Reclaiming Narratives, Histories, and Feminisms:

Artworks by South African Women of Indian Heritage

By

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Abstract

This dissertation investigates how three contemporary South African women artists of Indian heritage, Usha Seejarim, Ravelle Pillay and Alka Dass, deploy their artistic practices as intersectional feminist interventions to recover silenced histories and reimagine dominant narratives of race, gender and cultural identity in post-apartheid South Africa. The scope of this study is intentionally narrowed to focus exclusively on women artists of Indian heritage working in South Africa after 1994, thus largely excluding male artists, artists of other identities and heritages, and works created prior to the country's democratic transition. By explicitly setting these analytical boundaries, the research clarifies its commitment to investigating a specific demographic and historical moment, allowing for greater depth and clarity. Grounded in postcolonial theory, African feminisms, and Kimberlé Crenshaw's framework of intersectionality, the study combines visual, thematic, contextual, and intersectional analyses with an autoethnographic methodology that positions the researcher as both an insider and a critical interlocutor. For example, Crenshaw's concept of intersectionality vividly comes to life in Seejarim's Squeeze, where scores of clothes pegs cluster together yet pull in different directions, visually evoking the simultaneous and intersecting pressures of gendered domestic work and racialised histories. In this way, the theory does not remain abstract, but immediately engages with the very motifs and materials at the heart of the artists' production.

Chapter 1 reviews literature on autobiography, autoethnography, and the politics of representation to establish the study's conceptual framework. Chapter 2 traces the socio-historical trajectory of South African Indian communities, from nineteenth-century indenture through apartheid segregation to ongoing marginalisation, demonstrating how these layered injustices inform the artists' embodied experiences. Chapter 3 presents detailed case studies: Seejarim's reconfigured domestic objects that critique gendered labour; Pillay's figurative canvases that explore displacement and resilience; and Dass's mixed media assemblages that integrate personal narrative into collective memory.

The analysis demonstrates that these artistic practices enact resistance, reclamation, and healing, challenge archival absences, and expand the canon of South African art history. (Cowan, 2024) By foregrounding the creative strategies of women situated at the intersections of race, gender, and diaspora, this dissertation addresses a significant gap in scholarship on post-apartheid visual culture and offers a nuanced model for curatorial and academic engagement with marginalised artistic voices (Pillay, n.d.).

Declaration of Originality

I declare that this thesis is my own work and that all the sources I have used have been acknowledged by complete bibliographic references. This thesis is being submitted in fulfilment of the requirements for the Master of Arts at Rhodes University. I declare that it has not been submitted for any other degree or examination at any other university.

Signature: S Ellappa Date: 24 February 2026

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Introduction

This thesis explores both personal and academic dimensions, tracing the intricate identities, histories and artistic expressions of South African women artists of Indian heritage, and asks how their work navigates and articulates complex cultural identities within postcolonial and feminist discourse. My research both locates me within this scholarly framework and examines the works of these artists. This study is guided by the concept of "situating," a term articulated by Ruth Simbao to describe the dual positioning, both physical and metaphorical, that is influenced by lived experiences and shaped by specific situations (Simbao 2017:1). This approach has deeply informed my journey as both researcher and subject. The interplay between personal experience and academic inquiry has refined my focus, reshaped my inquiries, and enriched my understanding of how these artists articulate multifaceted identities through art.

A concrete example of this insider–outsider stance arose during a fieldwork interview with Alka Dass. While discussing her use of traditional beadwork, I initially felt a strong sense of cultural familiarity—my insider perspective recognised motifs drawn from my own family's heritage. However, as Dass explained her ambivalent relationship to these traditions, I became aware that my assumptions risked flattening her experience into a narrative that resonated personally with me. In that moment, I had to consciously adopt an outsider's perspective, asking follow-up questions that helped her articulate her own ambivalence and resistance. This process not only sharpened my methodological rigour but also revealed how shared heritage can mask important individual differences. It reminded me that holding both insider empathy and outsider curiosity is essential to ethical, nuanced scholarship in this field.

Contextualising their works within South Africa's multifaceted art scene, which encompasses established galleries, grassroots community spaces and public art initiatives often constrained by resource shortages, geographic disparities and socio-political tensions, has therefore become central to this thesis. (Miraftab et al., 2020) The research adopts a bottom-up ethnographic approach (using in-depth interviews), allowing the artists' perspectives and expressions to guide an understanding of the socio-political contexts they navigate. In addition to the three artists themselves, this approach includes the voices of curators, family members, and audience participants whose perspectives surface through interviews, informal conversations, and

collaborative events. For example, insights from a Durban-based curator highlight how exhibitions of South African Indian women artists have fostered new dialogues around cultural belonging, while the recollections of a founding member of a women's art collective help provide context for communal memory and resilience. Conversations with family members of the artists also reveal the generational impact of migration and memory, and feedback from exhibition visitors at local community centres uncovers the affective power of the works in sparking recognition, debate, and reflection.

Data collection for this study consisted of semi-structured, in-depth interviews with the three featured artists, as well as with curators, family members, and selected visitors at exhibition sites. Interviews were recorded and transcribed, with participants providing informed consent. Additional observations of public exhibitions and community events were documented through field notes. Informal conversations and collaborative art-making sessions were also captured in reflective journals. These diverse forms of qualitative data were then coded thematically, allowing for recurring motifs and narratives to be identified across different participants. A visual analysis of selected artworks was systematically integrated with interview data to corroborate and enrich interpretations. This transparent, multifaceted process ensures the rigour and credibility of the methodological approach, providing a strong basis for the analysis that follows.

By weaving these community voices into the research, I aim to fulfil the promise of a participatory, bottom-up methodology that extends beyond the studio to encompass the broader social worlds that animate and receive the artists' work. By examining their individual stories and techniques, I aim to underscore how their art serves not just as an aesthetic expression but as a critical lens on issues of race, gender, and identity within the feminisms of Africa. This process has deepened my engagement with the nuances of South African Indian heritage, revealing how marginalised voices and overlooked histories contribute to and reshape contemporary South African art and feminist discourse.

This study examines how, through their artworks, Seejarim, Pillay and Dass reclaim their own marginalised histories, challenge dominant cultural narratives, and assert their identities in the face of systemic exclusion. Their works engage with the residual impacts of colonialism, apartheid and patriarchy while also embracing a transformative potential that reimagines the

role of women in both the artistic and political spheres. (Pillay, n.d.) For instance, in Seejarim's installation *Unfolding Servitude* (2025), she reconfigures found domestic objects such as clothes pegs, ironing soleplates and brooms to expose intersectional legacies of colonial and patriarchal exploitation, transforming symbols of servitude into acts of resistance. The metallic clatter of soleplates threaded tightly together, and the rough texture of bundled pegs evoke both the oppressive weight of domestic labour and a palpable sense of defiance, inviting viewers to feel the tension between toil and subversion within the piece itself. Their art, whether through abstraction, symbolism, or intimate reflections on personal histories, holds the power to shape and reshape South African cultural discourse, providing a potent commentary on the complexities of postcolonial identity and gendered subjectivities (Mary Sibande, 2026). In sharing this research, I hope to honour these artists' contributions and contribute to a more inclusive understanding of South African art history that reflects the intersections of race, gender, and culture. Through this study, I aim not only to amplify the stories of Seejarim, Pillay, and Dass but also to position their work within the broader discourse of feminisms of Africa and speak to the power of art as a medium of transformation and reclamation.

This research is scholarly yet deeply personal. As a descendant of Indian indentured labourers who arrived in South Africa in the 19th century, my study is both a reclamation of lost histories and a celebration of a rich cultural heritage often overshadowed within national historical narratives. My ancestors were brought to KwaZulu-Natal to work on sugarcane plantations under exploitative conditions, their stories largely absent from colonial archives. (Beall, 2012) Through archival recovery and artist interviews, this thesis gives voice to these silenced histories and, in doing so, uncovers my own lineage within South African Indian heritage. (Vahed et al., 2011)

Within South African Indian communities, art has always stood as a powerful vehicle for self-expression and transformation. (Pillay, n.d.) As Gqola (2010:32) argues in *What Is Slavery to Me?*, art enables us to explore our most intimate thoughts, navigate personal and collective identities and challenge the status quo. This research recognises the role of art in both reflecting and constituting identities; it is not merely a form of representation but an act of creation and resistance. Building on Gqola (2010:45), who asserts that "art opens spaces of possibility for marginalised voices," this thesis explores the power of art to reclaim narratives. By delving

into the works of the artists, I seek to understand how their art challenges established norms and represents the nuanced experiences of women caught between multiple, often conflicting, cultural identities.

Exemplary in both personal expression and societal critique, Seejarim, Pillay, and Dass each offer a distinct lens on feminisms in Africa and on Indian-South African identity. Seejarim's installation *Unfolding Servitude* (2025) at Southern Guild interrogates domestic objects to expose the ongoing legacies of labour and colonial servitude (Seejarim, 2025). Ravelle Pillay's *Grove* (2025), part of *Sanctum (The Light and the Shade)* at Goodman Gallery, portrays the Black Madonna sheltered by towering banana leaves to explore cultural resilience in the face of colonial histories (Pillay, 2025). Alka Dass's mixed-media piece *Eyes Wide Shut* (2023) employs cyanotype, found beads and thread to explore themes of secrecy and memory within Indian South African households (Dass, 2023). This thesis provides a lens through which to examine how art not only reflects but also shapes our understanding of race, gender, and cultural belonging.

The theoretical frameworks that guide this research are rooted in the work of scholars such as Judith Butler (1990), who argues that identities are performative, constituted through repeated social acts, discourse and behaviours, and Frantz Fanon (1952), who explores how racialised and cultural identities are imposed upon individuals. This study also draws on the intersectional framework proposed by Kimberlé Crenshaw (1989:139), which provides a means of understanding how overlapping systems of oppression, such as race, gender and class, shape individuals' experiences. Additionally, Bhabha's concept of hybridity posits an in-between "third space" (Bhabha 1994:38) that illuminates how the artists' identities are shaped by both personal experiences and imposed societal structures. These theoretical frameworks provide the foundation for understanding how art serves as a medium through which identities are constructed, deconstructed, and renegotiated (Hall, 1997).

It is also important to note that I am not concerned whether the artists personally ascribe to labels such as 'Indian,' 'African,' or 'Feminist.' Instead, I analyse the performative aspects and societal meanings inscribed onto their bodies and art. Inserting the artists' voices at this point foregrounds their agency in engaging with such labels. As Ravelle Pillay expresses, "As much as my heritage shapes how others see me, I try not to let categories define my process.

Ultimately, my work is about feeling at home and displaced at the same time." In other words, the significance of the labels, whether they identify as 'Indian,' 'African,' or 'Feminist,' is not limited to their self-perception or subjective experience. Instead, the labels imposed on them by society, or the meanings attributed to their bodies and art, take on a transformative role in their works, as in Seejarim's use of domestic objects, which "performs" gendered labour.

These external labels often operate within a broader framework of societal expectations, power dynamics and cultural narratives that transcend the artist's own sense of identity. As Fanon (1952, p. 109) observes, "the body is the primal site of all possible experiences," underscoring how societal inscriptions are projected onto the artist's form. Whether or not the artist identifies with a particular label, the societal forces and historical legacies are attached to their bodies. Especially in a postcolonial, racialised context, their works continue to shape how they are perceived, interpreted, and situated within the broader cultural and political landscape. However, I am mindful that there is ongoing debate within art history and the broader humanities about the risks of imposing such labels or over-interpreting artists' intentions.

Critics may argue that categorising artists risks essentialising their identity or overlooking individual nuance. Others might caution against reading too much into artworks and misrepresenting the artists' own views. I acknowledge these tensions and recognise the value of maintaining a critical and reflexive approach. My analysis, therefore, aims not to fix identities or meanings but to trace the shifting dynamics between self-understanding, external attribution, and artistic practice. It is important to keep these debates in mind as you journey through this paper.

In this way, the artists' work may inadvertently manifest these imposed identities, not because they choose to, but because of the constructed nature of identity itself. Butler (1990, p.175) states, "gender is performatively constituted by the very 'expressions' that are said to be its results," emphasising that identities are constructed through repeated actions, social practices and external attributions. Butler's concept of performativity emphasises that identity is not a stable essence or a pre-existing category but is produced through acts that are continuously repeated and performed.

In the context of art, these acts can be seen in how an artist's body and work are framed and understood through the lens of societal expectations, including race, gender, and heritage. For example, in *Skroplap* (2024), Seejarim interweaves hundreds of wooden clothes pegs with steel wire to evoke the repetitive rhythms of domestic labour and women's resilience, simultaneously reflecting the external labels imposed upon her body and practice, regardless of her personal identification with those labels. In other words, the artist's body and artistic practice may be read as performing identities, whether they embrace them or not, because of how those identities are inscribed by broader cultural forces.

This aligns closely with Frantz Fanon's (1952) *Black Skin, White Masks*, which explores how racialised individuals experience a form of identity shaped by the gaze of the other and by the racial and cultural narratives imposed upon them. Fanon argues that the body becomes a site of social inscription, where cultural meanings are projected onto it (Fanon 1952:109). For example, the "black body" is often marked by a particular set of expectations that transcend the lived experiences or desires of the individual. These external cultural narratives impose meaning on the body, and the individual becomes aware of themselves as an object through others' gaze, an experience that often leads to the fragmentation or alienation of self. Fanon's analysis underscores the power dynamics that are embedded in how identity is constructed, suggesting that the artist's body cannot be seen in isolation from the cultural and historical context in which it exists. What new forms of history and agency become possible when socially inscribed bodies reclaim meaning through artistic practice? Can the transformation of domestic labour into sculpture alter the narratives projected onto those bodies?

Similarly, Stuart Hall (1997), in his theory of representation, reflects on how cultural artefacts, such as art, serve as vehicles for socio-political meanings and power structures. Hall's theory suggests that representations are never neutral; they are always shaped by dominant ideologies, historical narratives, and cultural codes. Art, as a form of cultural production, is not just an expression of individual creativity. It is also a product that reflects and participates in the political and social contexts in which it is made. This interpretive process situates art within broader cultural dialogues, reflecting Simbao's concept of situating (Simbao 2017:1), where engagement with specific socio-historical contexts generates meaning, and demonstrates that

an artwork's significance is not solely determined by the artist's intentions but is continually shaped by societal frameworks. Artworks can thus carry meanings that transcend the artist's personal definition, resonating with broader cultural, historical, and political implications.

To crystallise the concept of the counter-archive, consider Usha Seejarim's engagement with historical photography in her ongoing work Reframed Labour (2023). In this artwork, Seejarim selects an archival photograph from the 1950s depicting Indian women labouring on a sugarcane plantation—a visual that originally served to reinforce narratives of servitude and invisibility. By transferring the photograph onto muslin, embroidering over the women's hands with vivid red thread, and encasing the image in layers of translucent fabric, Seejarim reinterprets the historic image. The artist reclaims the photograph from its colonial archive and transforms it into a site of agency and memory, highlighting the women's resilience rather than their marginalisation. The before-and-after interpretive move animates the idea of a counter-archive: what was once a document of erasure becomes, through the artist's intervention, a tactile record that restores voice, presence, and dignity to the women portrayed.

For example, in Dass's Eyes Wide Shut (2023), the overlapping layers of cyanotype prints and embroidered threads evoke the artist's personal memory while simultaneously speaking to collective experiences of colonial erasure and communal healing (Dass, 2023). The works of South African women artists of Indian heritage, for instance, may speak to themes of racialisation, colonialism, gender and cultural hybridity, the blending of distinct cultural traditions and symbols into new forms of expression, even if the artists do not explicitly identify with these themes themselves. The art functions as both a personal and a collective artefact, carrying meanings that society ascribes to it through the lens of historical and political struggles (Hall, 1997, p. 3).

The artists' self-understanding is crucial to their creative process. Yet, external attributions and imposed labels also shape how their work is received. These labels, whether they are racial, cultural, gendered, or political (e.g., 'Indian,' 'African,' 'Feminist'), inevitably shape the reception and interpretation of their art. The performative nature of identity, as Butler (1990, p. 185) theorises in her performativity framework, means that these artists' works carry dual significance: they reflect personal experience and simultaneously enact and inscribe external

cultural, political and historical meanings. Therefore, the importance of imposed identities lies not in whether the artists claim them, but in how these identities are enacted through their artistic choices, media, and embodied performances.

By acknowledging this dynamic, we can better understand how art functions not just as personal expression but as a critical site of negotiation, where the artist's body and work interact with dominant cultural structures, reinforcing, challenging or subverting imposed identities. For example, in Ravelle Pillay's participatory mural Painted Memories (2022), community members were invited to stitch personal migration narratives onto a shared textile panel, negotiating individual and collective identity within a single cultural fabric (Pillay, 2022). As Spivak (1994, p. 279) famously asserts, "the subaltern cannot speak," a reminder of how marginalised voices are systematically silenced within dominant discourses. In response, these artists' works become sites where identity, history and social context intersect, allowing resistance and reclamation to unfold in the postcolonial and feminist arenas.

These manifestations often transcend lived experiences and personal agency, resonating with Homi Bhabha's concept of hybridity, which explores how identities exist within the interplay of personal and imposed structures in the "third space", a liminal zone where hybrid identities emerge (Bhabha, 1994). In artistic practice, this "third space" functions as a creative platform for exploring hybrid identities and cultural narratives, for instance, in Ravelle Pillay's Grove (2025) at Goodman Gallery, the juxtaposition of towering banana leaves drawn from Indian textile traditions with the figure of the Black Madonna creates a third space where Indian and African cultural narratives converge and are reimagined (Pillay, 2025). Similarly, Licona (2005) shows that hybrid narratives disrupt hegemonic binaries and recuperate marginalised voices. By situating narratives within this liminal, "in-between" zone, artists and storytellers can destabilise dominant discourses, creating opportunities for innovative forms of identity construction and meaning-making (Licona, 2005).

These dynamics will be further interrogated in this thesis, particularly through an in-depth analysis of autobiography and autoethnography as instruments for recapturing and articulating shared narratives and histories. This approach aligns with Carolyn Ellis et al.'s *Autoethnography: An Overview* as a method for merging personal experience with broader

cultural contexts and challenging dominant narratives (Ellis et al., 2011). Underpinned by performativity, intersectionality and hybridity, these frameworks illuminate the intersections of identity, history and representation in artistic practice and lead directly into the following research questions, which explore how South African women artists of Indian heritage navigate and articulate their complex cultural identities.

Ultimately, this thesis seeks to contribute to postcolonial feminist art theory by examining the role of art in shaping cultural and feminist discourses. By focusing on South African women artists of Indian heritage, it demonstrates how marginalised voices can reclaim their narratives and assert their presence within national and global cultural frameworks. Through this research, I aim not only to honour the contributions of these artists but also to offer a more inclusive and nuanced understanding of South African art history, one that reflects the intersections of race, gender, and culture. It also underscores the transformative power of art as a tool for resistance, reclamation, and identity formation with a particular focus on Indian-South African women.

Research Questions and Significance

The following questions guide this exploration of Indian-South African women artists, their identities, and practices. The research questions stem from an interest in understanding how art can function as a site of self-exploration, social commentary, and resistance:

1. How might South African women artists of Indian heritage employ artistic strategies to negotiate the tensions between personal, cultural and societal expectations and thereby articulate multifaceted identities?
2. How might their artworks intervene in and reconfigure dominant South African art histories, traditionally framed by Eurocentric or apartheid-era perspectives, to recover and elevate marginalised narratives?
3. How might the theoretical lenses of performativity, intersectionality and hybridity inform these artists' creative processes, enabling them to enact both individual self-expression and collective acts of resistance?
4. How might their works engage with postcolonial and feminist discourses to negotiate cultural belonging, memory and socio-political agency?

These questions drive the investigation into the interplay between personal narratives and collective histories, asking how artists harness their creative expression to both reclaim and redefine their cultural identities within the complex context of South African society. Answering these questions will fill gaps in South African postcolonial feminist art scholarship. As Keshni Ellapen argues in *Indenture Aesthetics* (2023, p. 145), "the cultural productions of indentured descendants function as critical counter archives," challenging dominant historical narratives while interrogating the legacies of colonialism and racial capitalism (Ellapen, 2023). This thesis builds on Ellapen's framework by examining how the artistic practices of South African women of Indian heritage act as visual and conceptual counter archives, reclaiming marginalised identities and histories within post-apartheid South African art.

Beyond academic insight, these findings have significant practical applications for curatorial and educational practice. For example, curators can draw from this research to design exhibitions that not only feature the works of South African Indian women artists but also structure interpretive materials and programming around themes of narrative reclamation, intersectionality and community engagement. Curatorial guides might include oral histories and first-person testimonies gathered through methods outlined in this thesis, while exhibition layouts can be organised to visually trace intergenerational stories or spotlight the counter-archive strategies employed by artists. Educational programmes in museums, galleries, or schools could incorporate workshops in which participants create visual responses to personal or family histories, fostering community dialogue and reflection on identity and marginalisation. Furthermore, educators can use the analytic frameworks explored here—such as intersectionality and autoethnography—to guide classroom discussions, critical writing tasks, and collaborative art projects, equipping students to critically engage with art as both personal expression and social commentary. By offering concrete models for participatory exhibition design, narrative-based interpretation, and inclusive curriculum development, this research supports broader efforts to make the art world more representative and responsive to marginalised voices.

By shedding light on this underexplored facet of South African art, namely the practices of women artists of Indian heritage, this thesis addresses a gap that Ellapen (2023:29) identifies, where academic scholarship has largely neglected their contributions and experiences, and in

doing so, enriches our understanding of their lived realities and artistic expressions. The investigation of how these artists utilise autobiography and autoethnography not only challenges dominant narratives but also reveals, as seen in Pillay's Sanctum (The Light and the Shade) series (Pillay, 2025), how personal reflection can unearth tensions between inherited cultural scripts and contemporary identity formation, thereby attesting to the resilience and complexity of navigating multiple cultural identities.

This MA Thesis recognises the pivotal role that art plays as a medium for social commentary and identity formation, illustrating how personal narratives can intersect with broader socio-political discourses. As Hall (1997, p. 2) contends, representation is not a passive mirror of reality but an active practice that shapes societal understanding; in the same vein, this thesis posits that art is not a mere reflection of life but a potent cultural force capable of moulding and influencing public perceptions and narratives. The focus on the interplay between art and identity encapsulates the transformative potential of creative expression in promoting dialogue, understanding, and reconciliation across diverse cultural heritages, a dynamic that will be analysed through visual, thematic, and contextual frameworks in later chapters (Ramgolam, 2011).

As Mama (2002, p. 1) observes, "the persistence of patriarchal hegemony across the African region has stimulated a visible proliferation of feminist scholarship and strategy, yet this is only rarely brought for collective reflection and analysis," underscoring the urgent need for inclusive representation of diverse histories and narratives within the art world. It underscores how art serves as a powerful platform for marginalised voices to articulate their stories, thereby contributing to a more diverse and comprehensive understanding of feminisms of Africa and the multiplicity of identities within the African continent.

In essence, the paper not only contributes to academic scholarship but also participates in a larger cultural conversation, advocating for the recognition and appreciation of the rich nuances of South African Indian women's heritage as expressed through the arts. It elevates the discourse on identity, representation, and feminism to a global stage, emphasising the importance of including diverse perspectives in shaping our cultural and historical consciousness (Pillay, n.d.).

Research Methodology

This research employs a qualitative, exploratory approach, as defined by Creswell (2013, p. 84), an initial investigation aimed at uncovering patterns and generating hypotheses, integrating a diverse range of narrative methodologies, including autobiography, autoethnography, and ethnographic and participatory methods. Narrative methodologies allow for an in-depth exploration of the intricate personal and cultural dimensions of South African Indian heritage as well as the layered intersections of identity, feminism, and artistic expression in Africa. The methodological framework weaves personal narratives into broader socio-political contexts by employing methodological triangulation through interviews, archival research and participant observation, and theoretical triangulation by analysing the same data through the lenses of performativity and hybridity, thus enhancing the credibility and depth of insights into the artists' lived experiences and creative processes. For example, triangulation becomes tangible through the convergence of interview data and visual analysis regarding the recurring peg motif: an artist's explanation of the pegs' symbolism during interviews reinforced their meaning as markers of gendered labour, as observed in the artwork itself. This micro-example illustrates how methodological rigour is strengthened by allowing diverse data sources to intersect around a shared theme.

Narrative methodologies form a critical aspect of qualitative research, particularly in the social sciences and humanities, where they are used to explore and understand the complexities of human experience, identity, and culture (Clandinin, 2013). At the heart of narrative methodologies is the belief that stories, whether spoken, written or visual, are powerful tools for constructing knowledge and making sense of the world (Connelly and Clandinin, 2006). In this study, that principle informs both the artist interviews, where personal testimonies are elicited as narrative data, and the visual analysis, where the artworks' formal elements are read as continuing those same stories. Through storytelling, researchers can give voice to experiences, particularly those that have been marginalised or silenced, offering deeper insights into the intersections of personal and social contexts (hooks, 1995, p. 58). Narrative methodologies not only allow for the exploration of individual lives but also highlight how broader societal structures and histories shape personal experience (Riessman, 2008).

Autobiography and autoethnography are two key narrative methodologies that focus on the intersection of personal experience with social, cultural, and historical contexts. Autobiography centres the self; autoethnography situates the self within culture. Both approaches emphasise the role of the researcher as a subject and participant in the research process, positioning them as central to the construction and analysis of the narrative (Adams, 1996). Through these methodologies, the researcher reflects on their own lived experiences, exploring how these experiences shape and are shaped by cultural, social, and political forces (Ellis, 2004).

Autobiography as a narrative methodology is grounded in the idea of self-expression and identity exploration. It centres on the researcher's personal history, experiences, and reflections, positioning the self as the primary voice in the narrative. This method acknowledges that the personal is inherently political and that lived experience can serve as legitimate and valuable knowledge.

As Adams (1996) argues, autobiography allows individuals to explore the self in relation to broader cultural and historical contexts, making it an invaluable tool for researchers interested in how identity is formed, negotiated, and represented. By situating the self within wider social frameworks, autobiography contributes to a deeper understanding of the intersections between personal narrative and collective history.

By reflecting on the researcher's own experiences, autobiography fosters a deep engagement with the self, uncovering the complexities of identity, memory, and subjectivity. This method encourages an honest and intimate exploration of the researcher's life and allows for the acknowledgement of how personal experiences intertwine with collective histories and societal structures (Brockmeier & Harré, 2001).

Autobiographical writing is especially effective when researching marginalised or less-heard voices. It enables individuals to assert their narratives and reframe how they are understood. Through autobiography, the researcher is not only an observer but an active participant in the creation of knowledge, as Gergen (2001) argues that meaning is co-constructed through relational and contextual engagement. In this research, autobiographical elements offer a nuanced understanding of how personal identity and heritage are experienced, especially for

those navigating complex intersections of race, gender, and cultural background. In my fieldwork, I interwove personal narrative with artist interviews to surface shared experiences and tensions around belonging, memory, and representation.

While autobiography focuses on individual experience, autoethnography blends personal reflection with cultural analysis, offering a method for linking the individual to the collective. Autoethnography, as defined by Holt (2003), situates the self within its cultural milieu, bridging the gap between personal experience and broader societal frameworks. It is a process of writing about the self while simultaneously contextualising that self within social, cultural, and historical structures. This approach allows the researcher to examine how their experiences reflect or challenge societal norms, ideologies, and collective memories (Ellis & Bochner, 2000). For instance, reflecting on my upbringing in a predominantly white, middle-class northern suburb of Johannesburg, I began to trace the subtle ways in which my heritage shaped my sense of identity and belonging. These reflections revealed resonances with themes in Alka Dass's work, particularly around dislocation, inherited memory, and cultural erasure, which I explore in more depth later in this study through an autoethnographic lens.

Autoethnography is particularly effective in addressing the interconnectedness of identity and culture, illuminating how personal experiences are shaped by external forces. Through autoethnography, the researcher not only explores the self but also investigates how their identity is constructed and represented within cultural narratives (Chavez, 2008). This methodology invites critical analysis of the researcher's own body, identity, and experiences within broader socio-political landscapes, offering insight into how personal and collective histories intersect and influence one another (Chang, 2008). To support this process, I maintained reflexive field notes throughout my research, which enabled an ongoing engagement with my own positionality and helped trace the evolving relationship between personal memory, cultural context, and artistic interpretation.

