid Meeran’s *Saracen at the Gates* (2009), which is about “ a curry-mafia princess who falls in love with the leader of an all-girl gang of anarchists, the Saracen, and finds out her father is the sex slaver that the anarchist gang is hunting down” (Ryman, 2017). The novel explores two girls falling in love, Sophie the girl gang leader and Zakira the curry-mafia princess. Her parents who are very conservative control Zakira, but unbeknown to them she goes out clubbing, drinking, smoking and has an entirely secret life where she has a love affair with Sophie. *Saracen at the Gates* is set in Johannesburg, the location gives the story a sense of edginess and danger, the congestion of the city, an imposing feeling and idea of a fallen civilisation, all themes carried throughout. The characters are not racialised, like so much of the narrative in South Africa is, evoking a sense of fluidity and a fragmented identity, especially Zakira. Meeran allows the character’s lives and interests decide what makes up their traits rather than solely based off their race.

Transgenerational trauma or transgenerational haunting is trauma past down from first generation trauma survivors to future generations through



complex post-traumatic stress disorder mechanisms. How does this trauma that one's grandparents and parents have gone through affect our growth?

In their own unique way both Khan and Meeran investigate the emotional abuse, trauma and misogyny within Indian family and culture. They make an attempt to identify one's dehumanised self- the dislocated and fragmented self, construction and reconstruction of ' identity', how it is inscribed on the body and how one can redefine identity/ the image of identity.

Meeran's novel and Khan's body of works represent a visual tradition/ story cloth to express transcultural traditions and embody the concept of healing through making- allowing for a sense of wish fulfilment and belonging.

Making and unmaking, learning and unlearning helps visualise the complexity of one's relationship to trauma.

I believe humans are capable of drawing from different identities. The complexity is often simplified by society, placing everything into specific boxes, which is artificial and allows for the exclusion of ' others'. South Africans are conditioned to see things in relation to racial categories, in turn being and behaving like ' an Indian' was/is imposed and it is something that needs to be questioned. What is left is diasporic communities that cling to these racial, cultural and ethnic identifications. In reality we have multi-layered identities.