One of the strengths of autoethnography is its capacity to challenge traditional notions of research and authorship. Rather than positioning the researcher as a detached, objective observer (as is typical in positivist approaches), autoethnography embraces subjectivity, recognising the researcher's lived experience as a valid and valuable source of knowledge. This

methodological choice allows for a more nuanced, relational understanding of meaning-making, particularly in contexts where personal, historical, and cultural narratives are deeply intertwined. This subjectivity is not seen as a limitation but as an important tool for uncovering deeper truths about culture, identity, and social structures (Ellis, 2004). This methodological approach also encourages researchers to reconsider how they relate to the subjects of their research, emphasising empathy and personal engagement in the research process (Bochner & Ellis, 2016). For instance, in my analysis of Usha Seejarim's *Mending the Matriarch* (2022), where the red thread is meticulously sewn through the soleplates of coal irons, I was guided by empathy rooted in my own reflections on familial histories of labour and silence. This autoethnographic lens allowed me to interpret the artwork not merely as an aesthetic object but as a shared site of inherited emotion, cultural memory, and embodied knowledge.

Both autobiography and autoethnography challenge traditional notions of authorship by positioning the researcher as an active participant in the narrative. In contrast to detached, ostensibly objective forms of research, these methodologies celebrate the researcher's subjective, lived experience (Bochner, 2001). As bell hooks (1995) argues, traditional academic research often marginalises the voices and experiences of those who do not conform to dominant cultural norms. Autobiography and autoethnography reclaim these marginalised voices, offering a space for self-expression, self-definition, and the articulation of subjugated knowledges. Given the personal nature of this research, I was mindful of ethical considerations, including informed consent, particularly when discussing sensitive or shared experiences. All participants were fully informed of the research aims and procedures, and their approval was obtained for the use of interviews and artistic materials, ensuring the integrity and ethical grounding of this study.

This rejection of traditional, impersonal research methods is particularly significant within postcolonial and feminist discourses, where the authority to speak and be heard has historically been unequally distributed. As Spivak (1994) famously questioned in her critique of Western knowledge systems, 'Can the subaltern speak?', highlighting the erasure of marginalised voices in dominant academic narratives. Similarly, Mama (2001) emphasises the need for African feminisms to centre lived experience, embodied knowledge, and local epistemologies in order to resist colonial legacies and epistemic violence. Autobiographical and autoethnographic

methodologies respond to these concerns by validating the researcher's situated knowledge and embracing a politics of voice, presence, and relationality. By centring personal experience, autobiography and autoethnography enable marginalised identities to challenge hegemonic narratives through representation. These methodologies allow for the reclamation of narratives that have historically been sidelined or silenced, offering a platform for individuals to tell their stories on their own terms (hooks, 1995). Through this process, autobiography and autoethnography make visible the complexities of identity, the ways in which power dynamics shape lived experience, and the possibilities for social transformation through storytelling. These possibilities are explored in later chapters through a thematic analysis of narrative arcs within selected artworks, highlighting how personal and collective stories can disrupt dominant narratives and reclaim silenced histories.

Narrative methodologies are not limited to the exploration of personal experience. They are also effective in analysing cultural artefacts, such as art, literature, and performance, that reflect and shape identity. As Riessman (2008) notes, narrative inquiry extends beyond individual storytelling to include the interpretation of symbolic forms, enabling researchers to trace how meaning is constructed, communicated, and contested through cultural expression. Through narrative inquiry, researchers can investigate how stories and representations are created and received, and how these stories contribute to the construction of cultural and social meaning (Riessman, 2008). In this study, I draw on a range of narrative sources, including exhibition texts, artist statements, and recorded conversations with the artists as data. These materials provide insight into how South African Indian women artists articulate identity, memory, and belonging through their creative practices. In this research, the artworks of South African women artists of Indian heritage are examined through the lens of narrative methodologies, offering insights into how their art serves as both personal expression and a collective commentary on race, gender, and cultural heritage.

Narrative methodologies enable the exploration of identity as a fluid, evolving process, shaped by intersecting cultural, social, and political influences. By using autobiography and autoethnography, this study seeks to provide a richer understanding of how these artists engage with their heritage and identity, and how their work contributes to broader cultural discourses. This approach is informed by Butler's (1990) concept of performativity, which understands

identity not as fixed or inherent, but as constituted through repeated acts and cultural scripts. Similarly, Bhabha's (1994) notion of hybridity provides a lens for examining how these artists inhabit and articulate liminal spaces, disrupting essentialist representations and creating new forms of cultural expression. Together, these theoretical frameworks support a narrative methodology that attends to the complexity and multiplicity of identity as it is lived and represented. In doing so, it acknowledges the power of narrative to shape understanding, challenge norms, and reclaim histories (Gergen, McNamee, & Barrett, 2001).

Ethnographic and participatory research methods provide a fundamental framework for this study, offering a rich and immersive approach to investigating the cultural and social dynamics in which identity is constructed, performed, and redefined. These methods are particularly well-suited for exploring the complex, lived realities of individuals and communities, allowing the researcher to engage with the phenomenon under study from an insider's perspective while maintaining a critical distance. "The goal is to gain a deep, nuanced understanding of how identity is formed and renegotiated within particular cultural, social, and historical contexts. To support this, I conducted semi-structured interviews with South African women artists of Indian heritage, allowing for flexible, in-depth conversations that foregrounded their personal narratives, artistic processes, and reflections on heritage and belonging.

Ethnographic research, which is rooted in anthropology, is a qualitative approach that emphasises direct engagement with people in their natural settings, typically through participant observation and interviews. It is based on the idea that to truly understand the social and cultural dynamics of a group, the researcher must immerse themselves in the daily lives of its members (Geertz, 1973). The ethnographer seeks to understand how individuals make sense of their world and how cultural practices shape their experiences. Participatory research, on the other hand, emphasises the active involvement of the community in the research process. It recognises that research is not a one-way interaction between researcher and subject, but rather a collaborative process where both parties contribute to the creation of knowledge (Reason & Bradbury, 2001). This approach allows for a deeper understanding of participants' lived experiences by encouraging their input, reflections, and the co-construction of knowledge alongside the researcher. For instance, during our interview, Alka Dass reviewed my interpretations of some of her works and offered insights into her intentions and underlying

themes. This exchange was instrumental in ensuring accuracy and ethical representation, while also reinforcing the collaborative nature of the research process.

In adopting these methods, I position myself as both an empathetic insider and a critical outsider, a dual positionality first introduced in the methodological framework of this study. This stance allows me to navigate the tensions between personal identification and analytical distance, enabling a more layered and reflexive engagement with the artists' narratives and artworks. As an empathetic insider, I acknowledge my own connection to the community and the cultural contexts I am studying, specifically, my shared Indian heritage and South African nationality. These aspects of my identity afford me an embodied understanding of certain cultural nuances, familial dynamics, and historical legacies that shape the experiences of the artists featured in this research. This connection allows me to understand the nuances of identity formation from a subjective, lived perspective, informed by shared histories and experiences. However, being an outsider in certain aspects of the experience enables me to critically examine the social and cultural dynamics without being overly influenced by personal biases or assumptions. This dual positionality allows me to navigate the tension between personal involvement and critical detachment, facilitating a more balanced and comprehensive analysis.

The concept of "situating," as proposed by Simbao (2017), plays a critical role in this research, offering a framework for how the researcher engages with the cultural and social practices under study. Simbao (2017:1) defines situating as a methodological process of engaging with lived experience both physically and metaphorically, encompassing not only one's immediate, material environment, but also the broader historical, cultural, and political contexts that shape identity and action. This approach foregrounds the researcher's role in the meaning-making process and acknowledges that knowledge is co-produced through dynamic, relational interactions between the researcher and the participant. In this study, I physically situated myself within the spaces of artistic production, through studio visits and face-to-face interviews, while metaphorically drawing on my own heritage and personal memories to reflect on themes raised in the artists' works. By actively situating myself within these layered contexts, I aim to understand how identity is performed and renegotiated in real-time. This reflexive and co-productive stance aligns with feminist and qualitative research practices that emphasise relational accountability, as outlined by Finlay (2002) in her work on reflexivity as a strategy for enhancing rigour in qualitative inquiry.

Analytical frameworks such as visual, thematic, contextual and intersectional analyses will be employed to interpret the works of artists, including Usha Seejarim, Ravelle Pillay and Alka Dass. Visual analysis, informed by Rose (2012), focuses on how artistic elements such as composition, material, and symbolism convey meaning and shape viewers' perceptions. Thematic analysis, drawing on Riessman (2008), identifies recurring motifs such as domestic labour, religious iconography and dislocation, which reveal deeper narratives embedded in the works. Contextual analysis situates these artworks within their social, historical and cultural backgrounds, connecting creative expression to broader narratives of identity, memory and resistance (Bhabha, 1994). This includes engaging with historical sources such as oral histories of Indian indenture in South Africa, familial testimonies and archival materials that speak to cultural continuity and rupture.

Intersectional analysis, informed by Crenshaw's (1989) concept of intersectionality, examines how overlapping structures of oppression based on race, gender and cultural heritage shape the artists' identities and practices. In this study, intersectionality is operationalised through the coding of interview transcripts and field notes, with specific attention to moments when multiple axes of identity intersect, such as when artists describe navigating racialised beauty standards, gendered expectations, or the burden of cultural preservation. This multi-layered analytical approach enables a richer understanding of how the personal and political are intertwined in the visual narratives produced by these artists."

The study emphasises the significance of narrative methodologies within the contemporary performance arts of Africa, recognising that these narratives are not static but are continually performed, reinterpreted, and renegotiated through artistic mediums. It seeks to contribute to the broader frameworks of feminisms of Africa (Mama, 2001; Gqola, 2018), highlighting how artistic practices can challenge patriarchal structures, reclaim embodied knowledges, and centre lived experience. It also engages with postcolonial discourse (Spivak, 1994), exploring how art can resist dominant narratives, recover marginalised histories, and provide a platform for self-representation and cultural dialogue. By positioning the artworks as acts of resistance, reclamation and identity formation, the study underscores their role in shaping a nuanced understanding of Feminisms of Africa, one that reflects diverse experiences and proactively includes varied perspectives in its discourse. As Gqola (2018) asserts, African feminism must

“create spaces that refuse erasure” and actively engage with complexity, ambiguity and contradiction in lived experience. These artworks function as such spaces, challenging singular narratives and affirming multiplicity in identity and memory.

Scope and Limitations

The scope of this MA Thesis is intricately defined to concentrate on the artistic expressions and experiences of South African women artists of Indian heritage. This focused approach allows for a nuanced and in-depth exploration of the intersectionality of art, identity and feminism from the perspective of this distinct demographic. The study is methodically circumscribed to a qualitative framework, utilising thematic analyses of selected artworks and conducting semi-structured interviews to gain deeper insight into the artists’ creative processes and the meanings embedded in their work. The research centres on three case studies, Usha Seejarim, Alka Dass and Ravelle Pillay, focusing on artworks produced in the post-1994 democratic era by women of Indian heritage in South Africa. While this means pre-1994 works are excluded, the strategic temporal focus intentionally foregrounds the profound cultural and political shifts following the end of apartheid, enabling a clearer investigation of how the democratic transition shapes contemporary artistic identities and practices. This temporal framing acknowledges the shifting socio-political landscape in South Africa and its influence on identity formation, memory and narrative reclamation through artistic practices.

However, this study has several limitations. The availability and accessibility of artists and their works pose a considerable challenge, potentially restricting the range of viewpoints that can be included and affecting the study's comprehensiveness; however, this is mitigated through secondary sources. The interpretive nature of art, coupled with the subjective lens through which it is analysed, introduces an inherent bias that must be acknowledged and mitigated where possible. Furthermore, the fluidity and ever-changing nature of identities pose a significant challenge for capturing their essence at any given moment, as the study may not fully encompass the ongoing evolution of the artists' identities (Hall, 1990). While this research offers an in-depth examination of a specific group, it also acknowledges the inherent limitations of its scope. The focus on South African Indian women artists provides valuable insight; however, the findings may not be directly transferable to other communities or contexts due to differences in social, cultural and historical backgrounds. Nevertheless, aspects such as the use of narrative methodologies, the application of intersectionality, and strategies for reclaiming

marginalised identities may resonate with researchers or practitioners studying other diasporic, postcolonial, or minoritised groups facing similar challenges. While some themes identified here—such as negotiating identity, memory, and resistance through art—may be applicable in comparable contexts, the specific social and historical dynamics of South Africa should be considered before drawing parallels. In this way, the study aims to provide conceptual tools and analytical frameworks that might inform approaches beyond its immediate setting, while recognising that the transferability of insights depends on the alignment of contextual factors. Building on this work, subsequent research might extend its themes into other cultural or geographical settings, offering comparative perspectives on identity, memory and resistance in marginalised artistic practices.

Thesis Outline & Chapter Structure

Introduction

Introduces the research objectives and significance of exploring the contributions of South African women artists of Indian heritage. It highlights the study's intersectional focus on race, gender, and cultural identity and briefly previews the theoretical frameworks of intersectionality, feminisms of Africa, and postcolonial theory. The introduction also outlines the methodology and provides a short overview of the chapter progression. A brief taste of the upcoming literature review and theoretical framing is included, with an emphasis on their importance to the research.

Chapter 1: Literature Review and Theoretical Framing

This chapter systematically reviews relevant literature and develops the theoretical framework for the study. It is structured as follows:

1. **Intersectionality and Feminisms of Africa**: Discussing foundational theories and their application to understanding the intersections of race, gender, and culture.
2. **Postcolonial Theory and Art**: Analysing how colonial histories inform the work of South African artists of Indian heritage.
3. **Methodological Approaches**: Outlining the use of autobiography, autoethnography, and visual and thematic analyses in interpreting artworks.

Chapter 2: History and Context of Indian South Africans

This chapter delves into the historical and socio-political context that shapes the identities of Indian South Africans. It includes:

1. **Colonial and Post-Colonial Histories**: Tracing the journey from indentured labour to apartheid and beyond, focusing on systemic oppression and resilience.
2. **Cultural Heritage and Identity**: Exploring the development of Indian South African identity and its interplay with race, class, and gender.
3. **Feminisms of Africa in Context**: Examining how this feminist framework fills gaps in earlier discourses, particularly regarding the Indian South African experience.

Chapter 3: Case Studies of Artists

This chapter provides an in-depth exploration of the artworks and practices of three South African women artists of Indian heritage:

1. **Usha Seejarim**: Analysing her use of domestic objects and her critique of gendered labour.
2. **Ravelle Pillay**: Exploring her paintings on displacement, resilience, and cultural identity.
3. **Alka Dass**: Investigating her autobiographical works addressing memory, identity, and heritage.

Through these case studies, the chapter examines how each artist reclaims narratives, challenges societal norms, and contributes to feminist and socio-political discourses.

Conclusion & Implications

The final chapter synthesises the key findings, emphasising the contributions of South African women artists of Indian heritage to contemporary art and feminist discourse. It reflects on the broader implications for feminisms of Africa, postcolonial art, and future research, highlighting the transformative potential of intersectional approaches in art and society.

Chapter 1: Literature Review and Theoretical Framing

This chapter begins with a personal reflection that situates the research within my lived experience. As a South African woman of Indian heritage, I navigate a landscape shaped by displacement, silence, and the ongoing pursuit of belonging. My ancestry is rooted in the history of indentured labourers who migrated from southern India to colonial KwaZulu-Natal, where men worked in sugarcane fields, and women undertook unpaid domestic labour such as cooking, cleaning, child-rearing, and sewing, forms of work that remain underrepresented in dominant historical narratives. Yet these forms of labour are not overlooked by accident: the invisibility of women's contributions in both private and public memory is a direct result of intersecting systems of colonial power, patriarchy, and racialised hierarchy that have long shaped which stories are recorded and whose voices are valued. The everyday artefacts passed down in my family embody this history of erasure and resilience, standing as personal reminders of the broader structural forces I will later examine. This thesis is a journey into my identity as a South African Indian woman, tracing a lineage shaped by my ancestors' migration from South India to colonial KwaZulu-Natal, and bridging the intimate domain of memory with the wider collective struggle for recognition and representation.

My research adopts an explicitly reflexive stance, recognising that my positionality as both insider and researcher shapes the framing of my research questions, interpretation of evidence, and methodological choices. By situating my inquiry within my own personal and familial narrative, I acknowledge the partial, situated nature of knowledge and seek to practice reflexivity throughout the research process. My lived experience informs both the formulation of my research questions—focused on identity, erasure, and belonging—and my reliance on methodologies such as autoethnography and oral histories. This approach allows for a critically engaged analysis that connects individual memory to broader social and political processes, strengthening the scholarly rigor of the study.

In my family, everyday objects such as a coal stove, a Singer sewing machine, and coal irons serve as symbolic anchors of memory, representing endurance and cultural continuity. Inherited from my grandmother and displayed in our home, these artefacts preserve familial histories that formal archives have largely overlooked for many South African Indian families descended from indentured workers (Desai and Vahed, 2010). In rural or working-class compounds where electricity was not yet widespread, the coal iron was a practical tool for

pressing clothing. Beyond its utility, it has become emblematic of domestic labour, particularly the unacknowledged contributions of women. Preserved and displayed, these items prompt oral storytelling, linking personal memory to broader cultural history.

These objects also reflect complex processes of hybrid identity formation, connecting ancestral traditions with contemporary realities. Passed down through generations, coal irons and other domestic tools symbolise perseverance, pride, and rootedness. At the same time, the coal iron itself occupies an "in-between" status: once a colonial import and now a cherished heirloom, it stands as a mediating object that embodies and negotiates the tensions and overlaps between colonial modernity and inherited tradition. In their continued presence, these artefacts do more than preserve the past; they actively participate in the creation of hybrid identities, marking sites where memory, adaptation, and transformation intersect. Despite the advent of modern technologies, many South African Indian families retain these items not only as cultural heirlooms but as expressive agents of belonging in a society where Indian narratives have been historically marginalised. For some, these irons represent a tangible link between India and South Africa, illustrating how hybridity emerges through ongoing negotiation between tradition and modernity. The symbolic significance of these objects is further examined later in this thesis through the work of artist Usha Seejarim.

The following literature review critically examines how art functions as a site of identity formation, feminist critique, and postcolonial resistance for South African women artists of Indian heritage. Its objectives are to:

Before delving into the literature, I will briefly outline the main themes and structure of this chapter. The chapter begins by situating the research within my personal and familial context, foregrounding the significance of everyday artefacts and cultural memory. It then moves to interrogate the historical and socio-political background of South African Indian identities, drawing on key moments such as indenture, apartheid, and forced migration. The next section explores theoretical frameworks, notably African feminisms, intersectionality, and postcolonial theory, to examine how overlapping systems of power have shaped the lived realities of South African Indian women. Following this, the chapter reviews how art and creative practice enable resistance, reclaiming overlooked histories and challenging dominant narratives. Issues of autobiography, life writing, and autoethnography are also discussed for

their methodological value in preserving marginalised experiences. The chapter concludes by identifying critical gaps in the literature, particularly the need to document and honour the artistic contributions of Indian women in South Africa, and proposes future directions for research and curatorial strategies.

Its objectives are to:

- Interrogate the historical and socio-political context that shaped South African Indian identities, particularly as they emerged from processes of indenture and apartheid;
- Critique feminist and intersectional frameworks, with a particular emphasis on African feminisms, in order to examine how overlapping systems of race, gender, and class produce both constraints and opportunities for Indian women in South Africa.
- Analyse the ways in which art challenges dominant narratives, expresses marginalised experiences, and reclaims overlooked histories, complicating the boundaries between the public and the private.
- Examine the value of autobiography, autoethnography, and life writing in contesting omissions from formal archives and in constructing alternative modes of preserving memory.
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From the mid-nineteenth century onwards, thousands of Indian labourers were brought to work on sugar plantations in colonial Natal (Desai and Vahed, 2010; Vahed and Desai, 2010). While men laboured in the fields, women performed domestic duties that were rarely documented in official records (Meer, 2000). These early migration experiences laid the foundation for cultural syncretism and continue to inform the gendered dynamics that shape Indian households today (Welsh, 1971).

During apartheid, racial segregation and legislation such as the Group Areas Act forcibly relocated Indian communities, further entrenching racial hierarchies and spatial inequalities. These systems intersected with patriarchal norms, limiting women's mobility, visibility and access to resources (De la Rey, 1997). In this thesis, the term "Indian community" specifically

refers to people living in the Durban suburbs of Chatsworth and Shallcross, which were demarcated as Indian areas during the 1960s. These neighbourhoods developed distinct social, cultural and economic dynamics in response to state-imposed displacement.

It is important to note that the use of the term "Indian community" here is not intended to homogenise the diverse and complex lived experiences of individuals in Chatsworth and Shallcross. Rather, it aims to highlight the shared struggles and similarities in their experiences as people of Indian heritage in South Africa, shaped by factors such as migration history, racial discrimination, and socio-economic conditions. While these communities are united by common historical circumstances, the individual experiences within these areas are still shaped by a variety of factors, including religion, caste, gender, and class, all of which contribute to the rich diversity within these neighbourhoods (Govender, 1995).

African feminisms offer a critical framework for understanding how race, gender, class and sexuality shape the lives of African women (hooks, 1981; Imam, Mama and Sow, 1997). Pumla Gqola (2001; 2015; 2018) argues that colonialism, apartheid and patriarchy must be examined together to understand women's lived realities. Intersectionality, introduced by Crenshaw (1989), is central to this inquiry, as it identifies how overlapping systems of oppression create distinct experiences of marginalisation. For instance, the experience of South African Indian women working as domestic labourers during apartheid highlights how constraints arising from racial discrimination (restricted employment and housing), gender norms (expectations to perform unpaid care work), and class status (working-class precarity) combined to severely limit their mobility and economic agency. At the same time, because of their ambiguous social position within apartheid classifications, Indian women could sometimes gain access to certain economic opportunities not available to Black African women, such as small-scale home-based businesses or teacher training, while still remaining largely excluded from public power and recognition. Thus, the intersection of race, gender, and class did not simply add layers of hardship but created specific possibilities and constraints unique to their position. McFadden (1992) adds that for South African Indian women, the interplay of apartheid, patriarchy and cultural expectations results in a unique positionality and generates a unique set of challenges and opportunities.

Colonial and apartheid-era classifications, which grouped diverse people from the Indian subcontinent under the singular label "Indian," erased the complexity of their cultural, religious and linguistic identities (Reddy, 1993). Scholars such as De la Rey (1997) and hooks (1994) caution against homogenising women's experiences, especially within marginalised communities, as identities are shaped not only by their Indian ancestry but by their position within South African society, negotiating both the racialised oppression of the broader South African context and the gendered expectations within their own communities (Mohammed, 2002). This thesis adopts terms such as "South African women artists of Indian heritage" (Reddy, 2007) to acknowledge hybridity and dual belonging while resisting essentialist framings of lived experiences. This approach thus allows for the recognition of their diasporic identities, shaped by migration histories, and their cultural hybridity within South Africa's complex socio-political landscape (Jain, 2010).

African feminisms help foreground the intersecting systems of race, gender and class that shape the lives of South African Indian women. Writers such as Gqola (2001; 2015) and hooks (1981) call for a historically grounded, intersectional analysis that centres women's agency within oppressive structures such as colonial histories, racial hierarchies, and patriarchal structures. This thesis draws on McFadden's (1992) observation that Indian women navigate both racial and patriarchal oppressions, occupying a complex social position. However, African feminist scholarship also insists on recognising women's capacity for strategic resistance alongside experiences of constraint. For example, despite constraints on their mobility and roles, many South African Indian women forged informal support networks, founded community organisations, or leveraged skills such as sewing and cooking to create income-generating opportunities for their families. Through such acts, women asserted agency by subtly challenging the limits imposed on them, negotiating patriarchal norms and exclusionary social systems in everyday life. Thus, this intersectional approach is pivotal in understanding the compounded oppression faced by South African women of Indian descent, while also affirming the ways in which they actively contested, adapted to, and reshaped their circumstances within the boundaries structured by colonial and apartheid legacies.

Ashwin Desai, in his edited volume *Indentured: Behind the Scenes of South Africa and Mauritius* (2014), combines oral histories and historical documentation to reveal the intimate

challenges of displacement, labour and cultural survival faced by Indian women. While offering macro-historical insights and a broad historical perspective, it also foregrounds the intimate, personal experiences of South African Indian women who navigated the profound challenges of displacement, exploitation, and survival. These accounts underscore the critical yet often unrecognised role women played in sustaining their communities and preserving cultural practices in the face of systemic oppression.

Memoir and life writing are key tools through which South African Indian women reclaim their stories. Fatima *Meer's Prison Diary: One Hundred and Thirteen Days, 1976* (2001) details her incarceration under apartheid, and is a first-person account of gendered political resistance and a deeply personal perspective on a pivotal moment in South African history. Similarly, Zuleikha Mayat, a cultural activist, made significant contributions to preserving South African Indian history through her book *A Treasure Trove of Memories: A Reflection on the Medical, Religious, Educational, and Social History of the Asians of South Africa* (1996). This work chronicles the collective and individual experiences of Indian women, emphasising their contributions to South Africa's socio-political and cultural landscapes. Mayat's reflections ensure that these stories, often neglected in mainstream histories, are preserved and celebrated.

In contemporary fiction, Shubnum Khan's debut novel,*Onion Tears* (2011), provides a poignant exploration of South African Indian women's lives across three generations. The narrative intricately weaves together the experiences of a grandmother, a mother, and a daughter who confront themes of migration, family, and cultural preservation. Through these intertwined stories, Khan highlights the struggles of identity and belonging in post-apartheid South Africa, capturing the emotional and cultural burdens inherited from the past and passed down through generations. Imraan Coovadia incorporates the experiences of South African Indian communities in novels such as *High Low In-between* (2009) and *Tales of the Metric System* (2014). Coovadia's works depict the intersecting realities of race, class, and gender, subtly highlighting women's roles in navigating societal change. His nuanced portrayal of Indian families reflects the intergenerational complexities of identity formation within a society shaped by apartheid and its aftermath. Coovadia's work illuminates the evolving roles of Indian families in contemporary South African society.

Intersectionality, as introduced by Kimberlé Crenshaw (1989), is particularly valuable for analysing how different systems of oppression overlap, creating distinct experiences for women of Indian heritage in South Africa. Crenshaw's framework helps elucidate how the intersecting structures of race, gender, and class, particularly during apartheid, shaped women's visibility, access to resources, and opportunities for self-expression. Women's historical relegation to the domestic sphere has often led to their marginalisation both within their communities and in broader society. The marginalisation of Indian women within both the Indian community and the broader South African society is thus underscored by their historically subordinate roles in the domestic sphere, as reflected in the unpaid labour of cooking, cleaning, and caregiving. McFadden (1992) addresses how this dual burden of patriarchy and racialised exclusion complicates the identity formation of South African Indian women.

McFadden's (1992) observations on how South African women of Indian descent navigate these intersecting oppressions emphasise the dual struggle against colonial forces and patriarchal traditions. By framing women's experiences through an intersectional lens, the research demonstrates the complexity of identity formation within a racially segregated society, highlighting the nuances of cultural heritage, community dynamics, and gendered power relations.

Postcolonial theory provides the foundation for understanding the continued impact of colonial structures on the identity formation of South African Indian communities. Drawing on Edward Said's (1978) work, this thesis examines the notion of Orientalism, which constructed the Indian diaspora as the "Other" within colonial discourse. This process of othering, according to Said, perpetuated Western superiority and reinforced the marginalisation of colonised groups. The historical classification of South African Indians as "Indian" during colonial and apartheid eras, while aiming to homogenise disparate groups, obscured the cultural, linguistic, and religious diversity within these communities. Yet, such colonial-era naming practices did not simply disappear with the end of apartheid; residual forms of Orientalism persist, as externally imposed labels continue to shape identities and delimit possibilities for self-definition. By contrasting these colonial descriptors with the self-chosen terms now adopted within communities—such as "South African Indian," "Indian South African," or simply

"South African"—it becomes clear that naming remains a subtle, ongoing site of power. This act of choosing how to self-represent, whether by asserting hybridity, emphasising local belonging, or resisting essentialist categories, signals both agency in identity formation and a critique of the enduring legacy of imposed labels. This framework is crucial for analysing how colonial legacies continue to shape the contemporary identity of South African Indians and how they negotiate their place in a racially segregated society. In the South African context, postcolonial theory illuminates the complexities of negotiating both the oppression of the apartheid era and the hybridised identities that emerge through migration.

Postcolonial theory thus further aids in unpacking colonial mechanisms of othering. Edward Said's (1978) theory of Orientalism reveals how colonial discourse constructed non-Western peoples as inferior and exotic. Spivak's (1994) analysis of the subaltern asks whether marginalised voices can be heard within dominant epistemologies. Bhabha's (1994) concept of hybridity critiques essentialist identity politics and illustrates how colonised subjects subvert imposed identities through mimicry and resistance.

Postcolonial theorists argue that the creation of the "Other" by colonial powers was not simply a by-product of empire but rather a deliberate, systematic process that reinforced and justified domination. Edward Said's concept of Orientalism, first articulated in his 1978 landmark study, highlights how European scholarship, literature, and popular media helped to construct the East, particularly the Middle East and parts of Asia, as exotic, backward, and inherently different from the rational, civilised West (Said 1978). According to Said, this body of knowledge was never neutral. Instead, it grew out of and perpetuated existing colonial power structures, enabling European states to define themselves as superior while simultaneously relegating colonised populations to the status of objects for study, curiosity, or control.

Therefore, Said's (1978) notion of Orientalism is especially relevant in the South African context, where Indian identities were framed as both exotic and subordinate. Postcolonial thinkers underscore the need to deconstruct imposed categories and recover erased narratives, goals often pursued through artistic expression (Mirza, 2009; Gqola, 2015). For South African Indian communities, art becomes a mode of self-definition and resistance.

Central to Said's thesis is the idea that Orientalism functioned as a discursive framework, shaping how scholars, policymakers, and the general public viewed and interacted with colonised societies. By categorising these societies as mysterious, childlike, or savage, Orientalist discourse validated the West's so-called "civilising mission." It effectively dehumanised the people it claimed to describe, dismissing their agency and complexity while asserting Western norms as the universal standard. Within this framework, the colonised were rarely seen as speaking subjects with their own valid perspectives and histories; instead, they were "spoken about" by European experts who claimed authoritative knowledge. For example, Fatima Meer's oral history recordings include testimonies like that of Saras Pillay, a second-generation South African Indian woman, who recalls: "We worked from sunrise to sunset, cooking, cleaning, caring for our families. Yet, in the old stories, it is as if our hands and voices never existed. But our stories are strong—they belong to our daughters." By including such direct testimony, the lived realities and voices of women previously marginalised in dominant accounts are foregrounded, exemplifying the shift from being 'spoken about' to speaking for themselves.

Postcolonial thinkers have since expanded on Said's critique, examining how similar processes of othering operated in regions beyond the Middle East and Asia, including Africa and the Americas. Gayatri Spivak, for example, explored how colonial discourse rendered subaltern voices invisible, raising the question of whether marginalised groups can truly "speak" if they are always filtered through dominant Western narratives (Spivak 1994). Homi Bhabha introduced concepts like hybridity and mimicry, revealing the complex ways in which colonised subjects could resist, appropriate, or disrupt these reductive representations (Bhabha 1994). Collectively, these theorists show that the depiction of non-Western peoples as "Others" was integral to legitimising and maintaining colonial power, and that dismantling such misrepresentations is crucial for understanding the legacies of empire in contemporary global culture.

For South African Indian communities, these theoretical perspectives reveal how colonial categorisations persistently shape present identities (Desai & Vahed, 2010). Postcolonial scholars highlight the necessity of rewriting marginalised histories, a project often taken up by artists (Mirza, 2009; Gqola, 2015). Art thus becomes a means to articulate alternative

narratives, assert agency, and complicate monolithic versions of history. For example, in Usha Seejarim's series of coal iron sculptures, she reconfigures the historically overlooked domestic tool into evocative artworks that foreground women's labour and resilience. By inscribing and assembling irons that evoke both weaponry and protective armour, Seejarim subverts colonial and patriarchal narratives, transforming a symbol of invisible labour into a monument of presence and dignity. In this way, her creative practice exemplifies decolonial praxis by materially rewriting histories of erasure and reinserting women's stories into the public imagination.

Art in South Africa has long been a conduit for social commentary and political resistance, particularly in response to the country's fraught history of colonialism and apartheid (Atkinson, 2009). Throughout the twentieth century, artists grappled with state-enforced segregation and racial oppression, using creative expression to expose systemic injustices and galvanise support for the anti-apartheid movement. Although many notable voices emerged, women artists and those from marginalised communities brought especially poignant perspectives to bear on the harsh realities of everyday life under oppressive policies. In post-apartheid South Africa, many art writers are seeking out and recording the work and histories of artists whose contributions were either ignored, banned, or forgotten. However, the contributions made by South African Indian women to the country's art landscape have not been systematically documented, risking their cultural activity being forgotten or never entering the public domain (Naidoo 2010:1). Sociologist, Nalini Naidoo (2010) in her paper *Culture, Politics, Identity: The Visual Art of Indian South Africans*, underscores the necessity of studying this area, asserting that "the visual culture of the Indian community has not been dealt with in a meaningful or challenging way."

Between 1962 and 1999, the only institution where Indian women could study fine art was the University College for Indians (UNICOL), which later became the University of Durban-Westville (UDW). (Moodley, 2012) During this period, 139 Indian students graduated with Fine Art degrees from both institutions (Moodley 2012:129). However, only a handful of these women have continued to work as professional artists. (Moodley, 2012, pp. 1-2) Those not covered in this study include artists such as Nalini Moodley, Judy Peter, Avitha Sooful and Reshma Maharaj, who have continued their practices largely within academic spaces. (Moodley, 2012, pp. 38-51)

Sophie Perryer's *10 Years 100 Artists* (2004) offers a more inclusive record of post-apartheid art, featuring artists such as Sharlene Khan, Rookaya Gardee, and Usha Seejarim. The book's decentralised curatorial model enabled broader representation. Khan's dual role as artist and critic is especially valuable in expanding discourses on identity and art. The collaborative nature of the book, in which 15 writers and curators each selected six or seven artists they deemed worthy of inclusion, allowed for a broad representation of artists. This approach empowered diverse voices and enabled the inclusion of artists who might otherwise have been overlooked. However, significant gaps in official archives and art-historical surveys remain, particularly regarding the work of South African Indian women artists, whose contributions have often gone undocumented or unexhibited. This raises a key question: what curatorial strategies might bring these "invisible" works and histories to greater prominence within public memory and institutional collections? For instance, could a dedicated exhibition framework be envisaged—one that foregrounds autoethnographic narratives, oral histories, and material artefacts from family archives—to actively surface these overlooked practices? Conceiving a project that encourages the submission and curation of personal objects, oral testimonies, and intergenerational artistic collaborations could offer a proactive way to remedy these archival absences, transforming gaps in the record into generative sites of research and collective remembrance.

By contrast, Marion Arnold's *Women and Art in South Africa* (1996) and *Between Union and Liberation* (2004, with Schmahmann) marginalise Indian women. While highlighting white and Black women artists, Indian women are notably absent. Schmahmann's *Through the Looking Glass* (2004) is one exception, briefly addressing the work of artist Jawahirlall. Arnold's *Women and Art in South Africa* (1996) offers insight into the experience of women working in a field where they have struggled to succeed. Arnold's feminist perspective examines not only the art of South African women but also the ways in which they have been depicted by men. She highlights the disparities in opportunity, training, and support for Black women artists. However, if Indian women are included under this broad category, it is not immediately apparent. The artists discussed in the book are predominantly Black or white, with Indian women receiving no mention at all. This exclusion is not simply an oversight but reflects institutional logics and structural biases: funding streams for exhibitions and research often prioritised white and later Black artists in line with shifting state and philanthropic agendas, while university and museum gatekeepers relied on established networks that seldom included

Indian women. Curatorial selections frequently assumed limited public interest in the work of Indian women artists, reinforcing cycles of invisibility. Audience assumptions, influenced by prevailing narratives of racial identity during and after apartheid, further shaped who was deemed significant enough to document. (Pillay, n.d.) By mapping these mechanisms of exclusion—funding priorities, gatekeeping curators, and audience perceptions—it becomes clear how structural barriers rendered Indian women artists largely invisible in major surveys of South African art. (Identity, place and displacement in the visual art of female artists at the Vaal University, 2026, pp. 156-157)

Similarly, *Between Union and Liberation* (2004) by Marion Arnold and Brenda Schmahmann covers the period from 1910 to 1994, aiming to bring the lives and work of South African women visual artists to the attention of the Western world. The book gives the impression that South Africa had numerous white women artists and a handful of Black ones, yet it fails to mention Indian artists, despite figures such as Jawahirlall, who was active before 1994. Several Black women included in the book are not visual artists but craftswomen or members of craft collectives, suggesting that there was no strict criterion for inclusion. Many of the featured artists also appear in Arnold's earlier work. However, in *Through the Looking Glass* (2004), Schmahmann does include a brief biography and two artworks of Jawahirlall, offering an in-depth analysis of her work, an appropriate treatment for an artist who received more recognition outside South Africa than within it.

The struggle to establish an identity, whether as an Indian, African, or a woman, is deeply tied to gender issues as well. Some Indian women artists identify as 'Black,' an all-encompassing term that includes all women of colour. Others prefer to identify as South African Indian or simply as South African, further complicating identity formation. This choice of identification is not merely a matter of personal preference but carries distinct political stakes. For many, adopting the label 'Black' offers access to shared political spaces of resistance developed during the anti-apartheid struggle and signals solidarity with other oppressed groups who fought for freedom and equality. Identifying as 'Black' can enable Indian women artists to align with collective struggles against systemic racism, claim political agency, and participate in broader movements for justice. However, others may reject this umbrella term to highlight the specificities of their own community's cultural heritage, migration histories, and ongoing

experiences of marginalisation. Choosing 'South African Indian' as a designation draws attention to the unique positionality of Indians in South Africa—neither white nor Black, but subject to a distinct set of social and legal constraints under apartheid and beyond. (Between Splitting and Lumping: The Naming and Framing of Coloureds and Indians Before Apartheid, 2022) It becomes a way to assert the visibility of experiences that are sometimes subsumed under broader categories and to resist erasure within multicultural narratives.

The complexities of identity—racial, national, and gendered—are thus evident in how Indian women artists choose to self-identify. For example, artist and scholar Sharlene Khan often identifies as Black within the South African context, not to erase her Indian heritage, but to align herself politically and socially with broader struggles against systemic racism and to claim solidarity with other marginalised communities (Khan, 2006). Her choice reflects a deliberate act of resistance against imposed racial categories and a refusal to be confined by apartheid-era classifications. In this way, the act of naming becomes a site of social negotiation and contestation, where different positionalities signal both the specific challenges and the possibilities for coalition-building within the ongoing struggle for recognition and justice.

Devarakshanam Govinden's *Sister Outsiders: The Representation of Identity and Difference in Selected Writings by South African Women* (2008) documents and analyses the literature of South African Indian women writers, setting a precedent for how the work of Indian artists should be approached. Govinden undertook this research because she believed that these artists had not been properly recognised, either locally or internationally, as part of the broader critique of South African culture and politics. She argued that in this period of ongoing change, it is imperative to incorporate these marginalised voices into critical discourse (Govinden 2008:2). Her approach thus provides a model for engaging with the visual arts of Indian women through a lens of representation, identity and cultural politics.

As South Africa transitioned out of apartheid in the 1990s, artists continued to explore the enduring legacies of segregation, displacement, and economic inequity. Today, their work not only recalls a painful past but also shapes conversations about reconciliation, nation-building, and social justice. By drawing on both local political conditions and international avant-garde influences, South African art remains deeply engaged in critiquing power structures and

imagining alternative futures. This creative tradition underscores the belief, embodied by so many resistance and feminist movements worldwide, that art can simultaneously illuminate inequality and serve as a catalyst for profound social change.

Feminist art historians such as Pollock (1988) and Chadwick (2012) argue that art can subvert patriarchal ideologies. In South Africa, artists like Berni Searle, Mary Sibande, and Usha Seejarim use visual media to interrogate race, gender, and identity. Through strategies such as large-scale self-portrait photographs enshrouded in richly textured spices (Searle) or life-sized sculptures and staged performances in vivid blue domestic uniforms (Sibande), these artists disrupt traditional gazes and invite viewers to engage sensorially with the material realities of women's lives. Sibande's imposing figures stand defiantly, their voluminous fabric challenging the expectations of servitude, while Searle's use of spices on skin foregrounds both embodied memory and cultural inscription. Such formal interventions ground their feminist critique in scale, surface, and performance, resisting marginalisation and creating alternative narratives of belonging. In the South African Indian context, these contributions reflect a dual critique: they confront both racial hierarchies and conservative cultural expectations. McFadden (1992) observes that, by melding personal experiences with social commentary, women artists assert their place in both global and local cultural histories.

This thesis examines how the art of South African Indian women engages with postcolonial critique by exposing historical erasures and challenging gendered norms. Through everyday materials, oral histories and personal memory, these artists politicise the domestic and assert visibility. By engaging with both local injustices and global dialogues on art and activism, these Indian and South African women artists not only confront oppressive ideologies but also expand the scope of feminist and postcolonial discourse. Their works exemplify the belief that visual media can serve as a catalyst for societal reflection, protest, and transformation. In doing so, they echo the avant-garde principle that creativity is not merely a personal pursuit but also a potent means of challenging entrenched systems of power.

Theoretical approaches drawn from postcolonial studies, African feminisms, intersectionality and autoethnography collectively frame this inquiry. These frameworks illuminate how women resist overlapping systems of oppression while asserting cultural agency through art. In

applying these theories, my analysis will involve a critical reading of selected artworks and narratives by South African Indian women artists, interpreting the visual, material, and narrative strategies through the lenses of postcolonial, feminist, and intersectional theory. I will use postcolonial theory to examine how artistic choices respond to, subvert, or complicate colonial representations and inherited power structures; African feminisms and intersectionality will guide analysis of how artists navigate the intersecting dynamics of race, gender, and class in their work and self-representation. Furthermore, I will deploy autoethnography and life writing as methodological frameworks by embedding my own subjectivity and lived experience within the analysis, drawing on personal and family archives to illustrate how individual memory intersects with collective histories. This multi-layered approach allows for a nuanced exploration of both the content of artworks and the contexts in which they are created and received.

Autobiography and autoethnography both foreground the interplay between individual experience and collective memory, illuminating how personal narratives can both reflect and shape broader social realities (Ellis, 2004; Holt, 2003). In the context of art, autobiography has traditionally served as a means for creators to embed fragments of their life stories into their work, whether in painting, sculpture, performance, or digital media (Adams, 1996; Miller, 1991). Such self-disclosures allow audiences to glean insight into the artist's emotional landscape, personal struggles, or cultural background, thereby fostering a more intimate and empathetic viewer engagement.

When autobiography transitions into autoethnography, the personal is deliberately situated within larger cultural and political contexts, transforming the artwork into an ethnographic artefact of sorts (Richardson, 1990). This shift broadens the scope of self-representation, compelling artists to examine how their individual histories, traumas, and triumphs intersect with communal narratives and cultural frameworks. Collective memory, in this sense, becomes both the backdrop and the subject of artistic inquiry, as creators not only reveal their inner lives but also comment on the shared experiences, social norms, and historical moments that have shaped their identities. By weaving together personal testimony with socio-political critique, autoethnographic art underscores how memory is a socially constructed phenomenon, one that emerges from the interplay of personal recollection, community storytelling, and national or

global histories (Ellis, 2004; Holt, 2003). Ultimately, such works help to expand our understanding of how individual stories resonate within and contribute to the cultural tapestry at large.

Autoethnography and life writing provide methodological approaches for reclaiming marginalised narratives and positioning personal histories within broader cultural, social, and political contexts. Life writing, encompassing autobiography, memoir, and personal narrative, serves as a vital tool for capturing the lived experiences of South African Indian women, whose histories have often been excluded from official records (Smith & Watson, 2010; Couser, 2012). Life writing, memoir, autobiography and autoethnography offer a counter-archive to dominant historical narratives (Smith and Watson, 2010; Couser, 2012). It transforms personal and communal memory into cultural critique, preserving experiences traditionally excluded from official records.

Through autoethnography, artists and writers can reflect on their personal experiences while critically engaging with the historical and cultural contexts that shape their identities. This approach aligns with the work of Ruth Simbao (2015), *What "Global Art" and Current (Re)turns Fail to See: A Modest Counter-Narrative to "Not-Another-Biennial"*. In this article, Simbao critiques dominant global art narratives and advocates for localised, personal narratives that challenge and disrupt prevailing historical frameworks. Her emphasis on counter-narratives aligns with the methodological approaches of autoethnography and life writing, which aim to centre personal histories within broader cultural, social, and political contexts and emphasise the significance of personal narratives in disrupting dominant histories and reshaping collective memory.

This thesis employs autoethnographic approaches to examine how everyday objects, such as coal irons, sewing machines, and cooking utensils, serve as markers of unacknowledged labour and cultural continuity. These items have become symbols of resistance and resilience, embodying the lived experiences of women and their ongoing efforts to preserve cultural heritage amid systemic erasure. Such material objects help construct a collective narrative that is not solely reliant on formal textual archives but instead reflects the lived realities of South African Indian women.

Moreover, the concept of post memory, as articulated by Marianne Hirsch (2012), underscores how descendants of marginalised communities inherit the emotional and psychological weight of historical trauma. Post memory emerges through a form of embodied witnessing, wherein the children and grandchildren of those who experienced violent upheavals, be it colonial dispossession, forced migration, or apartheid brutality, actively interpret and re-present the traumas of the past. Because they did not witness these events firsthand, memory is transmitted largely through stories, images, oral histories, and cultural artefacts. This concept is crucial for understanding how, in the works of Seejarim, Pillay, and Dass, younger generations of South African Indians use post-memory as a powerful artistic tool to disrupt official narratives and reclaim spaces where their communities' experiences have been marginalised or silenced. Thus, Hirsch's (2012) concept of post memory provides further insight. It describes how the descendants of trauma survivors inherit and reinterpret historical experiences through cultural expression. Therefore, postmemory enables the transmission of collective trauma and memory through stories, cultural artefacts, and artistic expressions, which serve as powerful tools for reconnecting with the past and healing generational wounds. Art thus becomes a form of embodied testimony. Through inherited memory and everyday objects, these artists draw attention to the unrecognised labour of women and the lingering effects of colonialism and apartheid. Their works not only reflect the past but also imagine more inclusive futures.

This thesis explores postmemory, shedding light on how creative expression can serve as a conduit for generational healing and cultural continuity. By delving into inherited memories, those that are both personally felt and collectively shared, these artists harness art-making as a form of critical testimony. Their work draws attention not only to the unseen labour of women within the domestic sphere but also to the complex legacies of displacement and discrimination that continue to reverberate in the present. In this way, post-memory-based art transforms individual acts of remembrance into collective reflections on identity, community, and social justice, affirming how personal narratives can challenge oppressive power structures and contribute to the ongoing project of decolonisation.

Collectively, the scholarship above converges around several themes. First, colonial histories and apartheid-era racial segregation, compounded by patriarchal norms, have created complex identity negotiations for South African women of Indian descent (De la Rey, 1997; hooks,

1981). Second, art emerges as profoundly political rather than purely aesthetic, providing a platform for women to critique exclusionary histories, reclaim personal narratives, and engage with feminist discourses (Pollock, 1988; Chadwick, 2012). Finally, postcolonial critiques underscore the importance of representation and authorship in dismantling entrenched colonial structures, highlighting autoethnographic art as a powerful means of challenging dominant narratives (Said, 1978; Bhabha, 1994).

While existing literature offers invaluable insights, several significant gaps persist. South African Indian histories have often been transmitted through oral storytelling, a mode of preservation that leaves few formal textual records (Meer, 2000). This practice means that women's narratives, particularly those around domestic work, intimate rituals, and community traditions, are "stored" in the body and in communal memory rather than in written archives (Smith & Watson, 2010). Contributing factors to the lack of textual documentation include historical disenfranchisement, limited access to formal education, and patriarchal norms that undervalued women's voices in print culture (Fatima Meer Foundation, 2015). Consequently, these stories may appear absent or invisible within mainstream historical accounts.

Public monuments and commemorative spaces, often shaped by dominant ideologies, are key sites of inquiry. Scholars such as Coombes (2003) and Nora (1989) show how monuments both reflect and shape collective memory, sometimes excluding marginalised voices. The absence thus extends beyond textual records: South African cities largely lack monuments or dedicated spaces commemorating Indian heroes, especially women. While individuals like Fatima Meer (1928–2010) and Amina Cachalia (1930–2013) made noteworthy contributions to anti-apartheid activism (Meer, 2000; Cachalia, 2013), few statues, plaques, or heritage sites exist to honour their legacies. This erasure underscores the broader social and political forces that shape which histories become "official," visual, and permanent, thereby perpetuating a sense of invisibility for these experiences.

This literature review underscores how South African Indian women's identities are shaped by colonialism, patriarchy and racial oppression. African feminisms and postcolonial critique offer tools to unpack these intersections, while art provides a platform for resistance and self-definition. Through visual art, life writing and memory work, South African Indian women

artists resist erasure and reclaim their histories. Their work affirms that personal experience is political and that storytelling, whether textual, visual or embodied, can challenge systemic inequality and catalyse social change.

Life writing, encompassing autobiography, autoethnography, memoir, and personal narrative, plays a pivotal role in capturing and transmitting experiences that have long been marginalised or silenced (Smith & Watson, 2010; Couser, 2012). In contexts such as South Africa, where oral storytelling has historically carried substantial cultural weight, life writing offers a complementary medium for preserving individual and collective memories, especially within Indian diasporic communities. By translating embodied knowledge and oral testimony into text, life writing actively resists institutional mechanisms of erasure and contributes a rich counter-archive to dominant historical narratives (hooks, 1995; Spivak, 1994). Importantly, this act of inscribing oral histories and lived experiences in writing is itself a political praxis: transforming the ephemeral into the permanent is a form of resistance against historical silencing, making the personal inherently political and asserting the right to be remembered.

In her work on African contemporary art, Ruth Simbao underscores the power of personal and embodied narratives in challenging dominant historical frameworks. For example, in her analysis of Igshaan Adams' *Bismillah* performance, Simbao (2015) explores how sensory engagement and autobiographical references in visual and performative art function as acts of resistance, subverting normative readings of identity and history. Rather than focusing solely on textual life writing, Simbao highlights the significance of "life expression" through performative, spiritual, and deeply personal artistic practices. This approach aligns with broader decolonial methodologies that seek to reclaim agency by centring lived experience, symbolic imagery, and communal memory-making in artistic production. Through such modes of self-representation, artists challenge hegemonic narratives and offer alternative archives of identity and belonging (Simbao, 2015; Simbao, 2017).

Moreover, life writing resonates with broader theoretical discussions in autobiography studies that highlight how identity is continuously constructed through narrative (Eakin, 1999; Bennett & Royle, 2009). As individuals recount their personal journeys, they simultaneously forge new understandings of the self and community, revealing layers of intersectional experience shaped

by factors such as race, gender, and class (Anderson, 2006). In South African contexts, this process is especially critical, given the overlapping histories of apartheid, colonialism, and migration that have impacted Indian, African, and other communities in complex ways (De la Rey, 1997). By allowing writers and artists to situate their experiences within these broader socio-political landscapes, life writing lays bare the collective repercussions of historical injustices while also proposing new visions for social transformation.

Expanded case studies focusing on individual South African Indian women artists who draw on oral histories, embodied memory, and family archives could offer deeper insight into these often-overlooked narratives. (Re-membering: Memory, Intimacy, Archive, 2017) Such research would illuminate how personal experiences and collective heritage intersect to inform creative processes and social critique. (Pillay, n.d.) While the primary scope of this thesis centres on the intersection of personal narrative, material culture, and artistic practice among South African Indian women, issues of cross-generational transmission and digital memory work are acknowledged as influential but remain outside the core analytical focus. The exploration of how younger South African Indians inherit, reinterpret, and rearticulate oral traditions in digital spaces such as social media, online repositories, and virtual exhibitions constitutes an important area that falls beyond the current boundaries of the thesis and is proposed as a direction for future research. Such future studies could investigate to what extent online platforms democratise or risk commodifying personal and communal histories, opening new questions about digital cultural preservation and innovation in diasporic communities.

This MA thesis aims to illuminate the multifaceted artistic and historical contributions of South African Indian women, examining how their personal and collective narratives challenge dominant perspectives of the past. In the process, it will investigate the concept of monuments as a crucial site of inquiry, given that public commemorative structures are far from straightforward commemorations of history. As scholars such as Coombes (2003) and Nora (1989) have shown, monuments function as contested spaces where memory, identity, and power converge, reflecting societal values and shaping collective memory in ways that can both acknowledge and obscure marginalised voices.

This literature review thus successfully underscores the complexity of South African Indian women's identities, shaped by the interlocking frameworks of indenture, colonialism, apartheid, and patriarchal power structures. African feminisms and intersectionality elucidate the converging forces that inform these women's lived experiences, while postcolonial theory foregrounds the significance of representation and cultural hybridity in dismantling entrenched colonial legacies. Art emerges as a profound site for both political contestation and personal expression, enabling women to weave personal narratives into wider socio-political commentaries. Autobiographical and autoethnographic methodologies further illuminate how life stories, oral traditions, and embodied memories become repositories of cultural knowledge. Significantly, the limited documentation of South African Indian histories, particularly concerning women, reveals a crucial gap in both academic and popular discourse. As a means to fill these silences, life writing can serve as an invaluable conduit, translating ephemeral oral accounts into lasting textual and visual forms.

Theoretical frameworks of art history and feminist theory emphasise the role of art in challenging patriarchal norms and dominant political ideologies. Feminist art history, as discussed by Pollock (1988) and Chadwick (2012), highlights how women artists use art to subvert traditional representations and assert their agency within both local and global cultural histories. In the South African context, artists like Berni Searle, Mary Sibande, and Usha Seejarim engage with issues of race, gender, and cultural identity, using art as a platform to critique social hierarchies and reclaim marginalised histories. Their works resonate with feminist and avant-garde movements, challenging colonial, patriarchal, and racialised narratives through subversive aesthetics and creative expression.

In this thesis, the art of South African Indian women is analysed as a means of engaging in postcolonial critique, questioning both the historical invisibility of their communities and the gendered dynamics that continue to shape their lives. By drawing on everyday objects, personal memories, and oral histories, these artists not only preserve cultural heritage but also politicise their personal stories, contributing to a broader discourse on decolonisation, gender equality, and social justice.

By integrating postcolonial theory, African feminisms, intersectionality, and autoethnography, this thesis provides a comprehensive theoretical framework for analysing the intersection of identity, memory, and gender in the lives of South African women of Indian descent. These frameworks collectively illuminate the complexities of navigating multiple systems of oppression while asserting cultural and political agency through art. Through the lens of these critical theories, the thesis highlights the importance of reclaiming personal and collective narratives, especially those marginalised by historical, racial, and gendered silences. Art, autobiography, and life writing emerge as powerful tools for challenging entrenched systems of power, offering new avenues for social transformation and cultural continuity.

Chapter 2: Visual Culture, History and Identity in the South African Indian Context

This chapter argues that to understand the shaping of identity among South Africans of Indian descent, it is essential to recognise how visual culture, colonial histories, and intersecting systems of power have produced fragmented yet resilient forms of self-definition, which continue to be negotiated across generations.

The historical landscape of South Africa reveals that the borders, categorisations, and structures established were not intended to reflect the lived realities of the governed populations. Instead, these mechanisms served the interests of colonial and apartheid regimes, functioning as deliberate tools of power to fracture communities, enforce hierarchies, and dictate social realities. To clarify the transition from questions of governance toward the construction of identity, it is helpful to foreground how each theoretical perspective illuminates these imposed categories. For example, Mahmood Mamdani (1996) contends that colonial and apartheid governance in South Africa sought not to integrate populations into a coherent system, but to institutionalise divisions through the creation of artificial racial and ethnic categories. In drawing out this point, Mamdani's analysis becomes crucial for understanding how governing techniques of separation translated directly into fragmented identities, with long-term consequences for how individuals and communities understood themselves and others. These structures prioritised the preservation of power through segregation and exclusion rather than logical governance, providing the foundation for the ongoing negotiation of identity in contemporary South Africa.

Colonial rule, apartheid, and their ongoing reverberations did not seek to create a society of reasoned order; instead, they imposed disorder under the guise of structure, ensuring that power remained concentrated in the hands of a few. Achille Mbembe (2001:27) describes this as the "commandment" of colonial and apartheid regimes, an arbitrary and violent assertion of control that manufactured chaos to justify continued domination. The Bantustan system, for instance, was not about self-governance but about reinforcing dependency and disempowerment (Posel, 2001:94).

Accordingly, the structure of this chapter does not adhere to a linear or seamless trajectory. Imposing a singular, chronological narrative would inaccurately suggest that South African history unfolded in an orderly manner. Instead, this chapter foregrounds the complexities,

intersections, and contradictions that define South Africa's past and present. As Stuart Hall (1996:4) notes, history is not static or linear but a contested space where meaning is continually negotiated. Engagement with history must account for the convergence and divergence of multiple forces—race, class, gender, geography, and resistance—that defy simple categorisation (Gqola, 2010:7). By embracing a fractured timeline, this chapter makes visible the hidden connections, lingering echoes, and ruptures that shape identity beyond the surface logic of cause and effect. Non-linearity thus enables a more nuanced understanding of how memory, trauma, and cultural practices are braided together, revealing how identities are constantly remade across time rather than simply inherited.

The chapter adopts multiple vantage points, intentionally disrupting expectations of linearity. History is examined as a web of overlapping narratives, where the reverberations of past injustices continue to shape contemporary realities. This deliberate non-linearity reflects both the constructed disorder of South Africa's history and ongoing efforts to reclaim, reframe, and resist imposed structures (Pillay, 2018:90).

The chapter begins by examining the interconnected colonial histories of South Africa and India, with particular attention to parallel experiences of exploitation, displacement, and resistance under British imperial rule. It outlines the divergent trajectories of colonialism in each country: land dispossession, labour exploitation, and racial segregation in South Africa; and economic upheaval, social fragmentation, and cultural suppression in India. The analysis then demonstrates how these histories converged through the Indian indentured labour trade in the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. Subsequently, the chapter highlights the roles of marginalised communities, particularly women, in resisting colonial oppression and preserving cultural practices. The discussion concludes by linking these historical foundations to contemporary contexts, focusing on the emergence of African feminisms and the role of art in identity formation and reclamation. Throughout, the central question animating this chapter is: How do legacies of forced separation and cultural negotiation across colonial histories become visible within processes of self-making for South Africans of Indian descent, especially as reflected through visual culture? By threading this question through each historical layer, the chapter underscores how every episode of displacement, adaptation, and resistance leaves traces that shape the forms of identity expressed in contemporary art. This contextual groundwork provides a basis for analysing selected artworks by South African women of

Indian heritage, who draw on these intertwined legacies to articulate new forms of resistance and self-expression.

South Africa's colonial history is marked by aggressive expansionist ventures led by European powers, principally the Netherlands, Portugal, and Britain, who sought to exploit the region's land, resources, and people (Welsh, 1971). Beginning in 1652, the Dutch East India Company established a settlement at the Cape of Good Hope, unleashing violent dispossession and displacement upon the indigenous Khoikhoi and San. This era of Dutch control also intersected with the wider Indian Ocean slave trade; enslaved individuals were forcibly brought from the Indian subcontinent and other regions of Asia, creating a diverse and coerced labour force that underpinned the colony's early development.

This created a vast network that predated and paralleled the Atlantic slave trade (Campbell, 2004; Harris, 2003). Enslaved individuals were forcibly transported from various locations across the Indian Ocean basin, including East Africa, the Indian subcontinent, Madagascar, and Southeast Asia, to bolster the labour needs of colonial enterprises. At the Cape, these enslaved workers were crucial to the establishment of commercial agriculture, construction projects, and domestic service, further embedding slavery into the colony's early economic and social structures (Shell, 1994).

British imperial interests gradually eclipsed Dutch authority, culminating in the formal annexation of the Cape Colony in 1806 (Nolte, 1997). The subsequent discoveries of diamonds in 1867 and gold in 1886 intensified the scramble for control over land and resources, exacerbating tensions between the British and the Afrikaners. These tensions erupted into two major conflicts, historically termed the Anglo-Boer Wars (1880–1881; 1899–1902), but now more appropriately referred to as the South African Wars or the South African War, to reflect the broader racial and political dynamics involved (Nasson, 1999; SAHO, 2024). The wars inflicted severe human suffering, most notably through the establishment of British concentration camps where thousands of women and children, Black, Coloured and white, were detained under dire conditions (Arnold, 1996; Nasson, 1999). For Indigenous South Africans, colonial expansion and militarised conquest further entrenched dispossession, systemic violence and socio-economic exploitation.

The 1913 Natives Land Act exemplified this process by limiting African land ownership to a mere seven per cent of the country (Tayal, 1979). Consequently, many Black South Africans were compelled to labour in white-owned farms and mines, perpetuating systemic poverty and marginalisation. Although colonial policies often aimed to erode Indigenous cultural institutions, African communities maintained their languages, customs, and art forms as potent means of resistance (hooks, 1994; Gqola, 2018). In parallel, people of Indian descent, initially brought to the Cape as slaves by the Dutch East India Company in the 17th and 18th centuries, and later as indentured labourers under British rule beginning in 1860, also forged vibrant cultural traditions that became integral to South Africa's multifaceted social tapestry.

This pattern, where legal exclusion attempts to suppress cultural and artistic forms, sets the stage for the next sections, making visible how dispossession and marginalisation are countered by resilience through expression. By highlighting the endurance of creative practices despite adverse policy, the following discussion traces the ways cultural identity and artistic resistance continue to define and reshape South African Indian experiences.

The Indian Ocean slave trade played a pivotal role in shaping South Africa's early colonial economy and demographics, linking the Cape settlement to broader networks of forced labour that extended across Africa and Asia (Campbell, 2004). While enslaved people at the Cape came from many regions, such as Madagascar, Mozambique, and Southeast Asia, a significant number also originated from the Indian subcontinent. These individuals were typically procured from coastal areas such as the Coromandel Coast and the Malabar Coast, and, to a lesser extent, from territories including Bengal and the Portuguese enclaves of Goa and Daman (Harris, 2003; Shell, 1994).

Enslavers targeted these Indian regions for various reasons. First, the Dutch East India Company (VOC) and other European powers had established trading posts and alliances along the Indian coastline, facilitating the capture and purchase of enslaved people. Second, Indian ports already had long-established maritime trade connections, making them accessible nodes within the existing Indian Ocean trading networks (Campbell, 2004). Once in South Africa, specifically at the Cape Colony, enslaved Indian men, women, and children were put to work in agriculture, domestic service, and construction, fulfilling the colony's labour demands and bolstering commercial enterprises. Laws and regulations not only permitted but actively

incentivised the ownership of enslaved people, thus entrenching a system in which individuals from the Indian subcontinent were forcibly uprooted from their homelands (Shell, 1994).

While slavery was officially abolished in the Cape Colony in 1834, the demand for cheap labour persisted, especially in the sugar cane plantations of Natal (later KwaZulu-Natal). In the mid-1800s, sugar planters in Natal faced a significant labour shortage. Local populations either refused to work on plantations or sought alternative employment, prompting colonial authorities to look elsewhere. Inspired by labour arrangements in Mauritius and other British colonies, Natal legislators turned to India for a steady supply of indentured workers (Desai & Vahed, 2010). From 1860 onwards, the British colonial government introduced a system of indenture to recruit Indian labourers. Initially recruited from regions such as Tamil Nadu, Andhra Pradesh and Uttar Pradesh, Indian indentured labourers were bound by five-year contracts that required them to work under often harsh conditions on sugar cane plantations in Natal. Upon completing the initial term, they were not immediately granted full freedom; rather, they could choose to re-indenture for another five years or, after completing ten years of service in total, become eligible for free return passage to India (Bhana and Brain, 1990). Although indenture was legally distinct from chattel slavery, the exploitative conditions, long hours, meagre wages, and restrictive living environments mirrored many of the oppressive dynamics of slavery (Vahed, 2001).

Natal passed legislation to formalise the recruitment of indentured labour from India. The Natal Legislative Council authorised agents to recruit and transport Indian labourers under specific contractual terms. Over time, a series of ordinances and amendments shaped the conditions of these agreements (Bhana & Brain, 1990). The first group of indentured labourers arrived in Natal on November 16, 1860. Indenture recruitment continued until 1911 (with a few pauses), bringing an estimated 150,000 Indian workers to South Africa by the time the system formally ended. 21 July 1911 is known as the formal end date of new indentured immigration into Natal. That is typically cited as the date on which the very last group of Indian indentured labourers arrived, bringing recruitment under the system to a close. (Tinker, 1974). Although the indenture officially ended in 1911, Indians in South Africa were granted permanent residency only in 1961. To oversee their affairs, the National Party established the South African Indian Council. (Indian Indentured Labour in Natal 1860-1911, 2011) (Indian Indentured Labour in Natal 1860-1911, 2011)

The Indian community in South Africa has historically been diverse, contrary to the common perception of them as a homogenous group. The first wave of Indian migrants arrived as indentured labourers between 1860 and 1911, primarily from Hindu backgrounds, speaking Tamil, Telugu, or Hindi. These workers were brought under contract to work in labour-intensive industries such as sugarcane plantations and railway construction. Later, passenger Indians—who came voluntarily as traders, priests, and businessmen—were often Muslim or Gujarati Hindus and arrived primarily between the late 19th and early 20th centuries.
In India, the rigid caste system structured social hierarchies, and this division extended to the Indian diaspora. However, upon arriving in South Africa, migrants had to navigate new social dynamics, often relinquishing traditional caste distinctions to establish connections within their community. Despite this, language and religion remained central to identity formation, with many continuing to identify as Hindu, Muslim, or Christian. Over time, caste distinctions evolved into class-based hierarchies, particularly as passenger Indians—whether from the educated Brahmin caste or affluent Muslim merchant families—perceived themselves as socially superior to indentured labourers (Desai & Vahed, 2007, p. 188).

Despite the economic and social divide between passenger Indians and indentured labourers, both groups faced racial discrimination under colonial and later apartheid rule. However, passenger Indians generally had greater access to resources and political influence, enabling them to resist oppressive laws more effectively. Their presence played a significant role in shaping the broader South African Indian identity, though class distinctions within the community persisted well into the 20th century (Desai & Vahed, 2007, p. 188).

While much of the scholarship highlights the economic and political differences between these groups, it is also important to note how colonial patriarchy produced distinct and sometimes competing gendered expectations for women of different backgrounds. For Indian women—particularly those arriving as indentured labourers—cultural norms often emphasised domestic roles and the preservation of familial traditions, even as women were required to undertake arduous plantation work and help sustain household incomes. At the same time, caste hierarchies from India intersected with the realities of class and colonial structures, shaping both social mobility and the kinds of labour women could access; for example, women from so-called lower-caste or Dalit backgrounds often performed the most precarious and physically

demanding tasks. In contrast, passenger Indian women, typically from higher castes or merchant classes, were sometimes afforded more educational opportunities or roles in religious and community leadership, though they too navigated patriarchal constraints.

These overlapping axes of class, caste, and gender fundamentally influenced not only the lived realities of women but also the kinds of artistic expression and cultural production that emerged within their communities. The ways women were positioned—whether as labourers, caregivers, or community leaders—shaped the imagery, themes, and materials present in their artistic practices. For African women under colonial rule, intersectional dynamics were similarly pronounced: they navigated a dual burden of imposed labour in white-owned farms and mines and the erosion of communal authority structures, which had previously afforded some women significant social and economic roles. Both communities experienced efforts to police women's mobility and sexuality, but the specific forms and justifications differed, often shaped by intersecting racial and cultural ideologies. Understanding these shared and divergent pressures, shaped by the interplay of gender, race, class, and (in the Indian context) caste, sharpens focus on how later generations of women artists from both communities would use visual practices to challenge and reimagine inherited roles.

Men initially formed the majority of the labour force, but growing numbers of women migrated under later ordinances. This facilitated the establishment of family units among the indentured community. Social networks and cultural practices from India were gradually recreated in Natal, laying the foundations of a South African Indian community that persists today (Desai & Vahed, 2010). Pressures from Indian nationalists, humanitarian activists, and critics within the British government led to the decision to end new recruitments in 1911. Some indentured labourers returned to India, but many remained in South Africa (Tinker, 1974). Indians who elected to stay in Natal began establishing small businesses and farming independently, shaping the region's cultural and economic landscape. Over time, the Indian community in KwaZulu-Natal established enduring cultural, religious, and economic networks. Their experiences, though distinct, were woven into the broader tapestry of colonial oppression and resilience, demonstrating how enslaved and marginalised groups drew on diverse cultural traditions to navigate and resist subjugation (Campbell, 2004; Shell, 1994).

The unfamiliar and often hostile African landscape that Indian immigrants encountered prompted them to recreate aspects of their familiar cultures and traditions. (Liu, 2023) Scholar Sudesh Mishra, in *Diaspora Criticism*, describes this process as the creation of "cultural markers" that "transform alienating territory into hospitable terrain" (quoted in Desai & Vahed 2007: 413). One of the ways they achieved this was by constructing shrines, temples, and mosques, many of which began as modest, single-roomed structures filled with the scent of incense and the cool, smooth feel of polished stone or painted plaster underfoot. Early mornings might be punctuated by the sound of ringing bells or the soft mumble of prayer, while the gentle flicker of lamps illuminated garlanded idols and hand-stitched tapestries. As communities gradually prospered, these places of worship evolved into more elaborate buildings resembling those in India, echoing with familiar chants and layered with the warmth of sandalwood against the smells of earth after the rain. Wealthier individuals who travelled back to India brought religious icons and imagery, which were either circulated or locally reproduced, their lacquered surfaces reflecting the dancing glow of candlelight. Other cultural practices, such as traditional dance, music, and attire, were similarly preserved—the metallic chime of ankle bells, the rustle of silk saris, the vibrant patterns and beadwork catching light during festivals, the aroma of jasmine woven into braids. These sensory memories helped transform unfamiliar spaces into lived homes, cultivating an atmosphere of belonging even in distant soil. However, by 1913, when Indian immigration to South Africa had ceased, many Indians had been in the country for nearly 50 years. For many, India no longer held a tangible presence in their socio-political consciousness; instead, it existed as "a pure imaginary space of epic plenitude" (Vijay Mishra quoted in Desai & Vahed 2007: 413) (Mishra, 2007).

Those who chose to remain in South Africa after completing their indenture faced ongoing racial discrimination, initially under colonial legislation and later through the institutionalised segregation of apartheid. The legacy of indenture influenced social, economic, and political dynamics within the emerging South African nation, shaping an Indian diaspora with strong cultural ties and a distinct identity (Bhana, 1991). The descendants of indentured labourers played a significant role in South Africa's economic growth, notably in the sugar industry, commerce, and later professional sectors. They also preserved India's linguistic, religious, and cultural traditions. (Desai & Vahed, 2010).

Although the system formally provided contractual protection, in practice, it often exposed workers to harsh conditions and limited their freedom. The terms of indenture, five years of contracted labour, minimum (and often exploitative) wages, the option (in theory) to return home, and restricted civil liberties collectively shaped the historical experiences of these early migrants and their descendants. Today, discussions about the indenture system illuminate the complex interplay between colonial economic structures, racialised labour policies, and the resilience of indentured communities. The story of indenture in South Africa is not only about exploitation but also about adaptation, community-building, and the forging of new identities in the diaspora. These legacies continue to inform contemporary South African Indian identity, both in everyday life and in artistic practices. The memory of indenture persists in family stories, community rituals, and the recurring themes of displacement, resilience, and hybridity that appear in the visual art of South African Indian creators. (Cohen, 2021) By drawing on the complexities of the past, present-day artists and cultural practitioners engage with inherited trauma and transformation, using visual culture to both preserve ancestral narratives and critically reimagine identity in a modern, plural South Africa.

For Indian South Africans, colonial rule entrenched socio-economic disenfranchisement and cultural marginalisation. Although the 1913 Natives Land Act primarily targeted Black African communities, it foreshadowed a broader legislative framework that would soon restrict Indian rights as well (Tayal, 1979). Under successive governments, Indians faced discriminatory policies, including limitations on property ownership, such as those imposed by the Asiatic Land Tenure and Indian Representation Act of 1946, which confined Indian's to overcrowded and under-resourced areas. By 1946, for example, Indian ownership was restricted to just 1.5% of the land in Natal, despite the province having a much larger Indian population. This stark figure underscores how legal measures translated into measurable, entrenched marginalisation.

This spatial and economic confinement, paired with ongoing prejudice, forced many Indians into limited employment opportunities, often as small-scale traders or wage labourers in urban centres. Yet, despite the colonial and later apartheid regimes' attempts to suppress their cultural and religious practices, Indian communities retained vibrant languages, customs, and artistic expressions as forms of both self-definition and resistance. While the labour of these Indian migrants was indispensable to the development of South Africa's sugar industry, colonial authorities confined the community to socio-economic margins, reinforcing parallels between

the segregation of Indians and that of the Black majority. Notwithstanding these oppressive conditions, the Indian diaspora retained vital cultural practices, such as religious ceremonies, festivals, and languages, that shaped the social and cultural landscape of KwaZulu-Natal (McFadden, 1992).

India's colonial history under British rule was similarly characterised by disruptions across social, economic, and political spheres. By the 1870s, British colonialism had reached nearly every aspect of Indian life, with exploitative land taxes alienating the lower castes from their ancestral lands and forcing many into cycles of debt (Richardson, 1982; Crenshaw, 1989). Concurrent famines underscored the catastrophic impact of British economic and administrative policies. Moreover, the emphasis on imported British industrial goods undermined local artisans and craftspeople, reducing India to a source of raw materials and a captive market for Western industrial capitalism (Collins, 1990). The destruction of India's textile industry offers a telling example: the once-flourishing centres of handwoven cloth production, such as Bengal and the Deccan, saw their livelihoods devastated as British machine-made textiles flooded the market. Traditionally, weavers, dyers, and embroiderers found themselves unable to compete with factory-produced imports, resulting in widespread economic displacement and the loss of artisanal skills and traditions. Objects like the finely woven muslin from Dhaka or intricately patterned chintz fabrics, both globally renowned before the colonial era, became symbols of a material culture disrupted by imperial intervention. This commodification and decline of indigenous textile arts not only reshaped the colonial economy but also left enduring marks on Indian cultural identity—a legacy that resonates in contemporary artistic practices and forms a crucial context for later visual analyses.

Although pre-colonial Indian society was largely feudal and patriarchal, women in Adivasi (original inhabitants) communities, lower castes, and matrilineal regions of South India assumed influential roles (Mama, 2001). During the colonial era, however, the "woman question" emerged as a contentious issue among British administrators, missionaries, and Indian reformers, who treated practices such as widow incarceration, sati, and purdah (discussed below) as emblematic of India's need for "modernisation" (Desai & Vahed, 2010).

The “woman question” broadly refers to the debates and discourses surrounding women’s roles, rights, and status in Indian society, particularly under British colonial rule (Desai & Vahed, 2010). For colonial officials, it became closely tied to their self-identified mission of “civilising” India, whereas Indian reformers often engaged with these debates as part of broader socio-political and nationalist movements. Practices such as widow incarceration, sati, and purdah historically served to control women’s social, economic, and personal autonomy across various parts of South Asia (Sarkar, 2001; Chakravarti, 1998). Widow incarceration, sometimes referred to as “widow seclusion,” confined widows to specific living quarters or ashrams, severely limiting their social interactions and economic opportunities (Chakravarti, 1998).

Sati involved the now-prohibited custom of a widow self-immolating on her deceased husband’s funeral pyre, often framed as an act of ultimate devotion but frequently coercive in practice and eventually outlawed by colonial and postcolonial governments in 1829 (Mani, 1998; Harding, 1999). Purdah, practised by some Hindu, Muslim, and other communities, entails both physical and social segregation, sometimes enforced through veiling, which is justified in the name of modesty yet criticised for restricting women’s autonomy and freedom of movement (Sarkar, 2001; Hasan, 1994). Although these customs have, to varying degrees, diminished under the impact of social reforms, legal interventions, and evolving cultural attitudes, they remain significant for understanding historical and ongoing debates about women’s rights in the region (Narayan, 1997). Overall, these debates (often sensationalised) reflect a complex interplay of colonial power dynamics and indigenous social structures, highlighting the multifaceted nature of reform and resistance during this era (Desai & Vahed, 2010).

In both South Africa and India, local economies and social structures were destabilised by colonial exploitation. The poorer Indian community lost their lands to exploitative taxation, which disproportionately burdens and takes advantage of certain groups, often leaving them with minimal or no benefits in return (Rodney, 1972; Mamdani, 1996). Under colonial rule, this frequently manifested as excessive or discriminatory taxes imposed on local populations, particularly those with limited economic power or political representation (Bates, 2000). The primary goal was to extract wealth or resources for the colonial administration or ruling elite, rather than to foster local development (Rodney, 1972). As a result, such practices not only

strained the finances of these communities but also contributed to widespread dispossession, poverty, and social upheaval (Mamdani, 1996). Similar to how Africans were dispossessed by laws like the 1913 Natives Land Act (Welsh, 1971). Although colonial regimes in both India and South Africa sought to dismantle local institutions, indigenous and migrant communities in these regions continued to uphold fundamental cultural practices, oral traditions, religious rites, and artistic expressions that became pivotal points of resistance and collective identity. These parallel experiences reveal how colonialism not only connected distant parts of the colonial realm but also facilitated overlapping struggles and cross-cultural exchanges.

In South Africa, Black, Coloured, and Indian women played key roles in anti-colonial and later anti-apartheid efforts (Meer, 2000). While colonial-era patriarchy proved oppressive, it paradoxically propelled these women into pivotal positions during strikes, uprisings, and organised protests. A prime example is the 1913 anti-pass law protest in Bloemfontein. It was a pivotal moment in South African history, marking one of the earliest recorded instances of women's collective resistance to racial oppression. Led by Charlotte Maxeke, a pioneering activist and educator, Black and Coloured women united against the government's attempt to extend pass laws to women, a move that threatened their freedom of movement and economic independence (Wells, 1993). Among the Coloured women engaged in early resistance was Katie Jacobs, who later became a key figure in broader anti-pass campaigns. These women organised mass meetings, staged protests, and burned their passports in defiance of the authorities. The protest scene was charged with tension: the brittle rustle of paper passports, held in determined hands, cracked in the cool morning air. Sparks leapt up as the small booklets were set alight, their ash spiralling upward amid the chanting and the shouts of police officers. The acrid scent of burning paper mingled with the determined voices of women refusing to be silenced, making the moment both defiant and unforgettable. Through acts like these, they laid the foundation for future women's activism, including the 1956 Women's March and the broader anti-apartheid struggle (Gasa, 2007). Maxeke's leadership in this protest also led to the formation of the Bantu Women's League, a forerunner to the African National Congress Women's League, further institutionalising Black women's resistance (Walker, 1991).

While Black and Coloured women were at the forefront of the 1913 Bloemfontein anti-pass protest, the Indian community was notably absent due to distinct political struggles and geographic constraints. At the time, the majority of South African Indians resided in Natal and

the Transvaal, while the Bloemfontein protest took place in the Orange Free State—a region that had formally prohibited Indian settlement since 1888 (Desai and Vahed, 2010). Moreover, while Black and Coloured women were mobilising against the extension of pass laws, Indian and Chinese communities were simultaneously engaged in their own resistance against racially targeted legislation, particularly the so-called Asiatic Laws. These included discriminatory regulations such as compulsory registration, restrictions on movement and trading, and the £3 tax imposed on formerly indentured Indians (Swan, 1985).

In 1913, Mahatma Gandhi launched a significant phase of the Satyagraha campaign in response to these injustices, particularly the £3 tax and the non-recognition of Indian marriages under South African law. This movement gained momentum with the involvement of women such as Kasturba Gandhi and Veerammal Naidoo, who played leading roles in civil disobedience campaigns. Their efforts culminated in the historic Great March of 1913, in which thousands of Indian workers and their families marched from Natal into the Transvaal (Bhana, 1997). The resistance also saw solidarity across Asian communities, as Chinese South Africans similarly challenged restrictions imposed under the Asiatic Registration Act, drawing parallels between their struggles and those of the Indian population (Hofmeyr, 2006). This period marked an important chapter in multiracial resistance to colonial racial categorisation and control.

These parallel struggles reflect the racially segregated nature of early resistance movements in South Africa, where different communities fought against distinct forms of oppression. However, as the 20th century progressed, solidarity between oppressed racial groups grew stronger. By the 1950s, organisations such as the Congress Alliance, which united the African National Congress (ANC), the South African Indian Congress (SAIC), and the Coloured People's Congress, fostered greater cooperation in the broader fight against apartheid (Lodge, 1983). The 1913 Bloemfontein protest and the Indian Satyagraha movement were both instrumental in shaping South Africa's history of resistance. Though these movements unfolded separately, they set important precedents for later trans-racial alliances, demonstrating the power of collective action in the fight against racial and gender-based oppression.

In South Africa, the terms "Black," "Coloured," and "Indian" were formalised through colonial and later apartheid-era legislation, most notably the Population Registration Act of 1950, to

classify and segregate communities along rigid racial lines (Posel, 2001). Under this system, "Black" referred primarily to Bantu-speaking Africans, "Coloured" signified people of mixed ancestry (including Khoikhoi, San, enslaved Africans, and Southeast Asians), and "Indian" denoted those tracing their heritage to the Indian subcontinent (Erasmus, 2001). In other regions, different naming conventions and cultural histories inform identity designations. For example, individuals classified as "Indian" in South Africa may be referred to as "South Asian" elsewhere, while "Coloured" populations with genealogical links to Southeast Asia may be identified as "Malay" or "Eurasians" in countries such as Malaysia or Singapore. Similarly, the term "Black" in South Africa is often used interchangeably with "African," though these terms can carry distinct connotations in both local and global contexts (Posel, 2001). These naming conventions emerged from historical processes of legal codification, social discrimination, and self-identification, illustrating the intersection of power and culture in the labelling of communities and the shaping of collective identities.

In Indenture Aesthetics: Cultural Expression in Indian South African Post-Apartheid Public Spheres (Ellapen, 2023), the author examines how the label "Indian" in South Africa is both a product of colonial-apartheid naming regimes and an evolving marker of diasporic identity. Historically, South African authorities employed terms such as "Asiatic" or "Asiatic labourer," particularly in reference to those who arrived under indenture contracts beginning in the 1860s. Over time, "Indian" became a statutory category under apartheid legislation, reinforcing racial hierarchies while consolidating diverse linguistic, regional and caste groups from the Indian subcontinent into one official racial group. Within post-apartheid public discourse and cultural production, "Indian" remains a dynamic identity marker that encompasses the legacies of indenture, the cultural imprints of South Asia and the lived realities of a community positioned at the intersection of South African nationhood and global diasporic ties.

Ellapen's work underscores that these naming practices are not merely administrative; they shape how people of Indian descent in South Africa articulate belonging, memory and heritage in ways that continue to evolve in the post-apartheid era. Similarly, the term "Black" has undergone a significant transformation in South Africa, from being a label of marginalisation and legal exclusion under apartheid to becoming a broad, strategic political identity in the post-1994 democratic era. While historically used to denote African populations exclusively, the Black Consciousness Movement of the 1970s (led by figures such as Steve Biko) expanded the

term to include all racially oppressed people, including Indians and Coloureds, as part of a unified resistance to white supremacy. Today, “Black” continues to function both as a political category of solidarity and, at times, a contested term that reflects ongoing negotiations around race, privilege and marginalisation in a democratic South Africa.

In examining the complex tapestry of South Africa’s diaspora, particularly around official racial labels like “Indian,” “Coloured,” and “Black”, it is essential to situate these within broader histories of oceanic trade, colonialism, and cultural exchange. Achille Mbembe (2005) observes that Africa’s encounter with populations from Asia, the Middle East, and Europe spans centuries, culminating in varied diasporic communities whose multiple “ways of being and doing” profoundly shape what it means to be African. Diaspora in this sense is not merely a question of arrival or a single point of origin; rather, it involves ongoing processes of negotiation between “societies of origin” and new environments, producing hybrid and evolving identities.

One concept that underscores the deep, interwoven histories of the Indian Ocean world is “Arafrasian” or “Arafrasia,” a term coined by Achille Mbembe in 2000 to highlight the enduring connections among Arab, African and Asian societies (Mbembe, 2005). Long before the arrival of European powers such as Portugal, the Netherlands, and Britain, Arab, South Asian, and East African traders had established extensive intercultural links through sophisticated maritime networks (Chaudhuri, 1985; Pearson, 2003). These routes formed a dynamic commercial ecosystem, prompting many historians to characterise the Indian Ocean as a “cradle of globalisation” (Mbembe, 2005; Alpers, 2014). A key driver of this early global exchange was the spice trade, which connected distant regions through the pursuit of highly prized goods such as pepper, cloves, cinnamon, and nutmeg (Chaudhuri, 1985). Spices were not merely lucrative commodities but also conduits for the exchange of knowledge, technologies, and cultural practices. Arab merchants carried these goods across the Red Sea into the Mediterranean, while Indian and Southeast Asian communities supplied aromatics esteemed for their culinary, medicinal, and ritual purposes. Along East Africa’s Swahili Coast, local products like gold and ivory mingled with spices, weaving African economies into a wider web of trade and cultural reciprocity (Pearson, 2003).

Within this cosmopolitan maritime arena, the Cape of Good Hope emerged as an essential hub of exchange. Known at various times as "Cabo Tormentoso" or the "Cape of Storms," it challenged sailors with its tumultuous waters but served as a meeting point for vessels travelling between the Atlantic and Indian Oceans (Mbembe, 2005). By the time the Portuguese, Dutch, and British began laying colonial foundations, the region was already marked by a rich tapestry of transoceanic interactions, evident in its ports, harbours, and coastal societies (Alpers, 2014). Taken together, these elements demonstrate that "Arafrasia" denotes much more than simple geographic proximity; it evokes a deep-rooted heritage of connectivity, cultural negotiation, and commercial exchange that predates the subsequent European age of exploration. By foregrounding the centrality of the spice trade within these maritime networks, we see how commerce and culture traversed the Indian Ocean, intertwining the fates of Arab, African, and Asian communities long before Western powers exerted their colonial influence (Chaudhuri, 1985; Mbembe, 2005; Pearson, 2003; Alpers, 2014).

Although Thania Petersen is not of Indian descent, her work has been included in this discussion to foreground the broader processes of creolisation and diasporic memory that connect Southern Africa to Southeast Asia. Her artistic practice speaks powerfully to themes of displacement, ancestral resistance, and cultural hybridity, concerns that resonate across multiple diasporic communities, including South African Indian ones. In her *I Am Royal* series (2015), Petersen invokes her lineage as a descendant of Tuan Guru, an exiled Southeast Asian royal, using performative photography to assert a dignified, embodied presence within the Cape landscape. Donning ceremonial attire sourced from the Indonesian Embassy, Petersen stages herself in visually potent portraits that confront the colonial relegation of Cape Malays to ornamental figures within aestheticised, picturesque landscapes (Simbao, 2025).

Petersen's work is particularly relevant to the South African Indian context because it highlights how visual culture can be used to reclaim identity and assert belonging in the aftermath of forced migration and cultural erasure. Like the Cape Malay community, South Africans of Indian descent have ancestries marked by displacement across oceans, the imposition of new identities under colonial rule, and ongoing negotiation of cultural memory within a society structured by racial hierarchies. The performative and restorative gestures in Petersen's art parallel the strategies adopted by Indian South African artists, who similarly engage with themes of fragmented belonging, ancestral pride, and the creative reimagining of

marginalised identities. By drawing an analytical bridge between Petersen's photographic practice and the work of artists from the Indian diaspora, it becomes possible to see how shared histories of creolisation and resistance are visually articulated, illuminating complex and often entangled processes of identity formation in South Africa.

Fig.1 Thania Petersen, *I AM ROYAL SELF PORTRAIT* 1, inkjet print on Epson Hotpress, 89 × 61 cm / 150 × 100 cm (2015)

Petersen's work highlights the emergence of creolised identities resulting from colonial-era interactions across the Indian Ocean. Here, creolisation refers not only to linguistic blending but to a multifaceted process in which African, Asian, and European cultural influences combined to generate new and dynamic traditions (Hannerz, 1992; Glissant, 1997; Simbao, 2025). These identities, shaped by forced migration, spiritual memory, and resistance, are exemplified in Petersen's reclamation of historical figures such as Tuan Guru, whose exile to the Cape by Dutch authorities and subsequent contributions to Cape Muslim intellectual and spiritual life represent significant acts of anti-colonial agency.

Before delving further, it is helpful to map how the concepts of land, embodiment, and archive will be woven together in this section. To provide clarity and guide the reader, this section will be structured in three main analytical steps. First, I will examine how Petersen's artistic engagement with land operates as both a physical and symbolic site, focusing on its significance as a ground for reclamation. Second, I will explore the embodied practices that manifest through her work, such as gestures, presence, and performance, and consider how these acts function as forms of resistance and self-definition. Third, I will address how these

embodied experiences are recorded, remembered, and circulated through visual culture, ultimately building an archive that holds creolised memory and layered geographies. By interrelating these analytic threads, I aim to show how such practices are central to postcolonial South African identity formation.

Petersen's engagement with land as both site and symbol, particularly in exhibitions such as *Between Land and a Raised Foot*, demonstrates how embodied acts such as standing, walking, and marching serve as forms of political and spiritual reclamation (Simbao, 2025). This perspective advances the understanding of visual culture as an archive of creolised memory and underscores the necessity of incorporating these layered geographies and legacies in analyses of postcolonial South African identity formation.

2.1 Framing Memory, Diaspora, and Resistance: Photography as Counter-Archive in Postcolonial South Africa

Photography is central to Petersen's construction and interrogation of identity within postcolonial and diasporic contexts. As a visual storytelling medium, photography enables her to restage history through bodily presence and dress, thereby blurring the boundaries between performance, portraiture, and archival reclamation. Petersen's practice aligns with Roland Barthes's (1981) conceptualisation of photography as a "theatre" of self-presentation, wherein the subject simultaneously reveals and conceals aspects of identity. In her work, this performative staging is closely linked to histories of forced migration, enslavement, and creolisation. By positioning herself in elaborate, culturally symbolic attire within specific Cape landscapes, Petersen references the traumatic legacies of colonial displacement while reclaiming visibility and agency. The resulting imagery conveys both the scars of historical violence and the adaptive strength and aesthetic innovation inherent in creolised cultural identities.

This performative engagement with identity parallels Paul Gilroy's (1993) concept of "double consciousness" and Frantz Fanon's (1967) articulation of "non-being." While Gilroy elucidates how diasporic or racially marginalised individuals perceive themselves through both their own cultural lens and the dominant, often prejudiced, perspective, Fanon's notion of "non-being" addresses the existential predicament of colonised or subjugated peoples whose sense of

personhood is diminished within hegemonic power structures. In reading these frameworks alongside Petersen's work, I see a productive tension: by inhabiting both the histories imposed upon her and her own lived experience, Petersen refuses any single, flattened narrative of selfhood. My view is that Petersen's practice demonstrates how occupying this in-between space is not simply a burden but can be a generative act, cultivating new subjectivities in response to, and in defiance of, structures of domination. Collectively, these frameworks highlight the tension between overlapping histories and the contemporary realities that continue to shape diasporic identities. In Petersen's photographic compositions, the Cape's colonial legacy, deeply entwined with broader imperial histories, remains a tangible force, evoking the region's enduring experiences of dispossession and enslavement. However, rather than focusing exclusively on historical trauma, Petersen affirms a dynamic heritage shaped by creolisation. This ongoing cultural blending and reinvention demonstrates the enduring agency of communities historically relegated to the margins, transforming narratives of oppression into assertions of identity and collective empowerment (Smith, 2022).

In summary, these theoretical frameworks provide the analytical lens through which I interpret Petersen's art. By explicitly drawing on Gilroy's and Fanon's insights, I approach Petersen's self-portraiture as a conscious negotiation between histories of subjugation and the creative possibilities of hybridity. My analysis thus emphasises how Petersen both embodies and exceeds these theoretical positions, using her photographic practice to destabilise imposed identities and to assert complex, ongoing forms of selfhood within postcolonial South Africa.

These artistic interventions underscore the historical and political significance of naming practices, which reflect centuries of mercantile exchange, coerced labour, and cultural intermingling (Posel, 2001). They also reveal the limitations inherent in attempts to categorise identity rigidly. As Mbembe (2005) observes, Africa's multiple diasporas maintain complex relationships with ancestral homelands, local communities, and the global context. Situated within this interzone—what historian Michael Pearson (2006) describes as a "littoral society" that navigates between land and sea—Petersen's artistry exposes both the fractures and the fusions that define South African identities in the post-apartheid era.

The tensions and ambiguities present in Petersen's photographs prompt viewers to reconsider concepts of origin, belonging, and difference. Rather than providing definitive answers, these

works exemplify what Barthes (1981) describes as photography's pensive power—its capacity to confront and unsettle, raising critical questions about the visibility of certain histories and the ongoing processes through which individuals and communities construct identity in the aftermath of colonialism and diaspora. As you encounter Petersen's *I Am Royal Self Portrait*, what catches your attention? Is there a particular detail—a look, an object, a stance—that draws you in unexpectedly or provokes an emotional response? What is it in this image that "pricks" you, as Barthes would say, interrupting the surface and inviting a more personal, visceral reaction? In engaging with this photograph, you are invited to sense the punctum for yourself before any analysis unfolds. Petersen's work thus exemplifies the continual redefinition of liminal identities in South Africa and contributes to broader global discussions on naming, representation, and cultural memory. In *Camera Lucida: Reflections on Photography*, Barthes (1981) distinguishes between the *stadium*, the viewer's general cultural and intellectual engagement with an image, and the *punctum*, the unexpected detail that "pricks" the viewer, evoking a deeply personal and emotional response. By integrating *studium* and *punctum*, Barthes suggests that photography holds a "subversive" capacity to unsettle dominant cultural narratives, even as it is framed within them. In Petersen's self-portraits, the initial *studium* is powerfully rendered through her regal attire and the Cape landscape, both of which evoke layered histories of colonial conquest, Indian Ocean trade, and creolised cultural formations. However, upon closer viewing, subtle elements such as her direct gaze, her poised stance at the edge of land and sea, and the unease between past and present operate as *punctum*, confronting the viewer with the complexities of identity, belonging and inherited displacement.

Importantly, Petersen's series must be read with an awareness of how the term *Malay* functions in the South African context. As Simbao (2025) notes, *Malay* is a racially imposed and historically reductive term used by colonial authorities to categorise Muslim descendants of enslaved and exiled Southeast Asians in the Cape. While Petersen references this imposed label, she does so critically, embracing, subverting and reframing its meanings through the careful styling of her portraits. Her varied use of Indonesian ceremonial wear, 18th-century Cape regalia, and imaginative costumes that blend Eastern and African aesthetics underscores the performative, constructed nature of identity. Rather than presenting a single cultural "truth," she stages a visual conversation that challenges static definitions of heritage and instead highlights hybridity, reinvention and creolisation.

Barthes (1981) notes that photographs can serve as a “theatre” for these negotiations, transforming the subject into both a vividly present being and a spectral trace of historical realities. Petersen’s work exemplifies this duality. Her portraits are at once acts of cultural retrieval and creative self-fashioning, merging performance and historical memory. As Simbao argues, this theatricality is not simply aesthetic but profoundly political, reclaiming visibility and authorship for those long relegated to the margins of South African visual history.

Barthes’s concept of photography as an index of "that-has-been" is particularly pertinent in this context. A photograph serves as a "certificate of presence," anchoring both photographer and subject in a specific historical moment (Barthes, 1981). Petersen’s *I Am Royal* (2015) exemplifies this: the image documents the artist in costume and place, making visible her embodied claim to Cape Malay heritage. The photograph does not simply illustrate heritage, but is itself evidence of the ongoing presence of that lineage by capturing Petersen's deliberate self-fashioning in the here and now. In Barthes's terms, the photograph's very existence validates and materialises the ancestral connection to the Indonesian Archipelago, a connection interrupted by enslavement, forced relocation, and cultural erasure, yet continually reasserted through contemporary acts of representation. Through this approach, Petersen’s work demonstrates photography’s capacity to layer multiple temporalities, colonial histories, and contemporary assertions of personhood within a single frame.

In charting her own genealogies, Petersen performs what Ellapen (2023: 5) describes as a “diasporic return,” where the reimagining of ancestral pasts becomes a mode of negotiating present identities. Her work dramatises the broader challenge faced by many South African communities, how to reconcile the “colonial-apartheid ghosts that continue to haunt post-apartheid spaces” with urgent aspirations for cultural revival and self-definition (Ellapen, 2023). The very ambivalence Barthes highlights, where a photograph can at once reveal and transform the subject, becomes a metaphor for identity in a diasporic context. As Mbembe (2005: 29) suggests, an “Africanity” that emerges from layers of Arab, Asian, and European influences is forever in flux, an unfinalised process of reinvention.

2.2 Visual & Photographic Construction of South African Indian Histories: From the 1940s to Post-Apartheid Memory

Extending this discussion by examining the works of Ranjith Kally. Kally's photographs, much like Petersen's, challenge dominant historical narratives by providing a counter-archive to conventional representations of marginalised communities. As Barthes (1980) argues, photography functions as both a record of the past and a form of subjective engagement with history. Kally's work embodies this dual function, serving as both documentary evidence of apartheid-era South Africa and as an emotional, lived archive that humanises and reclaims narratives of the Indian, Black, and Coloured communities that were marginalised under apartheid.

Photography plays an essential role in historical memory, particularly for communities excluded from official state narratives. As Okwui Enwezor (2008:15) posits, photography in postcolonial contexts operates as an alternative mode of history-making, offering a visual record that challenges dominant archives controlled by colonial and apartheid-era institutions. Yet, the notion of the 'alternative' archive itself warrants interrogation: who has the authority to define a particular archive as 'alternative,' and to what end? Such categorisation is not neutral; it reflects broader struggles over power, legitimacy, and whose histories are considered worthy of preservation or recognition. Naming an archive 'alternative' can both empower marginalised communities and reinforce existing hierarchies by positioning them outside the boundaries of official historical legitimacy. In my approach, I use the term 'alternative archive' deliberately but critically: rather than accepting a binary between mainstream and alternative, I recognise that all archives are shaped by power as well as by acts of inclusion and exclusion. I seek to foreground community-driven narratives like Kally's work not simply as a reaction to dominant histories, but as essential contributions that expand the very definition of the archive itself. Kally's work serves as such an archive, preserving moments of everyday life, political resistance, and cultural identity within South Africa's marginalised communities. Given that cameras were rare in Indian families in the 1940s and 1950s, with significant life events typically documented in formal studio settings, Kally's vast body of work becomes even more crucial. (Ranjith Kally, 2019) His images capture a period of history that might otherwise have remained visually undocumented, providing a lens into the lives of people who were often omitted from mainstream historical records.

Born in 1925 in Isipingo, Kally grew up in a working-class Indian family. Like many of his generation, he left school after Standard Six (Grade 8) to support his family, taking a job at a shoe factory. It was during this time that he purchased a second-hand camera, setting him on a path toward becoming one of South Africa's most significant photojournalists. Self-taught, he studied composition and exposure techniques using photography magazines, and his talent soon led him to a part-time position with *The Leader*, a prominent newspaper serving South Africa's Indian community at the time.

Kally later became a full-time photojournalist for *Drum* magazine and the *Golden City Post*, two groundbreaking publications that provided an essential platform for Black and Indian journalists and photographers. He worked alongside notable figures such as Peter Magubane, G.R. Naidoo, and Alf Khumalo, capturing moments of resistance, joy, and struggle in apartheid South Africa. In 1967, he was admitted to the Royal Photographic Society in London, and his work gained further recognition when two of his images were used on South African postage stamps. However, despite his prolific output, widespread recognition of his talent came much later; his first solo exhibition was held in 2004, when he was 79. In 2013, he was awarded an honorary doctorate by the University of KwaZulu-Natal. He passed away in June 2017 at the age of 91, leaving behind an unparalleled photographic archive of South African history.

One of Kally's early photographic series for *Drum* magazine in 1957 focused on the lives of sugar cane workers in KwaZulu-Natal. His family had deep ties to the industry; both his father and his grandfather had worked as overseers on sugar cane estates (Drum Magazine, 1960). This personal connection allowed him to capture the raw realities of labour exploitation with empathy and depth.

Fig.2 **Ranjith Kally, *Sugar-Cane Girl*, photograph, 1957.**

Source: Curating Culture (accessed 11 February 2025).

One particularly striking image, *Sugar-Cane Girl* (1957), depicts a young girl working in the fields, a stark reminder of the widespread child labour among Indian indentured families. At the time, entire families worked on the plantations, with children as young as ten earning just 10 pence for an eight-hour workday (Drum, 1957). This image exemplifies how Kally's work intersects with historical documentation, humanising statistical accounts of labour abuses and embedding them within a visual narrative that resonates emotionally.

Perhaps one of Kally's most iconic images is *Prizegiving* (1965), which captures the moment when golfer Papwa Sewgolum was forced to receive his Natal Open trophy outside in the pouring rain because the Durban Country Club was a whites-only establishment. In the photograph, Sewgolum stands exposed to the relentless rain, water streaming down his face and soaking his clothing. He grips the trophy tightly but his shoulders are hunched, and his gaze is steady yet distant, as if searching for dignity amid the indignity of the moment. The cluster of officials, sheltered under umbrellas, accentuates his isolation. The wet grass around him and the heavy sky evoke a sense of chill and exclusion, making the raw injustice palpable. Sewgolum, a self-taught golfer who had previously won the Dutch Open in 1959, 1960, and 1963, was later banned from professional golf in South Africa by the apartheid government. (Papwa Sewgolum, 2024) This image, showing a victorious yet humiliated Sewgolum, became an international symbol of apartheid's cruelty, drawing global attention to racial segregation in South African sports (Desai & Vahed, 2010).

Fig.3 **Ranjith Kally, *Prizegiving*, photograph (1965)**
Source: Curating Culture (accessed 11 February 2025).

Beyond political and labour-related imagery, Kally documented the everyday cultural and social life of South African Indians. His 1958 photograph *Night on the Town* captures Durban's Shah Jehan Cinema, a central hub for the Indian community. For many Indian families, cinema-going, whether for Bollywood films or Western productions, was a major social event. At a time when South African media promoted predominantly white, Western beauty ideals, Bollywood provided an alternative cultural anchor for Indian South Africans (Hansen, 2000).

Similarly, *Cup Final Day* (1970s) highlights another critical cultural space: Curries Fountain, one of the few sports fields available to the marginalised South Africans. This image captures three contestants from the beauty pageant held before the final match of the South African Federation League, which represented Black players. Curries Fountain was more than a sports venue; it was a site of community gathering, resistance, and political activism. Many anti-apartheid rallies took place there, reinforcing Kally's ability to capture intersections between culture and resistance.

Fig.4 **Ranjith Kally, *Cup Final Day,* photograph (1970's)**
Source: Curating Culture (accessed 11 February 2025).

Kally was deeply embedded in South Africa's political landscape, often photographing rallies, marches, and key figures in the anti-apartheid struggle. His 1958 photograph of *Monty during the Treason Trial* shows Dr Monty Naicker standing with Nelson Mandela and Yusuf Dadoo. Naicker, a leader in the Natal Indian Congress, was at the forefront of the fight against apartheid and was frequently imprisoned or banned for his activism.

Similarly, his 1973 portrait of *Winnie Madikizela-Mandela* captures her at a time when she was emerging as a formidable political force in her own right. Kally's access to these figures allowed him to document history from within, rather than as an outsider, making his work an invaluable primary source.

Kally's photographs form an essential part of South Africa's visual history, preserving memories of people, places, and events that might otherwise have been forgotten. His images challenge traditional archives by offering a counter-narrative, one that is deeply human, historically rich, and emotionally evocative.

Kally's photographs resonate with Roland Barthes' (1981) idea of photography as a convergence point for personal memory and collective history, where each image carries the weight of what he terms the *"that-has-been"*, a moment irretrievably anchored in the past. More than just documents, these photographs are performative in their preservation of affective, political, and cultural memory. Okwui Enwezor (2008:63) argues that in postcolonial contexts, photography becomes "a radical act of historical intervention," providing visual testimony that counters the colonial archive's erasures. Kally's work performs exactly this function: by capturing figures such as Monty Naicker or Papwa Sewgolum in moments of dignity, defiance, or exclusion, his lens actively challenges dominant historical narratives and reshapes how marginalised communities are remembered.

Fig.5 **Ranjith Kally, *Monty during the Treason Trial*, photograph (1958)**
Source: Curating Culture (accessed 11 February 2025).

Fig.6 **Ranjith Kally, *Portrait of Winnie Madikizela Mandela,* photograph (1973)**

Source: Curating Culture (accessed 11 February 2025).

2.3 Reclaiming Erased Histories: Artistic Practice, Pedagogy, and the Formation of a South African Indian Counter-Archive

The end of apartheid in 1994 introduced a democratic dispensation committed to redressing socio-economic disparities. Under the Reconstruction and Development Programme (RDP), the new government sought to enhance access to housing, healthcare, and education for previously marginalised groups, including South African Indians (Seekings & Nattrass, 2005). Although apartheid-era legislation (e.g., the Group Areas Act of 1950) had segregated Indian communities into specific townships, robust internal networks in trade, business, and activism enabled many to flourish despite systemic restrictions (McFadden, 1992). However, ongoing challenges remain. Persistent economic inequalities, disparities in educational resources, and uneven access to opportunities continue to affect South African Indian communities, as well as other historically disadvantaged groups. While significant strides have been made, the legacy of apartheid-era segregation still shapes patterns of social and economic mobility, and many experience the limitations of reform on a daily basis. (Berg, 2007)

To better understand how these policies shaped everyday experience, imagine a student like Anil attending school in Chatsworth in the late 1990s. Each morning, Anil woke before dawn to catch a crowded bus to a school still marked by the legacies of the past: walls painted decades earlier, outdated textbooks handed down from former white schools, and a shortage of laboratory equipment. Despite improved access following the end of apartheid, infrastructure gaps and resource constraints remained. For Anil and his classmates, teachers often balanced large class sizes and worked creatively to compensate for the lack of materials, encouraging students to study current events as part of their social studies curriculum or share books among small groups. Lunchtime conversations echoed the optimism of a changing country, but also the everyday frustrations of slow reform. Anil's school journey highlights the lived realities behind policy initiatives, revealing both the progress and the persistent challenges that shaped the new opportunities of post-apartheid South Africa.

Under apartheid, Indian South Africans were subjected to a racially defined, inferior education system, albeit one that was administratively distinct from that of Black Africans under the Bantu Education Act. While the Bantu Education Act of 1953 targeted Black Africans specifically, centralising control of curricula, resources, and teaching methods to uphold white supremacy, Indian and Coloured schools were also systematically underfunded and closely

monitored by government authorities (McFadden, 1992). Textbooks presented Eurocentric content, and the broader educational framework reinforced apartheid ideology, limiting access to quality resources and confining students to predetermined social and occupational roles.

These constraints on educational opportunities intersected with broader apartheid policies such as the legislated spatial separation, entrenched socio-economic inequalities: resources such as libraries, laboratories, and qualified teachers were often disproportionately allocated to white areas, leaving Indian schools comparatively under-resourced (Seekings & Nattrass, 2005). The Group Areas Act (1950) was one of the most significant apartheid laws that restricted where South Africans could live based on race, forcing the Indian community into designated areas like Chatsworth and Shallcross in Durban. Other laws that further limited their freedom included the Asiatic Land Tenure and Indian Representation Act (1946), also known as the Ghetto Act, which confined Indians to specific areas and restricted property ownership.

Although efforts to close educational gaps advanced slowly, given the legacies of racial segregation and limited national resources, improvements in infrastructure, teacher training, and access to higher education began to broaden academic pathways for Indian communities (Seekings & Nattrass, 2005). By forging alliances with other historically disadvantaged groups, Indian South Africans could both advocate for educational equity and help shape a new post-apartheid academic landscape.

Following the advent of democracy in South Africa in 1994, the process of reclaiming and recognising the contributions of historically marginalised artists, particularly women and artists of colour, gained momentum (Coombes, 2003). Within this context, the artistic legacy of Zainab Reddy emerges as a significant yet often overlooked chapter in South African art history. One of the earliest known Indian women to receive critical acclaim as an artist in the country, Reddy's contributions to modernist art and her engagement with themes of race, identity, and harmony remain relevant in contemporary discourse (Peffer, 2009).

Born as Zainab Madarasawalla in Poona, India, Reddy studied art at the University of Mumbai. While pursuing her studies, she met Dennis Reddy, a South African medical student. Their marriage brought her to South Africa in 1955, where they settled in the rural town of Stanger (now KwaDukuza) in Natal. Despite moving to a socially and politically restrictive

environment under apartheid, Reddy quickly became active in the South African art world. Within a year of arriving, she participated in the Natal Society for the Arts (NSA) 51st Annual Contemporary Art Exhibition, making history as one of the three Indian participants and the only Indian woman in the exhibition (Martin, 2017).

Her artistic journey extended beyond Natal, as she showcased her works in major exhibitions in Bloemfontein, Kimberley, Stellenbosch, and Queenstown. She also participated in one of the earliest recorded women-only exhibitions in South Africa, which was held at Payne Brothers Department Store in Durban. These exhibitions were significant at a time when opportunities for women artists, especially women of colour, were extremely limited (Rankin, 2020).

In addition to painting and exhibiting her work, Reddy balanced multiple roles as an artist, mother, and educator. She taught art at Temple Indian Girls School and later became a lecturer at the University College for Indians, an institution designated for "non-white" students under the apartheid government's racially segregated education system (Govender, 2015). However, the restrictions imposed by apartheid, combined with the challenges of navigating an art world dominated by white artists and institutions, likely influenced her decision to emigrate with her family to London in the early 1970s (Pissarra, 2011).

Fig.7 **Zainab Reddy, *The Human Race (Maya).* Oil Painting. Iziko Art Gallery**

Despite her departure from South Africa, Reddy's artistic legacy remains within the country's national collections. Three of her works are housed in the Iziko South African National Gallery in Cape Town, while another is held in the Durban Art Gallery (Miles, 2004). Her painting *The Human Race* stands out as a particularly powerful expression of her artistic and ideological vision. Strongly influenced by artists like Paul Gauguin and the German Expressionists, this large-scale work depicts people of different racial backgrounds embracing or interacting with one another (Peffer, 2009). The painting's subheading, *Maya*, references the Sanskrit term for "illusion", a concept that, in Hindu and Buddhist philosophy, denotes the illusory nature of worldly divisions and distinctions. Given Reddy's experience of racial segregation in apartheid South Africa, the painting could be interpreted as a critique of the artificial barriers imposed by racial categorisation and a hopeful vision for unity and coexistence (Pissarra, 2011).

Her approach to painting reflects modernist influences, particularly in the simplification and flattening of forms and the expressive use of colour. Many of her works depict women or elements of nature, often rendered in rich, vibrant tones. Reddy described art as *"a creative medium through which my joys, sorrows, and frustrations can be expressed"* (Reddy, *Drum Magazine*, December 1961), underscoring how her practice was deeply personal yet also reflective of broader social and political realities.

Fig.8 **Zainab Reddy, *Three Women*. Oil Painting. (1965) Iziko Art Gallery**

Though Reddy's name is not always foregrounded in discussions of South African art history, her contributions remain an essential part of the narrative of Indian women artists in the country. Her work offers insight into the experiences of women of colour navigating both artistic and political landscapes in apartheid South Africa (Coombes, 2003). In the post-1994 era, as South African art institutions continue to reassess and expand their canons, figures like Reddy deserve greater recognition for their pioneering contributions to modern South African art (Martin, 2017).

Lalitha Jawahirilall's artistic journey is deeply intertwined with the socio-political landscape of apartheid South Africa, exile, and the search for belonging. Born in 1954 in Ladysmith,

Natal, she grew up in an era defined by racial segregation, displacement, and the oppressive policies of apartheid. At the age of 11, her family was forcibly relocated to an Indian township under the Group Areas Act, an event that shaped her understanding of state-enforced racial discrimination and the loss of home (Coombes, 2003). Although Jawahirilall never studied art formally in school, she displayed an early talent for drawing, focusing on portraits of her family and images from nature. However, like many South African artists of her time, her aspirations were curtailed by apartheid-era restrictions that limited educational and professional opportunities for people of colour (Govender, 2015).

Jawahirilall trained as a nurse in Coronationville, Johannesburg, where she was directly exposed to the suffering and injustices caused by apartheid. This experience reinforced her belief that the oppressive regime had prevented her from fully pursuing her dreams. In 1979, seeking new opportunities, she left South Africa and moved to Tel Aviv and Jerusalem, spending two years in the Middle East before settling in England in 1981. In exile, Jawahirilall found herself among a vibrant South African diaspora of artists, musicians, writers, and activists who used cultural expression to resist apartheid (Enwezor, 2008).

With the support of the African Education Trust, she was finally able to pursue her passion for art, studying Fine Art at the Camberwell School of Art in London. Her education continued at the Royal College of Art, where she earned a Master's Degree in 1989. During this period, she exhibited widely in London, Germany, Spain, and India, gaining recognition for her expressive, abstract style. Her participation in the anti-apartheid movement through her art and activism positioned her among the many South African creatives in exile who used their work to challenge apartheid's narratives and build international solidarity (Pissarra, 2011).

Despite her growing success abroad, Jawahirilall longed to return home. With the fall of apartheid and South Africa's transition to democracy in 1994, she seized the opportunity to reconnect with her homeland. She took up a lecturing position at the University of Durban-Westville (UDW), where she played a pivotal role in mentoring young artists and initiating

community-based art projects. However, she soon grew disillusioned with the realities of post-apartheid South Africa. The transformation she had hoped for, one that would bring true social and economic justice, seemed elusive.

Her disappointment with post-apartheid South Africa culminated in her decision to leave the country permanently. She settled in Puttaparthi, India, where she continues to focus on her art and spiritual practice. This shift in her life is reflected in her later artworks, which emphasise themes of transcendence, peace, and inner reflection.

Jawahirilall has worked across various media, including painting, screen printing, and etching, but painting remains her primary passion. Her style is characterised by bold, expressive colours and abstract forms, often reflecting emotion and spiritual inquiry. A key element of her practice is the inclusion of poetry alongside her artworks, an approach that further emphasises the deeply personal and introspective nature of her work (Rankin, 2020).

Fig.9**Lalitha Jawahirilal, *Oh South Africa you've turned my world completely upside down.* Oil on canvas (1996) Iziko Art Gallery**

One of her best-known paintings, *Oh South Africa, You've Turned My World Completely Upside Down* (1996), housed at the Iziko South African National Gallery, encapsulates her emotional journey of return. The painting is a visual meditation on memory and homecoming, depicting the artist reclining under a tree on a riverbank—an homage to her childhood memories of playing near streams in Ladysmith. The presence of a white bird, possibly symbolising peace, and two differently coloured masks in a boat suggest a longing for racial unity in post-apartheid South Africa. The vibrant colour palette and harmonious composition reflect her initial optimism for the nation's future (Peffer, 2009).

Another significant work, *Apartheid Day* (1988), includes an accompanying poem that speaks to themes of displacement, history, and loss. The etching portrays a fragmented, almost dreamlike landscape, echoing the disorientation of exile and the lingering effects of apartheid's violence. The poem's haunting imagery, *"Whose ashes are those that lie on puddled sand and perfumed flowers?"*evokes the unresolved trauma of the past and the unfulfilled promises of liberation (Pissarra, 2011).

Fig.10 ***Lalitha Jawahirilal ,Apartheid Day.*** **Etching (1988) Iziko Art Gallery**

During her time in Durban, Jawahirilall was dedicated to making art accessible to broader communities. She led mural painting projects in her hometown of Ladysmith and conducted craft workshops to empower children with creative skills. Her work as an educator and community artist aligns with broader movements in South African art that emphasise participatory engagement and cultural reclamation (Miles, 2004).

Lalitha Jawahirilall's work exists at the intersection of art, activism, and spirituality. Her journey from apartheid-era displacement to exile and eventual return mirrors the broader struggles of South Africa's marginalised communities. While her initial optimism for a new South Africa was met with disappointment, her art remains a testament to her hope, her search for meaning, and her commitment to justice. Even as she continues her artistic practice in India, her work serves as a powerful reminder of the personal and political dimensions of exile, homecoming, and belonging. Jawahirilall's narrative is emblematic of a broader trend among South African Indian artists and cultural producers, whose creative practices serve as vital mechanisms for negotiating hybrid identities, preserving cultural memory, and resisting historical erasure.

As Gqola (2018) observes, writers, performers, and visual artists often use their mediums to make sense of marginalisation, memory, and identity in ways that defy singular narratives. These artistic expressions not only highlight resilience but also affirm the community's evolving contributions to South Africa's social and cultural landscapes. Beyond the arts, several prominent figures of Indian heritage played pivotal roles in South Africa's political and social transformation. Fatima Meer, a sociologist, writer, and activist, was a formidable intellectual force in South Africa's anti-apartheid struggle. A close ally of Nelson Mandela, she played a critical role in mobilising grassroots resistance and advancing feminist and anti-racist discourse (Meer, 1985). Through her scholarship and activism, Meer directly confronted systemic oppression, advocating for marginalised communities, particularly Indian women, while documenting the socio-political conditions of Indian South Africans under apartheid (Vahed & Desai, 2010).

Despite the significant contributions of Indian artists and intellectuals to South Africa's cultural and political landscapes, colonial histories largely omitted their work. The systematic erasure of identity and the silencing of their existence in dominant historical narratives have created an

archival void in which Indian artistic and cultural contributions remain largely invisible (Hofmeyr, 2019). This absence underscores the necessity of engaging with contemporary works to reclaim and assert these voices. However, excavating histories requires looking beyond conventional archives to alternative forms of record-keeping, such as archaeological findings, oral traditions, and written texts (Peterson, 2016). (Majeed & Hofmeyr, 2016)

It is important, however, to acknowledge that alternative archives such as commemorative journals and community-edited publications carry their own potential biases and limitations. While these sources allow for the reclamation and celebration of historically marginalised voices, they may also reflect the priorities, values, and perspectives of their editors and contributors. As Derrida has argued, the construction and maintenance of any archive involves decisions about inclusion, exclusion, and interpretation, inevitably shaped by power relations and subjective choices. Being transparent about these dynamics not only strengthens the credibility of historical reconstructions but also honours the complexities of archive politics and the continual negotiation of memory. (Derrida, 1995)

Fatima Meer's extensive body of writing provides a critical counterpoint to this historical exclusion. Her literary and scholarly works document the lived experiences of marginalised groups, offering a framework for understanding identity, resistance, and belonging (Meer, 1996). Through her use of language and narrative, she engaged in intellectual excavation, recovering histories deliberately omitted from dominant discourses. Writing, in this sense, becomes a method of reclaiming historical agency, a powerful tool for asserting cultural and political presence in the face of systemic silencing. By engaging with Meer's work, we expand the scope of historical inquiry beyond visual art and performance, recognising the written word as an essential means of cultural preservation and resistance.

As Peterson (2016) argues, excavating histories requires looking beyond these traditional archives to alternative forms of record-keeping, including archaeological findings, oral traditions, and written texts. Commemorative publications, community-led documentation, and personal narratives are critical in capturing histories that mainstream archives often overlook or marginalise. *Centenary of Indians in South Africa (1860–1960)* is a compelling example of such an alternative archive. This commemorative journal, published in 1960, serves as a

significant historical document that preserves the lived experiences, struggles, and contributions of South African Indians.

2.4 A Community-Curated Counter-Archive: Reframing Indian Histories Through Commemorative Publishing

The *Centenary of Indians in South Africa (1860–1960)* constitutes a significant intervention in addressing the omissions and silences of official historical narratives. Analysing this publication is pivotal for this chapter because it exemplifies how marginalised communities construct their own counter-archives to challenge mainstream histories and assert their presence. This 224-page commemorative journal, provided by curator and archivist Thava Pillay, presents an intimate, community-driven account of the first century of Indian settlement in South Africa. Edited by Leila Pather, who, with her husband Ronnie, later established the *1860 Settler Magazine, the* publication was compiled over nearly three years and released in 1960 as part of the centenary commemorations. More than a formal historical record, it functions as a living repository of memory, cultural identity, and resilience. The journal foregrounds the voices and experiences of a community frequently excluded from dominant archives and underscores the importance of alternative record-keeping in preserving marginalised histories.

Situating the Centenary journal within broader archival debates highlights its resonance with similar counter-archival projects in other postcolonial or diasporic contexts. For instance, commemorative publications produced by Caribbean or Mauritian Indian communities, such as the Souvenir Brochure of Indian Immigration to Mauritius (1935) or anniversary journals by Indo-Caribbean groups, also serve as grassroots repositories that reclaim histories suppressed by colonial officialdom. These initiatives foreground community narratives, photographs, and personal testimonies, challenging exclusion and producing memory work not unlike the Centenary journal. In the African diaspora, works like the Notting Hill Carnival souvenir booklets or Ghanaian independence commemorative magazines have similarly asserted cultural pride and documented lived histories outside state-sanctioned narratives. By briefly comparing these examples, it becomes clear that The Centenary of Indians in South Africa fits within a wider, transnational phenomenon where marginalised groups deploy

commemorative publishing as a form of archival intervention, negotiating visibility, identity, and historical justice in the wake of colonial erasure. (Ngoepe & Bhebhe, 2024)

The *Centenary of Indians in South Africa (1860–1960)* is more than a commemorative publication; it serves as a visual and narrative counter-archive that foregrounds the resilience, contributions, and evolving identity of the Indian community over a century of settlement in the country. Opening with formal messages from dignitaries, including South Africa's first State President, C.R. Swart, the journal performs a dual function: it symbolically acknowledges the Indian community's presence while simultaneously revealing the racialised politics of the period. The bold cover design, featuring national symbols and assertive typography, stakes a claim to civic legitimacy and historical belonging.

Inside, the publication meticulously traces the historical trajectory of Indian migration, particularly the arrival of the first indentured labourers aboard the SS *Truro* on 16 November 1860. These workers were recruited to labour on sugar plantations in Natal under contracts that offered minimal rights and harsh conditions, echoing systems of bonded servitude already in place in British colonies such as Mauritius (Desai & Vahed, 2010). Through a mix of historical essays, family photographs, and community achievements, the journal constructs an archive of everyday life and cultural survival, an archive often excluded from official state narratives.

A particularly significant aspect of the journal is its inclusion of early newspaper reports that shaped public perceptions of Indian migrants. One such example is an article from *The Natal Mercury*, which reported on the arrival of the *SS Truro* under the headline *"The Coolies (sic) Here."* The term "coolie" was commonly used in British colonial discourse to refer to indentured labourers from Asia, particularly India and China (Bhana & Brain, 1990). While the term originated from the Tamil and Hindi words *kuli* (meaning wages or hire), it was appropriated into colonial vocabulary as a racialised and derogatory label that dehumanised Indian labourers and reinforced their perceived servitude.

The use of "coolie" in state documents and the press reflects the racialised labour hierarchies of the colonial era, where indentured workers were seen as expendable labour rather than as individuals with agency and aspirations. Crucially, these terms were not neutral descriptors but language deliberately chosen and propagated by British colonial administrators and

predominantly white-controlled colonial newspapers, who wielded power over both the legal and public representations of Indian migrants. By controlling press terminology, colonial authorities solidified and spread pejorative stereotypes, shaping how broader society viewed and understood Indian labourers. Over time, the term became a slur used to demean Indian South Africans, underscoring the long-lasting impact of colonial racial categorisations (Desai & Vahed, 2010). The *Centenary of Indians in South Africa* journal provides a crucial counter-narrative by reclaiming and documenting these histories from the perspective of the Indian community itself, rather than through the lens of colonial authorities (Desai & Vahed, 2010).

While the journal does not shy away from detailing the hardships of indentured labour, it also highlights the resilience and progress of the Indian community. Articles within the publication document the rise of Indian-owned businesses, the growth of an educated middle class, and the increasing political consciousness that led to organised resistance against discriminatory laws (Vahed & Desai, 2013). Advertisements in the journal provide an additional layer of historical insight, revealing the community's economic aspirations and entrepreneurial spirit. These advertisements not only promoted local businesses but also reflected broader social mobility trends, showing how Indians in South Africa navigated their position within a racially segregated society.

The *Centenary of Indians in South Africa (1860–1960)* serves as a vital archival source precisely because it exists outside of conventional institutional records. Commemorative journals like this are integral to historical excavation, as they provide first-hand accounts, reflections, and community-driven narratives that state-controlled archives often exclude. They allow for the preservation of histories that may otherwise be erased, overlooked, or misrepresented. Looking ahead, the practice of reclaiming, preserving, and reinventing these narratives through alternative archives foreshadows the creative strategies employed by contemporary South African Indian artists. By foregrounding memory, community, and counter-narrative, these commemorative projects set the stage for examining how present-day artists continue to reshape and assert identity, resistance, and belonging within a rapidly evolving cultural landscape (Archary & Landman, 2021).

The reliance on alternative archives is especially crucial in postcolonial and subaltern studies, where conventional records are often biased toward dominant historical narratives (Islam,

2020). Peterson (2016) emphasises that written texts such as these, along with oral traditions and personal testimonies, offer a more holistic understanding of historical events. In the context of South African Indian history, publications like *Centenary of Indians in South Africa* not only document past experiences but also contribute to ongoing conversations about identity, belonging, and historical justice.

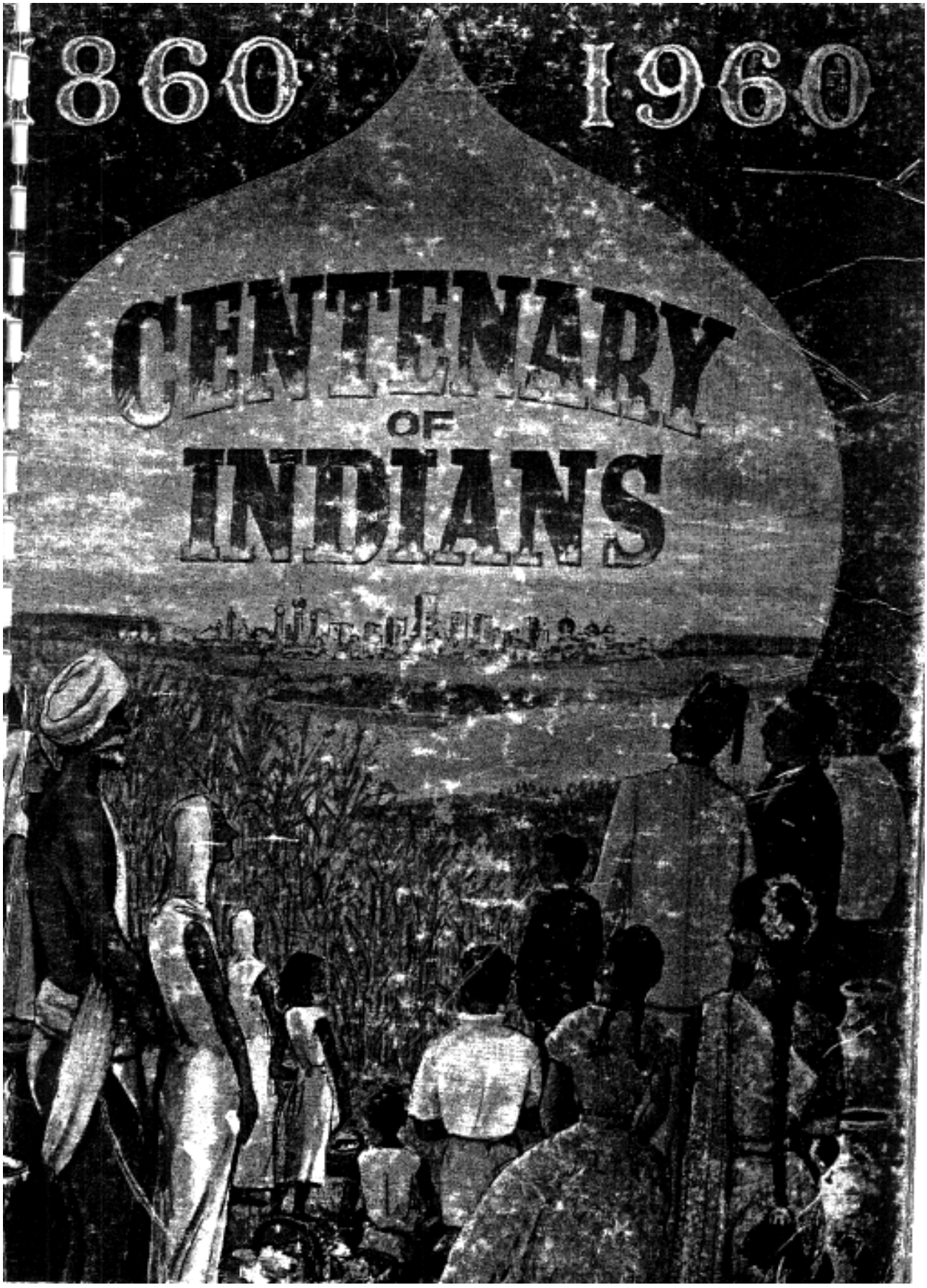
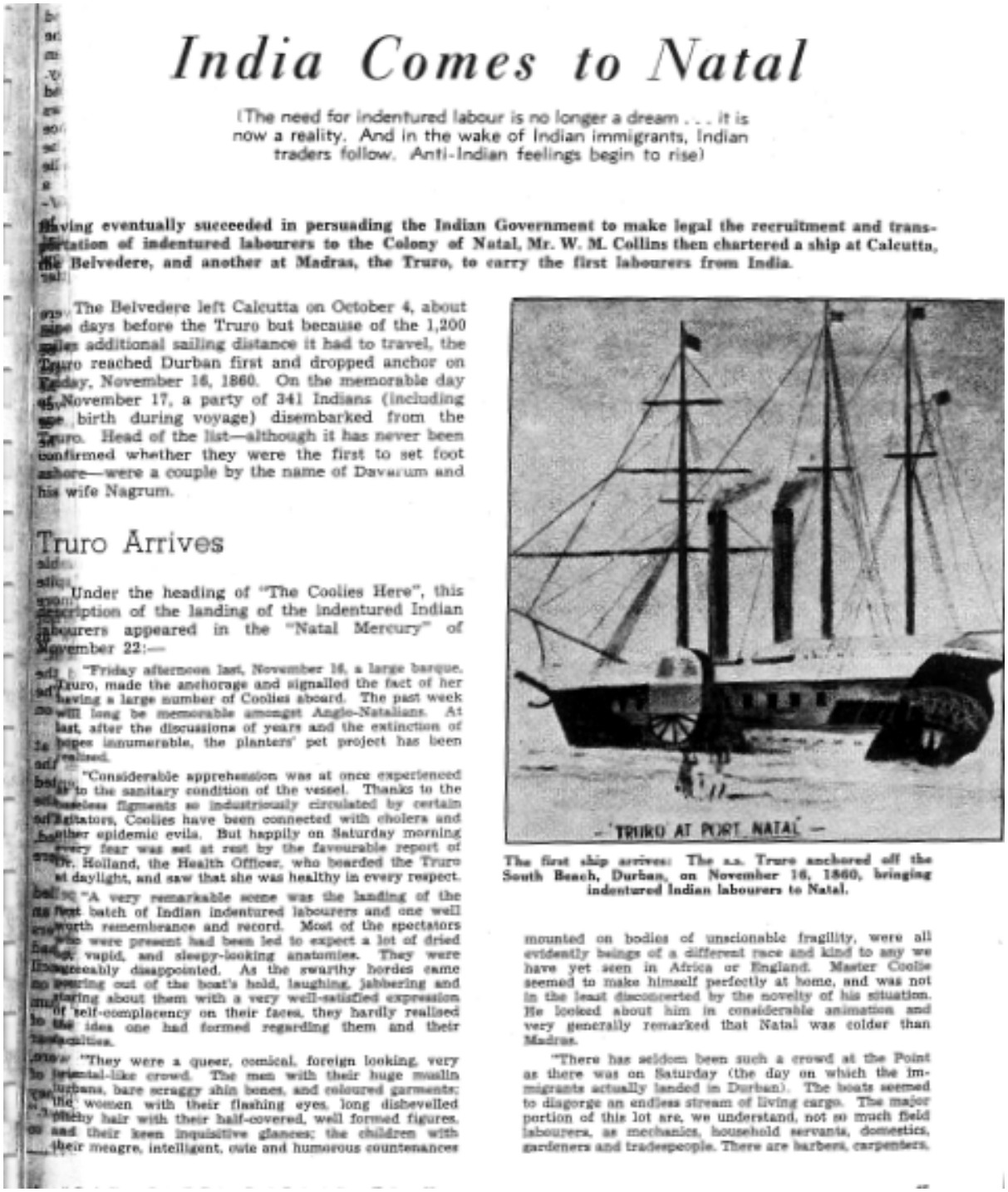


Fig.11 ***Cover of Centenary of Indians in South Africa*, print, 1860–1960 (1960)**

Source: Curating Culture (accessed 11 February 2025).



India Comes to Natal

(The need for indentured labour is no longer a dream . . . it is now a reality. And in the wake of Indian immigrants, Indian traders follow. Anti-Indian feelings begin to rise)

Having eventually succeeded in persuading the Indian Government to make legal the recruitment and transportation of indentured labourers to the Colony of Natal, Mr. W. M. Collins then chartered a ship at Calcutta, the Belvedere, and another at Madras, the Truro, to carry the first labourers from India.

The Belvedere left Calcutta on October 4, about nine days before the Truro but because of the 1,200 miles additional sailing distance it had to travel, the Truro reached Durban first and dropped anchor on Friday, November 16, 1860. On the memorable day of November 17, a party of 341 Indians (including one birth during voyage) disembarked from the Truro. Head of the list—although it has never been confirmed whether they were the first to set foot ashore—were a couple by the name of Davarum and his wife Nagrum.

Truro Arrives

Under the heading of "The Coolies Here", this description of the landing of the indentured Indian labourers appeared in the "Natal Mercury" of November 22:—

"Friday afternoon last, November 16, a large barque, Truro, made the anchorage and signalled the fact of her having a large number of Coolies aboard. The past week will long be memorable amongst Anglo-Natalians. At last, after the discussions of years and the extinction of hopes innumerable, the planters' pet project has been realised.

"Considerable apprehension was at once experienced as to the sanitary condition of the vessel. Thanks to the baseless figments so industriously circulated by certain agitators, Coolies have been connected with cholera and other epidemic evils. But happily on Saturday morning every fear was set at rest by the favourable report of Dr. Holland, the Health Officer, who boarded the Truro at daylight, and saw that she was healthy in every respect.

"A very remarkable scene was the landing of the first batch of Indian indentured labourers and one well worth remembrance and record. Most of the spectators who were present had been led to expect a lot of dried fish, vapid, and sleepy-looking anatomies. They were unspeakably disappointed. As the swarthy hordes came pouring out of the boat's hold, laughing, jabbering and staring about them with a very well-satisfied expression of self-complacency on their faces, they hardly realised the idea one had formed regarding them and their personalities.

"They were a queer, comical, foreign looking, very oriental-like crowd. The men with their huge muslin turbans, bare scraggy shin bones, and coloured garments; the women with their flashing eyes, long dishevelled filthy hair with their half-covered, well formed figures, and their keen inquisitive glances; the children with their meagre, intelligent, cute and humorous countenances mounted on bodies of unscionable fragility, were all evidently beings of a different race and kind to any we have yet seen in Africa or England. Master Coolie seemed to make himself perfectly at home, and was not in the least disconcerted by the novelty of his situation. He looked about him in considerable animation and very generally remarked that Natal was colder than Madras.

"There has seldom been such a crowd at the Point as there was on Saturday (the day on which the immigrants actually landed in Durban). The boats seemed to disgorge an endless stream of living cargo. The major portion of this lot are, we understand, not so much field labourers, as mechanics, household servants, domestics, gardeners and tradespeople. There are barbers, carpenters,

The first ship arrives: The s.s. Truro anchored off the South Beach, Durban, on November 16, 1860, bringing indentured Indian labourers to Natal.

Fig. 12 **An inside page of *Centenary of Indians in South Africa*, print, 1860–1960 (1960)**

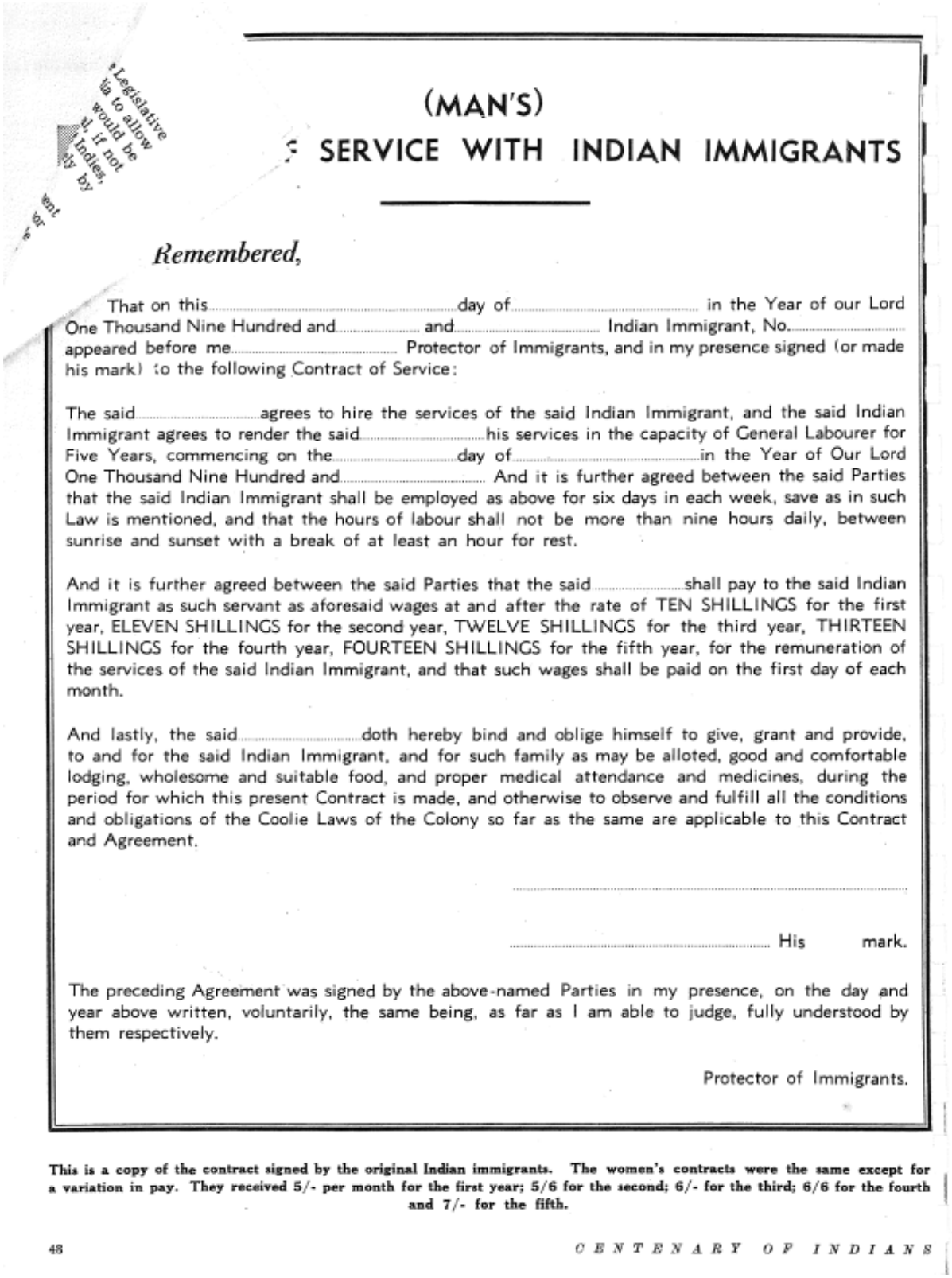
Source: Curating Culture (accessed 11 February 2025).

This evocative illustration from *The Centenary of Indians in South Africa (1860–1960)* visually narrates the historical arrival of Indian indentured labourers in colonial Natal. Set against a backdrop of maritime and plantation imagery, it symbolically links India and South Africa through the indenture system. Notably, there is no illustrator credited for this image in the publication (the absence of attribution is itself significant, pointing to the historical tendency

to erase or anonymise artists working on community or commemorative projects, particularly those from marginalised groups). The imagery romanticises the journey while eliding the harsh realities of displacement, labour exploitation, and racialised control. Nevertheless, the illustration functions as an important visual artefact that gestures toward the beginnings of a diasporic Indian presence in South Africa.

This inside page of the *Centenary* journal combines textual retrospection with photographic documentation, reinforcing the narrative of perseverance and progress within the Indian community. The visual layout juxtaposes formal family portraits with descriptions of social upliftment, drawing attention to themes of respectability, cultural pride, and generational continuity. The photographs serve as both memory work and visual assertions of belonging, offering a counter-narrative to state-driven histories that have marginalised Indian contributions.

This archival reproduction highlights the historical moment of the SS *Truro*'s arrival in Port Natal on 16 November 1860, marking the beginning of Indian indentured migration to South Africa. Often referenced in both academic and commemorative texts, the image represents a foundational event in the South African Indian diaspora. While the visual itself may appear subdued, its inclusion in the journal signals the gravity of this historical rupture, a forced movement of people who would go on to profoundly shape the cultural and economic landscape of KwaZulu-Natal.



(MAN'S)

SERVICE WITH INDIAN IMMIGRANTS

Remembered,

That on this.....day of..... in the Year of our Lord One Thousand Nine Hundred and..... and..... Indian Immigrant, No..... appeared before me..... Protector of Immigrants, and in my presence signed (or made his mark) to the following Contract of Service:

The said.....agrees to hire the services of the said Indian Immigrant, and the said Indian Immigrant agrees to render the said.....his services in the capacity of General Labourer for Five Years, commencing on the.....day of.....in the Year of Our Lord One Thousand Nine Hundred and..... And it is further agreed between the said Parties that the said Indian Immigrant shall be employed as above for six days in each week, save as in such Law is mentioned, and that the hours of labour shall not be more than nine hours daily, between sunrise and sunset with a break of at least an hour for rest.

And it is further agreed between the said Parties that the said.....shall pay to the said Indian Immigrant as such servant as aforesaid wages at and after the rate of TEN SHILLINGS for the first year, ELEVEN SHILLINGS for the second year, TWELVE SHILLINGS for the third year, THIRTEEN SHILLINGS for the fourth year, FOURTEEN SHILLINGS for the fifth year, for the remuneration of the services of the said Indian Immigrant, and that such wages shall be paid on the first day of each month.

And lastly, the said.....doth hereby bind and oblige himself to give, grant and provide, to and for the said Indian Immigrant, and for such family as may be alloted, good and comfortable lodging, wholesome and suitable food, and proper medical attendance and medicines, during the period for which this present Contract is made, and otherwise to observe and fulfill all the conditions and obligations of the Coolie Laws of the Colony so far as the same are applicable to this Contract and Agreement.

.....

..... His mark.

The preceding Agreement was signed by the above-named Parties in my presence, on the day and year above written, voluntarily, the same being, as far as I am able to judge, fully understood by them respectively.

Protector of Immigrants.

This is a copy of the contract signed by the original Indian immigrants. The women's contracts were the same except for a variation in pay. They received 5/- per month for the first year; 5/6 for the second; 6/- for the third; 6/6 for the fourth and 7/- for the fifth.

48 CENTENARY OF INDIANS

Fig. 13 **An inside page of *Centenary of Indians in South Africa*, print, 1860–1960 (1960)**

Source: Curating Culture (accessed 11 February 2025).

This image features a reproduction of an original indenture contract signed by Indian immigrants brought to colonial Natal. Such contracts, typically binding for five years, outlined

conditions of employment, wages, and obligations, but in practice obscured the exploitative nature of indentured labour. Written in English and often poorly understood by the signatories, these documents formalised the asymmetrical relationship between colonial authorities and Indian workers. The contract symbolises the legal codification of subjugation, framing coerced labour as a voluntary agreement, and serves as a stark reminder of the systemic control exercised over migrant bodies through bureaucratic language and colonial law.

As discussed earlier in this chapter, these contracts formed the legal foundation of the indenture system, a practice the British colonial administration adopted after slavery was formally abolished. Recruited primarily from regions such as Tamil Nadu, Andhra Pradesh, and Uttar Pradesh, indentured labourers were bound by these five-year contracts to work under often brutal conditions on sugar plantations in colonial Natal (Desai & Vahed, 2010).

While the contracts promised fixed wages, housing, rations, and return passage after ten years of service, the reality was far more exploitative. Labourers had little understanding of the legal implications, especially given that contracts were written in English and signed in colonial ports such as Madras or Calcutta under duress or misinformation (Bhana & Brain, 1990). Upon completion of the initial five-year term, workers could either renew their contracts or receive free passage back to India after 10 years of continuous service. However, many remained in South Africa due to financial constraints, family obligations, or lack of support for return migration.

Earlier in the chapter, the system of indenture was analysed as a form of racialised labour discipline, functionally distinct from chattel slavery but comparable in its structural violence and social impact. These contracts illustrate how colonial powers used administrative and legal mechanisms to institutionalise inequality under the guise of contractual consent. As material artefacts, they expose how Indian bodies were commodified, regulated, and racialised in the service of empire. Their presence in commemorative publications like *Centenary of Indians in South Africa (1860–1960)* underscores both the trauma and endurance that define the collective memory of indenture within South African Indian communities.

As such, commemorative publications and community-led documentation, such as *The Centenary of Indians in South Africa (1860–1960)* mentioned above and *The 1860 Settler Magazine,* both function as critical alternative archives. These sources are not only historical documents but also artistic and archaeological artefacts that capture the socio-political consciousness of their time. Archives are more than mere collections of documents; they are sites of power, memory, and cultural identity (Derrida, 1995). Indeed, as Derrida powerfully argues, the authority to construct and control the archive determines not only what is preserved but also who has the power to shape collective memory. This underscores the high stakes involved in archival formation and highlights how archival practices are always entangled with broader structures of authority and exclusion. Traditional archives, especially those constructed during colonial rule, often reflect the priorities and biases of the ruling elite.

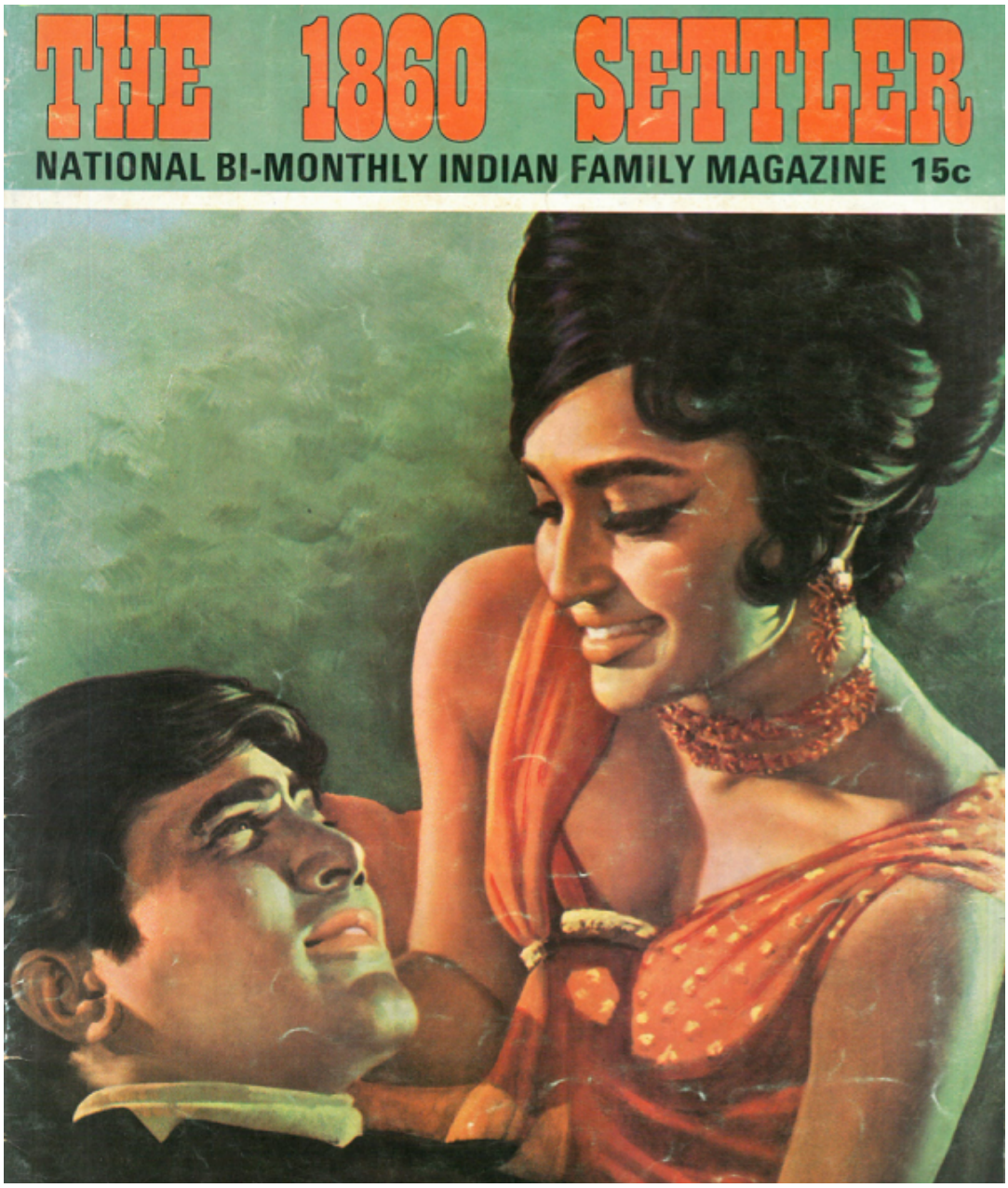


Fig.14 ***The 1860 Settler Magazine Cover*, print (year unknown)**
Source: Curating Culture (accessed 11 February 2025).

In contrast, alternative archives like *The 1860 Settler Magazine* provide counter-narratives that allow historically marginalised communities to reclaim and reconstruct their histories. However, *The 1860 Settler Magazine* is not just an archive; it is also an artistic and archaeological artefact. Its carefully curated content, which included advertisements, celebrity interviews, and letters from readers, reflects an intersection of material culture, visual art, and lived experience. This periodical encapsulates the aesthetic sensibilities, cultural aspirations,

and social discourses of South African Indians during the 1970s, functioning both as a historical record and as cultural production.

Art, as a form of self-representation, is deeply embedded in *The 1860 Settler Magazine*. The very act of featuring South African Indians, whether through advertisements, photographs, or community stories, can be seen as a resistance against mainstream white-centric media. The magazine's imagery, from fashion advertisements to Bollywood-inspired editorials, provides insight into how the community constructed and visualised its identity. It is both an archival source and an artistic expression, making it a vital artefact for historical excavation.

Archaeology extends beyond physical artefacts such as pottery and ruins; it also involves the excavation of cultural and ideological landscapes (Gero, 2007). *The 1860 Settler Magazine* serves as an archaeological artefact by offering a material record of social customs, beauty standards, consumer habits, and political consciousness within the South African Indian community.

The February/March 1973 issue of *The 1860 Settler Magazine* provides invaluable insights into the aspirations and identity politics of South African Indians during the apartheid era. The cover prominently features Bollywood superstar Rajesh Khanna and his co-star Asha Parekh, an immediate visual cue signalling the strong diasporic connection between South African Indian communities and Indian popular culture. As Pillay noted during a Zoom interview (Ellappa & Pillay, 2024), such imagery served a dual function: it reflected cultural nostalgia for a homeland many had never visited, while also affirming identity and visibility in a media landscape that largely excluded Indian representation. Bollywood was not merely a source of entertainment; it became a vital conduit for cultural belonging, identity affirmation, and resistance. For a community marginalised in mainstream South African print and broadcast media, the presence of recognisable Indian celebrities on magazine covers acted as both a symbolic homecoming and a visual assertion of worth and cultural relevance.

Inside the magazine, advertisements further serve as historical artefacts. An Omo advertisement features the family of legendary golfer Papwa Sewgolum, as well as Gail Naidoo, the daughter of Tony Harris, leader of the popular *Blue Ricks* band. These advertisements were more than commercial promotions; they functioned as cultural affirmations, showcasing South African Indians in roles of success, aspiration, and relatability. Unlike mainstream South African magazines, which predominantly featured white beauty ideals, *The 1860 Settler Magazine* offered an alternative lens, one in which South African Indians could see themselves reflected in their full diversity.

Fig. 15 **An Inside page of *The 1860 Settler Magazine*, print (year unknown)**
Source: Curating Culture (accessed 11 February 2025).

A critical aspect of *The 1860 Settler Magazine* was its interaction with its readership. The letters section offers a direct window into public sentiment, as readers openly discussed their views on the magazine's content. For instance, Mrs P. Jairaj expressed concern that the magazine lacked a strong Indian character and featured too many white models in its advertisements. This reveals an ongoing discourse within the community about cultural representation, assimilation, and identity preservation.

Such letters are not merely responses to the media; they are historical documents that reflect the evolving self-perception of South African Indians. They illustrate the tension between Westernisation and cultural retention, a theme that resonates deeply within diasporic communities. Despite occasional criticism, *The 1860 Settler Magazine* remained a popular publication, demonstrating its importance as both a community archive and a cultural artefact.

Both *The 1860 Settler Magazine* and *The Centenary of Indians in South Africa (1860–1960)* demonstrate the importance of alternative archives in reconstructing marginalised histories. These publications serve as valuable records of visual and material culture, with advertisements, photographs, and magazine layouts capturing aesthetic trends, cultural values, and social aspirations. Unlike state-controlled archives, which often reduce Indian histories to narratives of labour and political struggle, these community-driven publications highlight the social, cultural, and economic agency of South African Indians. Additionally, they function as counter-histories, challenging dominant archival narratives that frequently exclude the lived experiences of minority communities. Through their documentation of everyday life, aspirations, and evolving identities, these publications preserve histories that might otherwise be overlooked. By recognising these sources as valid historical and artistic records, we challenge the limitations of traditional archiving and expand the ways in which histories are preserved (Archary & Landman, 2021).

The lack of formal recognition and documentation of Indian artists in South Africa speaks to the broader erasure of marginalised histories within the country's artistic and cultural landscape (Govender, 2018). Creativity has always existed within the Indian community, despite systemic barriers that limited access to formal training and institutional validation (Desai, 2016). The early artists, such as Lutchman and Ramsamy Pillay, Ebrahim Badsha, and others, were self-taught and worked within a colonial and apartheid-era society that often excluded them from mainstream artistic spaces (Maharaj, 2009). Their contributions were significant, yet their works remain largely undocumented, fragmented, or even lost (Reddy, 2020).

As established above, art in South Africa has long served as a powerful medium for social critique and community building, a fact well-documented in the anti-apartheid struggle (Nolte,

1997). Indian South Africans have also made significant contributions to this artistic heritage, though less frequently highlighted. From the colonial period onward, Indian artists in South Africa drew on diverse aesthetic traditions and personal experiences to both preserve their cultural identity and respond creatively to oppressive structures.

By the late 19th and early 20th centuries, a small but growing number of Indian South Africans had the opportunity to study painting and drawing, often through mission schools or private tutelage (Desai & Vahed, 2007). Although documentation from this period is relatively scarce, surviving sketches, portraits, and landscapes reveal an evolving blend of Indian and European styles that served as a visual counterpoint to colonial narratives, as we saw in the works unpacked above. Although these artworks rarely contained overt political content, they bore witness to the lived realities of Indian communities, standing as crucial early examples of self-representation in a society structured to marginalise the voices of Indian, Coloured and Black individuals (Desai & Vahed, 2007).

The creative seeds planted during the colonial period informed subsequent generations of Indian South African artists, who would later produce anti-apartheid works explicitly. Whether focusing on forced removals under the Group Areas Act or highlighting educational inequalities, these artists drew from a legacy of cultural maintenance and aesthetic fusion begun decades earlier (Nolte, 1997). Their art became a channel through which they asserted both an Indian identity, inflected by language, religion, and diasporic memory, and a shared South African identity rooted in collective struggle against racial oppression.

Creativity is an intrinsic trait, and the absence of formal training did not prevent Indian artists from emerging in the early years. Among them were twin brothers Lutchman and Ramsamy Pillay, likely born in the early 1900s to indentured parents at the Muckle Neuk Sugar Estate. As self-taught artists, they developed their craft independently. Lutchman gained recognition for his portrait of his mother, Lutchmy, and his depiction of Sir Srinivasa Sastri, which was displayed at the Greenacres Department Store in Durban for nearly a year. This notable piece is now housed in the Documentation Centre at UKZN. (Naidoo, 2017). His brother, Ramsamy

(M.R.), whose work created one of the few surviving watercolours of Swami Shankeranand, a key figure in the establishment of the Hindu Maha Sabha in 1912 (Singh, 2015).

Fig. 16 **Ramsamy Pillay, *Swami Shankeranand.* Watercolour.**
Source: Curating Culture (accessed 11 February 2025).

Ebrahim Badsha, another crucial yet often overlooked figure, not only produced striking works, such as *Passage Way Douglas Lane,* but was also instrumental in fostering artistic communities through initiatives like the Bantu Indian Coloured Art Association (Chetty, 2013). His connections with major black artists, including Dumile Feni, emphasise the intersections of artistic and political struggles during apartheid (Pillay, 2011). Badsha's lost portrait of Chief Albert Luthuli serves as a poignant reminder of the gaps in South African art history and the need for continued reclamation of these narratives (Moodley, 2022).

Although often overshadowed by the more widely recognised Black or white protest artists of South Africa, Indian South Africans played, and continue to play, a crucial role in the country's artistic tapestry. From early colonial-era crafts and religious arts to the formation of cultural associations and the emergence of protest aesthetics, these artistic practices underscored the Indian community's resilience and creative agency in the face of systemic marginalisation (Raman, 2018). In doing so, Indian artists not only contributed significantly to South Africa's broader narrative of art as resistance but also carved out spaces for cultural affirmation that resonate to this day.

Fig. 17 **Ebrahim Badsha, *Passage Way Douglas Lane.* Painting.**
Source: Curating Culture (accessed 11 February 2025).

In acknowledging the erasure and incomplete documentation of these artists and their works, we must also recognise them as pioneers and trailblazers who laid the groundwork for contemporary Indian artists navigating and challenging South Africa's artistic and political landscapes today (Raman, 2018). Their creative output, though often relegated to the margins, provides an essential foundation for understanding the complex and often messy history of South African art (Govender, 2018).

As we move forward, the next chapter will explore how contemporary South African Indian artists are not only reclaiming their space within the art world but also using their practice as activism, challenging historical silences and asserting new narratives of identity, resistance, and belonging (Desai, 2016).

Chapter 3: Case Studies of Artists

3.1 Usha Seejarim: Background and Context

Usha Seejarim is a South African artist recognised for her capacity to reveal beauty and significance within everyday life. She employs ordinary household objects, including brooms, safety pins, and irons, to explore themes of gender, identity, and the frequently invisible labour underpinning daily existence. Through her practice, Seejarim elevates overlooked objects, prompting audiences to reconsider their perceptions of the mundane.

Born in 1974 in Bethal, Mpumalanga, Seejarim's early exposure to art began while she was still in school. Between 1990 and 1992, she studied art part-time at the Federated Union of Black Artists (FUBU), later pursuing a Diploma in Fine Arts at Witwatersrand Technikon (now the University of Johannesburg), graduating in 1996 (Seejarim, 2012). She acknowledges that while her family supported her decision to study art, they did not fully understand her choice (Seejarim, 2012).

After graduating, Seejarim quickly established herself within the South African art scene. She participated in the group exhibitions *50 Stories* (1997) and *Isintu* (1998), both of which received favourable criticism (Edmunds, 2001). In 1999, she earned a B.Tech. degree in Fine Arts from Witwatersrand Technikon and held her first solo exhibition, *Long Distance*, at the Generator Art Space in Johannesburg (Bedford, 2003). She was later invited to participate in the Fresh Artist in Residence programme at the South African National Gallery in Cape Town, which provided her with studio space, funding, and a published monograph on her work (Bedford, 2003). That same year, she and Thembinkosi Goniwe were joint winners of the MTN New Contemporaries award for her video submission, *From Eight to Four* (Bedford, 2003). In 2002, she was nominated for the FNB Vita Art Prize, and in 2003, she received the Ampersand Fellowship, granting her a two-month residency in New York (artthrob.co.za, 2007).

Seejarim's work consistently addresses themes of gender and domesticity, reflecting on the roles women occupy and the often-unacknowledged tasks required to sustain a household. The selection of materials—brooms, safety pins, and irons—immediately signals engagement with gendered labour, as these objects are traditionally associated with invisible, repetitive, and feminised forms of work. By foregrounding these materials, Seejarim makes visible the social

structures and expectations that have historically shaped women's lives, cuing viewers to approach her art through a feminist lens. By repurposing familiar objects, she transforms them into potent symbols of resilience and strength, encouraging viewers to reassess their relationships with everyday items and the value of domestic labour (Favis, 2012). However, it is important to acknowledge potential critiques of this approach. Some critics might argue that highlighting domestic labour in art runs the risk of romanticising the hardships faced by women, or of essentialising gender roles by associating certain tasks or objects too closely with women's experiences. Seejarim's nuanced engagement with these materials invites an ongoing dialogue about the meanings assigned to domestic work and avoids simplistic interpretations by recognising both the burdens and the agency present in everyday labour. Notable public commissions include *Pincode* (2005), a chandelier constructed from safety pins for the MTN head office in Johannesburg, and a mural for Eskom's Megawatt Park in Woodmead.

A significant milestone in her career came in 2008 when she was commissioned to create ten sculptures representing the ten clauses of the Freedom Charter. These sculptures, installed at the Walter Sisulu Square of Dedication in Kliptown, were commissioned by the Johannesburg Development Agency (joberg.org.za). In the same year, she designed a large mesh sunscreen for the South African Embassy in Addis Ababa, using pop rivets embedded in mesh screens to depict Khoisan rock art (Morojele, 2010). Additionally, she created *Why Men*, a public lighting project in Central Sandton, which won the Business and Arts South Africa (BASA) Award in both 2008 and 2009.

Beyond her artistic practice, Seejarim is deeply committed to arts education and social engagement. She obtained a certificate in teacher training in the visual arts through the Curriculum Development Project for Arts and Culture Education and Training (ushaseejarim.com). She worked with the organisation for several years, training educators on how to integrate visual arts into the school curriculum (Favis, 2012). Her passion for teaching also extends to working with individuals with disabilities and visual impairments, helping them create and appreciate art (Favis, 2012). She has had a long-standing association with the Visual Arts and Crafts Academy, serving as a trainer, facilitator, and manager.

In 2008, Seejarim obtained a Master of Fine Arts from the University of the Witwatersrand and continued lecturing part-time at UNISA and Wits. In 2009, she co-founded *Such Initiative* with

artist Hannelie Coetzee, a public arts organisation focused on eco-conscious art projects that engage artists, craftsmen, and community members.

Seejarim's work has been exhibited widely in South Africa and internationally, including venues in Paris, Minneapolis, Tokyo, Belgium, and Havana. She has held six solo exhibitions to date (ushaseejarim.com). Through her art, Seejarim bridges the personal and political, employing everyday objects to critique gender roles and labour structures in post-apartheid South Africa. By foregrounding the overlooked, her practice demonstrates that the mundane possesses significant power and meaning, influencing conceptions of identity, history, and culture.

3.1.2 Analysis of Key Artworks and Themes

The exhibition Venus at Home (2012) represents a pivotal moment in Usha Seejarim's career, initiating her sustained engagement with domestic objects—a motif that has become central to her artistic practice. This exhibition included key works such as Squeeze (2012), United by Stitches (2021), and Lotus Flower (2012), in which Seejarim transformed everyday items like brooms, ironing boards, and clothes pegs into significant artistic statements. These works investigate the tension between the ordinary and the extraordinary by situating domestic objects within the gallery context, thereby challenging conventional understandings of art, femininity, and domesticity.

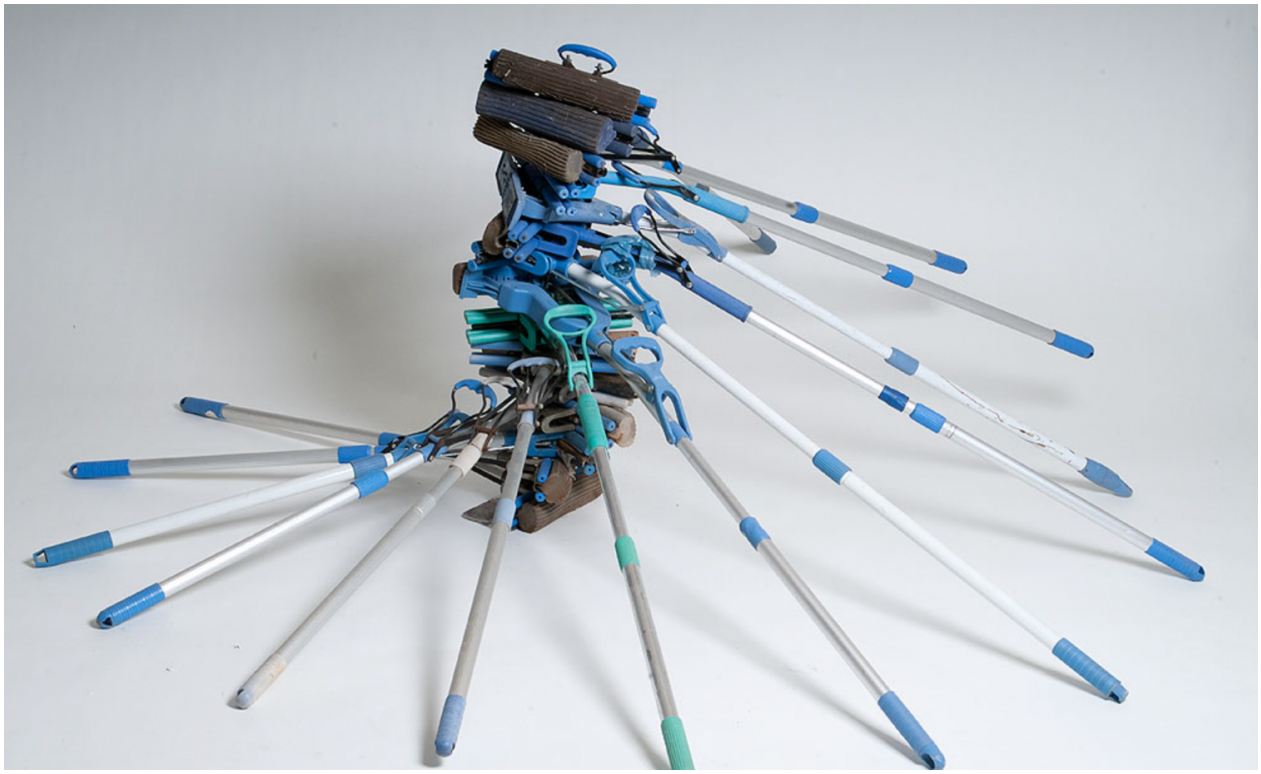


Fig. 18 **Usha Seejarim, *Squeeze* (2012), Mixed media installation**

Source: Goodman Gallery

Fig.19 **Usha Seejarim, *United by Stitches* (2021), Mixed media installation**

Source: Goodman Gallery

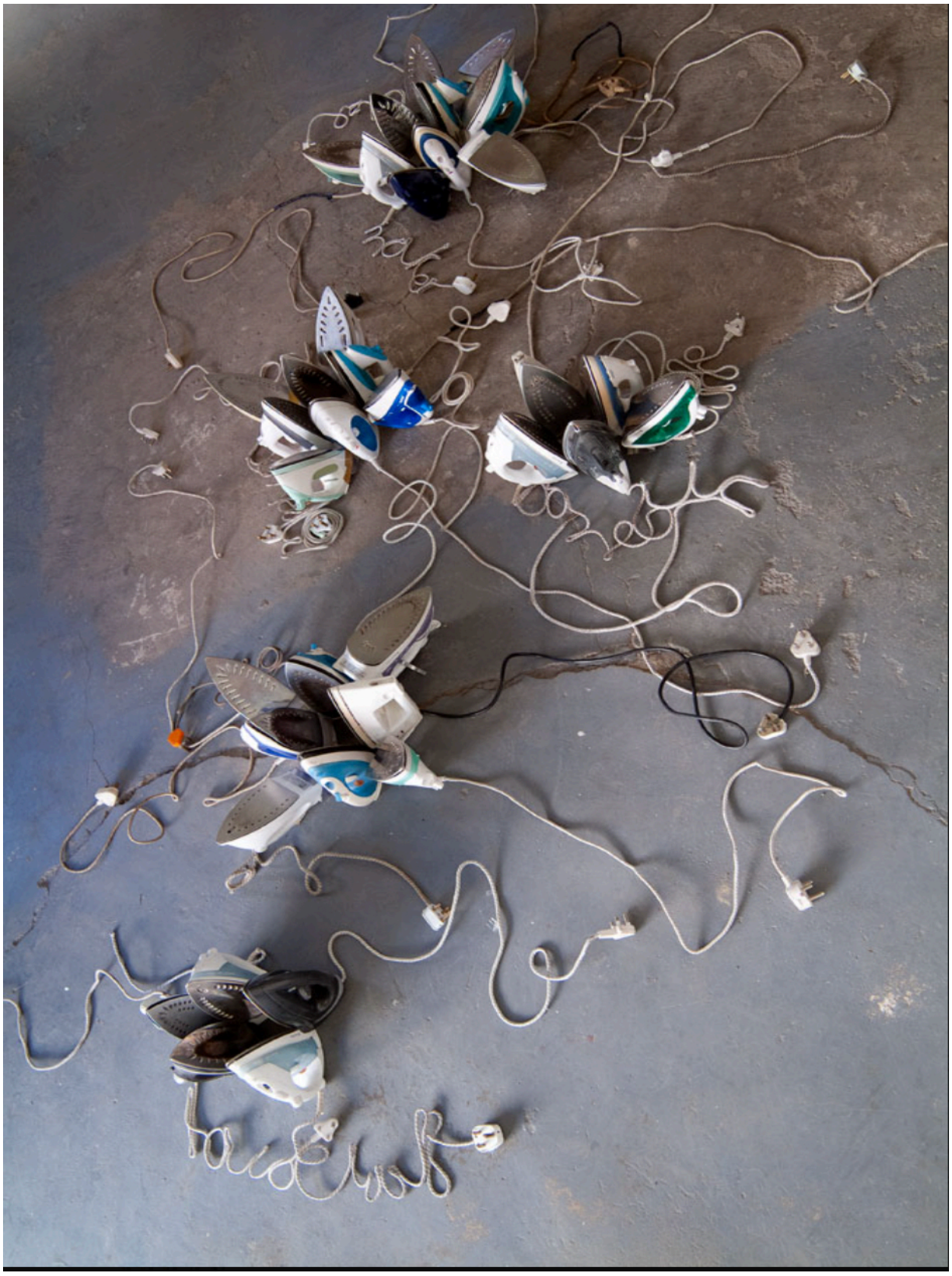


Fig.20 **Usha Seejarim, *Lotus Flower* (2012), Mixed media sculpture**

Source: Goodman Gallery

The incorporation of everyday objects in contemporary art frequently underscores the intersection between the mundane and the sacred. This juxtaposition aligns with Dadaist traditions, where ordinary objects are elevated through artistic intervention (Richter, 1965). Similarly, feminist artists have appropriated domestic materials to contest patriarchal structures and redefine the value of women's work (Parker, 1984). Seejarim participates in this discourse by transforming ordinary materials into compelling artistic statements, thereby shifting their significance from the domestic sphere to broader cultural and feminist contexts.

Seejarim further intertwines the mundane and the sacred through her engagement with ritualistic repetition. The repetitive nature of household tasks, such as sweeping or ironing, parallels religious and spiritual practices in which repetition signifies devotion and transcendence (Irigaray, 1993). The physical sensations of these actions—the rasping sound of a broom as it traces patterns across the floor, the steady hiss and heat rising from a coal iron, the rhythmic clack of laundry pegs snapping shut—translate repetition from a mere concept into a bodily experience for both artist and viewer. By foregrounding these sensory details in her artwork, Seejarim elevates everyday gestures beyond utilitarian function, positioning them within a context of reverence and contemplation. This transformation interrogates hierarchical binaries that have historically devalued domestic labour in contrast to artistic production.

Seejarim's focus on everyday domestic labour and her transformative use of household materials directly correspond with the central themes of this thesis, which examines how South African women artists of Indian heritage employ art to reclaim and challenge marginalised narratives of race, gender, and cultural identity. In a 2023 interview, Seejarim articulated her resistance to rigid categorisation, particularly within feminist discourse. Although her work frequently engages with feminist issues, she avoids explicitly identifying as a feminist, instead asserting that her practice is shaped by the work itself rather than by external definitions. This self-positioning invites reflection on the limitations and complexities of labels, suggesting that her art may be more productively understood through its affect and context, rather than by trying to fit it within prescriptive frameworks.

In positioning my own analysis, I recognise and respect Seejarim's scepticism toward labels, particularly the category of feminist art, while also engaging with the critical tools these frameworks provide. My approach is to foreground the ways her work participates in and complicates feminist and decolonial discourses, without imposing definitive classifications.

Rather than viewing her resistance to labels as a refusal of meaning, I interpret it as an active strategy that opens up interpretive space, allowing for nuance and multiplicity. This thesis therefore, situates Seejarim's art both within and beyond conventional theoretical boundaries, maintaining an attentiveness to the meanings generated through her materials, methods, and the contexts in which she works.

According to bell hooks (1990), the reimagining of the domestic sphere can act as an act of resistance against patriarchal norms that confine women to these spaces. Seejarim's work embodies hooks' concept of "homeplace," where domesticity is not solely a reflection of female oppression but also a site of agency and cultural production. This tension between oppression and empowerment is particularly evident in Seejarim's engagement with household objects, such as the coal iron inherited from her father. The iron, historically associated with female labour in maintaining the household, becomes a culturally loaded object in her practice. This transformation echoes Homi Bhabha's (1994) notion of cultural translation, in which objects and practices from the private realm acquire new meanings when relocated into the public sphere. For Seejarim, the coal iron is both a personal and a collective symbol, a representation of family histories of labour as well as broader themes of domesticity, resilience, and memory.

By recontextualising the iron within her artwork, Seejarim challenges and subverts the gendered connotations it carries, turning it into a statement of creative power. This transformation parallels the practice of South African artist Alka Dass, whose mixed media works employ dried flowers to capture and preserve personal and cultural memories. Dass's use of flowers, another symbol often coded as feminine, highlights the dualities of fragility and strength, life and death, a dichotomy that resonates with Seejarim's practice. Both artists invoke symbols of the domestic, whether through irons, pegs or flowers, to articulate their identities and the complex intersections of race, gender, and belonging. Through these symbols, they disrupt the boundaries of "high art" and challenge the cultural meaning embedded in everyday items.

Furthermore, Seejarim's work aligns with Judith Butler's (1990) concept of performativity, particularly in how she frames domestic labour as both a ritual and a performance. *Wash Cycle* (2021) is a video work in which she methodically pins laundry pegs onto her body. Initially conceived as an exploration of domestic ritual, the process unexpectedly highlighted the

physical imprints and pain left by the pegs, serving as a visual metaphor for the invisible burdens women carry in their daily lives. The repetitive nature of this act reinforced the idea that domestic labour is not only physically taxing but also deeply ingrained in social conditioning.

The idea for *Wash Cycle* emerged from Seejarim's reflection on everyday tasks, particularly the act of hanging laundry. She recalled how the simple routine of pinning pegs onto her clothing while doing laundry led her to wonder what would happen if she applied them to her own body. The use of multi-coloured pegs mimicked the randomness of those she had used in her previous home, further reinforcing the connection to domestic memory. What began as an intuitive gesture transformed into an exploration of gendered labour, endurance, and the often-unacknowledged toll of repetitive household tasks.

The work strongly engages with concepts of invisible suffering and the societal expectations placed upon women. As the performance progressed, the extended pinning process left visible marks on Seejarim's skin, underscoring how domestic duties—often regarded as insignificant—can have enduring physical and emotional effects. Thus, *Wash Cycle* serves as a meditation on endurance and the silent sacrifices women make within the domestic sphere. While grounded in personal experience, the piece addresses broader narratives concerning gendered labour and the historical undervaluation of women's contributions in both domestic and professional contexts.

A turning point in Seejarim's understanding of her lineage occurred in 2019, when she discovered her maternal grandmother was born in Nairobi—a family detail that had been hidden and unspoken for years. This revelation brought to light silenced narratives of trauma and resilience running through her family, deepening her sense of identity and prompting her to look closer at the generational impact of hardship. In constructing this case study, I selected sources based on their ability to shed light on these turning points and the underlying themes of inheritance and identity. I focused on interviews with Seejarim that address her personal history and motivations, key artworks that demonstrate thematic continuity across her career, and family narratives that are referenced in her own statements or highlighted in critical analyses. Priority was given to artworks and accounts, such as those relating to the ongoing series Mending the Matriarch, that directly engage with acts of repair and intergenerational

healing. By combining artist testimony, representative artworks, and family histories, this selection approach provides a layered and methodologically transparent analysis of Seejarim's practice.

By situating her practice within the domestic, Seejarim engages in a broader feminist discourse that challenges the traditional hierarchies of art-making. Rozsika Parker's (1984) seminal text, *The Subversive Stitch*, underscores the reclamation of craft as a form of feminist resistance, and Seejarim's work builds upon this legacy. *Mending the Matriarch* exemplifies this approach, transforming heavy, utilitarian objects into delicate and intricate artworks. This act of stitching into objects traditionally associated with domestic labour serves as both a literal and a symbolic gesture, acknowledging the pain of past generations while simultaneously enacting care and restoration.

Seejarim's work ultimately dissolves boundaries between household and gallery, personal and public, material and symbolic. This duality reflects her negotiation of identity as both artist and homemaker. Her practice redefines everyday tasks within the framework of feminist art, affirming the cultural significance of domestic labour. Alongside artists such as Dass, Seejarim contributes to the broader discourse of reclaiming narratives in the South African context, where domesticity, often overlooked in mainstream discourse, is repositioned as a site of cultural significance and creative potential. Both artists articulate their identities through their work, challenging conventional boundaries of art and prompting viewers to reconsider the value of women's lives and labour.

However, there are both similarities and marked contrasts in the ways Seejarim and Dass approach domesticity, materiality, and identity. Seejarim's use of utilitarian objects like coal irons, brooms, and safety pins is often heavily process-based, foregrounding repetition, endurance, and the physicality of labour. Her installations and performances create multisensory experiences that are anchored in acts of care, repair, and the visceral realities of women's everyday work. In contrast, Alka Dass' practice uses ephemera such as dried flowers, textiles, and family photographs, focusing on preservation, fragility, and the passage of time. Where Seejarim's work is often outwardly tactile and emphatic in its engagement with collectively resonant symbols, Dass's art tends towards a more introspective and poetic evocation of memory, loss, and healing. Yet both artists engage with forms of ritual: Seejarim

through the repetitive gestures of stitching or pinning, bringing attention to the marks left on the body and psyche, and Dass through acts of careful arrangement and archiving of delicate materials.

Moreover, while both artists respond to the marginalisation of South African Indian women, Seejarim often foregrounds the socio-economic narratives of migration and labour through material choices, whereas Dass explores affective registers tied to the personal and familial, focusing on the interplay between vulnerability and resilience. Their practices thus reflect complementary strategies in representing identity: Seejarim's assertive transformation of the mundane into an enduring statement, and Dass's quiet reclamation of tenderness and memory.

Importantly, these artistic interventions also resonate deeply with South African communities beyond academic circles, speaking to the lived realities and histories of countless families. By highlighting experiences that are shared across generations and social backgrounds, Seejarim's work not only documents but also affirms the dignity and resilience found in everyday acts. This makes her art both a point of scholarly analysis and a meaningful reflection for local audiences who recognise their own stories and struggles in the artworks. In this way, Seejarim's practice bridges critical theory and community memory, enabling broader engagement and fostering dialogue among diverse South African audiences.

The notion of "mothering" within African feminist thought is complex and deeply embedded in cultural, communal, and socio-political contexts that extend beyond biological definitions. Seejarim's reflections on her own family history, gendered expectations, and artistic practice demonstrate how personal narratives intersect with larger feminist concerns. By engaging with these themes, her work not only preserves the histories of those who came before her but also reclaims agency for future generations, asserting that domesticity can be a site of resistance, reinvention, and artistic expression.

Fig.21 Usha Seejarim, *Wash Cycle* (2021), Film Still, Video, 00:05:49

Source: Goodman Gallery

African feminist scholars emphasise that motherhood in African societies is a multifaceted role encompassing emotional labour, societal expectations, and community engagement. This nuanced understanding of mothering resonates with Usha Seejarim's artistic practice, particularly as she draws on her experiences of navigating her roles as both an artist and a mother in post-apartheid South Africa. For Seejarim, "mothering" is more than a biological role; it is a lens through which she interprets and responds to the world.

Adrienne Rich, in her work Of Woman Born: Motherhood as Experience and Institution (1976), makes an essential distinction between "motherhood" as an institution shaped by patriarchy and "mothering" as the experience of nurturing and caregiving. This distinction is crucial to understanding Usha Seejarim's art, particularly as she reclaims the narrative around domestic labour. Her work, which often features household objects like brooms, irons, and safety pins, speaks to the lived reality of mothering, transforming these everyday items into profound symbols of resilience and care. Rich's idea that mothering involves an act of resistance against institutional expectations aligns with Seejarim's creative process, where she elevates the mundane into powerful statements about gender and identity.

African feminist scholars have long explored mothering as a communal, political, and empowering role. Oyèrónké Oyěwùmí, in The Invention of Women: Making an African Sense of Western Gender Discourses (1997), argues that the imposition of Western gender roles disrupted traditional African understandings of caregiving. In many African cultures, the role of mothering is inherently communal, encompassing responsibilities that extend beyond the nuclear family (Oyěwùmí, 1997). Usha Seejarim's work captures this communal aspect by emphasising domestic labour, often transforming objects linked to caregiving into works of art that reflect the broader social value of nurturing roles. Her art challenges the narrow definition of mothering by recognising its collective impact, a theme that Oyěwùmí highlights in her writing.

Similarly, Nkiru Nzegwu, in Family Matters: Feminist Concepts in African Philosophy of Culture (2006), discusses how caregiving in African societies is often seen as a shared responsibility involving extended family and kinship networks. This communal concept of motherhood is at the core of Seejarim's artwork, as she uses everyday tools to represent both personal and collective experiences of care (Nzegwu, 2006). The act of turning domestic objects into art speaks to how mothering extends beyond an individual role—it represents collective resilience, where the mundane becomes symbolic of shared strength and interconnectedness.

The concept of "Motherism," as introduced by Filomina Steady in The Black Woman Cross-Culturally (1981), emphasises the nurturing, healing, and interconnected aspects of African womanhood. Steady's notion of Motherism views mothering as an active, dynamic process that involves nurturing and supporting the community at large. Usha Seejarim's art aligns with this ethos, especially in how she reclaims domestic labour through everyday objects. Her practice transforms these objects, often associated with women's work, into powerful artistic expressions that acknowledge the nurturing and sustaining aspects of motherhood (Steady, 1981). This transformation is an act of empowerment, elevating the unseen work of mothers into the public domain and celebrating its significance in the community.

Amina Mama, a Nigerian-South African feminist and academic, explores how African women navigate their multiple identities, including the visible and invisible labour associated with caregiving. In Beyond the Masks: Race, Gender and Subjectivity (1995), Mama discusses how African women must constantly balance their responsibilities within both the family and the broader socio-political landscape. For Mama, mothering in African contexts is a complex negotiation of care, resistance, and survival. This is reflected in Seejarim's work, where the use

of everyday household items highlights the labour that often remains invisible but is essential to the functioning of families and communities (Mama, 1995). Her art reveals the complexity and depth of mothering, positioning it as both a personal and public act that involves negotiation, resilience, and creativity.

Further expanding on these ideas, Sara Ruddick's concept of "maternal thinking" from Maternal Thinking: Toward a Politics of Peace (1989) describes mothering as a practice shaped by repetitive care and deep concern for others. Usha Seejarim embodies this perspective in her art, as she recontextualises the objects of everyday labour, such as safety pins and brooms, turning them into metaphors for the intellectual and emotional work involved in caregiving (Ruddick, 1989). This transformation challenges viewers to recognise the value in the repetitive, invisible actions that define the nurturing aspects of mothering.

In her work, Seejarim draws on diverse ideas about mothering, aligning herself with African feminist thought that celebrates the power of care, the importance of community, and the creativity embedded in nurturing and sustaining life. Her art speaks to the undervalued labour of mothers, making it visible and central to her artistic narrative. By doing so, Seejarim reclaims these domestic symbols, transforming them into powerful emblems of identity, resilience, and cultural expression. Her work not only challenges societal constructs but also elevates mothering to a form of artistic creation—a radical act of visibility and empowerment that resonates deeply within African feminist discourse.

In *Wash Cycle* (2021), Seejarim explores the physical and emotional labour associated with domestic chores. The performance is not just about the act of hanging laundry, but also a commentary on the repetitive, often unnoticed labour that defines many women's lives. The physical pain and the imprints left by the pegs on her body symbolise the lasting impact of these daily tasks on women's bodies and psyches.

Seejarim's work is a powerful example of how autobiography and autoethnography can be employed in art. Her pieces often draw from her personal history and everyday experiences, allowing her to address broader socio-cultural issues through a deeply personal lens. This approach enables her to create art that is both intimate and universally resonant.

The idea of autobiography and autoethnography in Usha Seejarim's art practice is foundational to the way she communicates broader socio-cultural issues through the lens of personal experience. Autobiography, as a genre, concerns the artist's life story, while autoethnography situates personal experiences within the wider social and cultural context, creating a bridge between the individual and the collective (Ellis, 2004). Through her use of these approaches, Seejarim transforms her own life experiences into a universal language that allows viewers to connect with her work on both an intimate and socio-political level.

Autobiography in art allows the artist to use their personal history as both subject and material, and Usha Seejarim often does this by incorporating elements from her own life into her art. For instance, Seejarim uses everyday domestic objects such as brooms, irons, and safety pins, items associated with the labour of caregiving and housekeeping that are often part of her own lived experience as a mother (Seejarim, 2017). By using these objects, she tells a story about her own life while inviting viewers to reflect on the broader implications of domestic labour and gender roles. In The Autobiographical Self in Art, Nancy Miller (1991) discusses how the personal, when shared in an artistic form, can disrupt traditional narratives and open up new spaces for dialogue. Seejarim's autobiographical approach challenges preconceived notions about women's work, showing how the personal can be a powerful site of resistance.

Autoethnography, on the other hand, takes the autobiographical one step further by embedding personal narratives within the cultural context. Seejarim's work can be seen as an autoethnography because it reflects not only her individual experiences but also the larger cultural and societal structures that shape them. As Carolyn Ellis (2004) explains in The Ethnographic I: A Methodological Novel about Autoethnography, autoethnography "seeks to describe and systematically analyse personal experience in order to understand cultural experience" (p. 37). Seejarim's use of domestic tools, which are culturally associated with women and their labour, allows her to critically explore the way these objects represent broader cultural norms regarding gender and work. Her work, therefore, becomes a reflection of both her own story and the collective experiences of women within the socio-political framework of post-apartheid South Africa.

Usha Seejarim's use of autobiography and autoethnography is particularly powerful in exploring her identity as a South African woman of Indian descent. By drawing from her heritage and the cultural practices that have shaped her life, Seejarim negotiates her place within both her cultural

community and the broader South African context. For example, her works that incorporate repetitive patterns or domestic items not only reflect her own experiences of caregiving but also evoke the rhythms and routines characteristic of many women's lives, particularly those from culturally traditional households. This reflects what Homi Bhabha (1994) terms "the third space," a place of hybridity where different aspects of identity intersect and are negotiated. By presenting these elements of her identity in her artwork, Seejarim invites viewers to consider the complexity of identity formation in a multicultural society.

Furthermore, Seejarim's use of personal experience to address broader socio-cultural themes allows her to create art that resonates universally while remaining rooted in her own history. In her work, the boundary between the personal and the political is constantly blurred, which is a central tenet of feminist art-making. According to Julia Swindells in *The Uses of Autobiography* (1995), autobiography can serve as a political act, particularly for marginalised groups, by providing a platform for voices that are often silenced. Seejarim's use of her personal experiences as a woman, a mother, and an artist highlights the labour and experiences of countless women, effectively turning the personal into the universal and using her art as a means of cultural commentary.

"The story is our escort; without it, we are blind. Does the blind man own his escort? No, neither do we the story; rather it is the story that owns us and directs us" (Achebe, 1987, p. 50). Chinua Achebe's evocative statement draws attention to the reciprocal nature of storytelling, where stories are not static possessions but dynamic entities that guide and shape our understanding of the world, our identities, and our histories. This conceptualisation positions storytelling as an act of both guidance and relationality, intertwining personal narratives with collective memory. For Usha Seejarim, this concept is profoundly relevant. Her art does not merely recount her personal story; it actively engages with broader cultural and historical narratives, positioning her as a custodian of her heritage and a participant in a larger dialogue about identity, memory, and resilience.

Her work becomes an escort, not only guiding her audience through the layered histories of South African Indian women but also creating a space for reflection and engagement with the socio-political frameworks that shaped these lives. This relational function of storytelling through art is not static but an active, ongoing process that draws upon embodied knowledge systems, memory, and material culture to foster both individual and collective understanding.

Ruth Simbao's scholarship provides a compelling lens through which to explore storytelling as an escort. In her research, Simbao (2006) interrogates the role of artists and artworks as "escorts" that guide audiences through complex terrains of history, identity, and lived experience. Escorting, in Simbao's framework, involves more than simply leading; it signifies a relational dynamic among the artist, the artwork, and the audience, in which the artist becomes a mediator, navigating the boundaries between personal and collective narratives.

Simbao's work on performance and situational interpretation underscores how art and embodied practices animate objects and histories, allowing them to traverse time and space. This perspective aligns closely with Achebe's metaphor, emphasising the interconnectedness of storytelling, where stories are not owned but experienced and shared. Both Simbao and Achebe suggest that stories act as bridges, allowing creators and audiences to move through cultural, historical, and emotional landscapes in ways that are deeply relational and transformative. Escorting, then, becomes an act of interpretative mobility, a dynamic process that continually reshapes meaning through performance, audience engagement, and shifting contexts.

The idea of escorting is further enriched by Jay Pather's discussion of performance art, which he describes as privileging the body over text as a primary medium of storytelling. What is now termed "live art" is, in fact, an extension of performance art, a field deeply rooted in embodiment and relational experience. Pather (2019) critiques the dominance of textual and scripted approaches in traditional art forms, arguing that "performance refuses fixity and is an act of continual negotiation" (Pather, 2019, p. 45). Similarly, Simbao (2006) asserts that "live performance exists only in the present, and thus resists the museological impulse to fix meaning in time" (Simbao, 2006, p. 22). Achebe, in his discussion of storytelling, echoes this notion when he states, "the story is our escort; without it, we are blind" (Achebe, 2000, p. 132). His words reinforce the fluid and ever-evolving nature of narrative and meaning in performance art.

Simbao's analysis of performance within Zambian cultural festivals provides a crucial context for understanding the concept of escorting beyond a metaphorical framework. Escorting, in this context, is not simply about leading or guiding but about actively enacting and negotiating meaning through movement, ritual, and performance. In her discussion of Chief Mununga at the 2004 Shila Mabila ceremony, Simbao (2006) describes how the chief "escorted" his carved

wooden staff through a performative act that transformed it from a static object into a dynamic conduit of power and meaning. Through theatrical gestures, such as waving the staff in the air and pretending to row a boat against the current, Mununga animated the symbolic attributes of the staff's carvings, allowing them to acquire new resonances within the ceremony's context. In this way, escorting becomes an active process of meaning-making that integrates material objects, ritual, and audience participation.

This notion of escorting as an embodied, performative act resonates with the ways in which artworks engage with histories of labour, resilience, and survival. In Seejarim's work, for instance, this privileging of embodied knowledge is evident in her performative engagement with domestic objects. The coal irons she stitches into are not mere relics of the past; they are tactile, physical carriers of memory. By interacting with these objects through the embodied act of stitching, Seejarim transforms them into powerful symbols of resilience, labour, and cultural survival. This act of stitching draws on what Pather would describe as "performance as lived practice," a process that transcends textual limitations, relying instead on the physicality of the artist's actions to convey meaning (Pather, 2019, p. 47). The stitches themselves become traces of Seejarim's engagement with the object, creating a dialogue between the artist's body, the object's history, and the audience's interpretation.

In both Simbao and Pather's scholarship, the notion of escorting destabilises fixed interpretations, urging us to consider how meaning is continually reshaped through movement, interaction, and performance. Escorting, then, is not merely a metaphor but a methodology of engagement that foregrounds relationality, transformation, and the active participation of artists, audiences, and objects in the ongoing production of meaning.

The coal irons in *Mending the Matriarch* (2022) by Usha Seejarim serve as profound symbols of both domestic labour and cultural memory, deeply embedded in the history of South African Indian women. These heavy cast-iron objects, traditionally heated with coal or embers, were not just household tools but tangible connections to a past shaped by indenture, resilience, and survival. Their presence in Indian homes speaks directly to the experiences of indentured labourers brought to Natal between 1860 and 1911, when over 152,000 Indians were transported under British colonial rule (Desai & Vahed, 2010). Many of these labourers worked on sugarcane plantations under harsh conditions, while others, particularly men, were employed in railway

construction, where coal was a fundamental resource. The coal iron, therefore, becomes an extension of these histories—representing both the industrial labour of indentured men and the domestic and economic survival strategies of indentured women and their descendants.

For Indian women, the coal iron was more than a household appliance; it was a means of economic survival. Many women, particularly those whose families transitioned from indentured labour to small-scale domestic work, took in laundry and ironing as a source of income (Meer, 1985). This work was labour-intensive, requiring skill and endurance, much like the broader struggles of Indian women who carried the weight of both financial sustenance and domestic labour. Within families, these irons became heirlooms, passed down across generations as markers of endurance, resourcefulness, and memory.

In my own family, coal irons were treasured possessions, carefully preserved and handed down from one generation to the next. My grandmother, who relied on ironing for income, inherited her coal iron from her mother, a woman who had lived through the indenture system and later worked in domestic service to provide for her family. This iron, with its weighty presence and worn handle, was more than just a tool—it was a testament to the labour, struggles, and sacrifices of the women who came before me. Over time, it became an object of reverence, a silent yet powerful reminder of the resilience that defined their lives.

Fig.22 Usha Seejarim, *Mending the Matriarch* (2022), Mixed media installation

Source: Goodman Gallery

Fig.23 Usha Seejarim, *Mending the Matriarch* (2022), Mixed media installation

Source: Goodman Gallery

Seejarim's artistic intervention, stitching and embroidering into these irons, elevates them from mere utilitarian artefacts to vessels of intergenerational memory. The act of sewing, traditionally a feminine practice associated with care, repair, and resilience, transforms these rigid, industrial objects into sites of storytelling and reclamation (Baderoon, 2014). By embedding delicate stitches into the iron's surface, Seejarim's act of stitching into these objects transforms them into escorts, guiding viewers into the intergenerational experiences of South African Indian women and the socio-political contexts that shaped their lives. In *Mending the Matriarch*, the coal irons do not simply symbolise domesticity; they become carriers of lived histories, embodying the endurance of indentured women who laboured in colonial economies and later forged paths toward economic self-sufficiency.

This transformation of coal irons into bearers of memory and testimony aligns with theories of the "aliveness" of objects, which challenge the notion of material culture as inert or static. Anthropologist Arjun Appadurai (1986) argues that objects possess "social lives," accumulating meaning as they move through different temporal and relational contexts. Similarly, Jane Bennett (2010) expands on this idea through her theory of "vibrant matter," suggesting that objects exert agency and hold an affective charge, shaped by their interactions with people and histories. Seejarim's intervention activates the coal irons as more than relics of the past; her stitches animate them, imbuing them with tactile traces of labour, resistance, and continuity. Through this process, the irons do not merely recall history; they *perform* it, engaging with viewers and evoking the embodied experiences of the women who used them.

Seejarim's transformation of the coal irons into dynamic carriers of memory also resonates with Ruth Simbao's (2007) concept of the "dancing of objects," which explores how material artefacts are not merely passive but actively participate in cultural narratives and performative histories. Simbao draws from Robert Farris Thompson's (1983) seminal work on African art, which emphasises how objects possess kinetic energy and embody movement, even when seemingly static. In *Mending the Matriarch*, the coal irons, traditionally associated with repetitive, laborious domestic work, are reanimated through the act of stitching, evoking a sense of motion and vitality. The embroidery becomes a visual trace of movement, suggesting the hands that once manoeuvred these irons and the generational labour embedded within them.

Thompson's (1983) concept of *musicality in material culture*, the idea that objects hold rhythm, resonance, and performativity, applies to Seejarim's work, where the coal irons seem to

“dance” between past and present, between function and symbolism. Much like how Thompson describes African sculptural forms as embodying rhythm through implied motion, Seejarim’s coal irons, activated by thread, hold a similar rhythmic tension. They become not just relics of indenture and domestic labour but also dynamic participants in storytelling, resisting historical erasure by asserting presence. In this way, *Mending the Matriarch* enlivens the irons, transforming them into pulsating, animated witnesses to the resilience of South African Indian women across generations.

Usha Seejarim’s work exemplifies how personal narratives, domestic labour, and cultural memory intersect within a broader socio-historical framework, which scholars such as Ruth Simbao (2015) have termed *life expression*. A compelling example is Seejarim’s Mending the Matriarch (2022), which prominently features coal irons in its sculptural composition. Historically, coal irons were once commonplace in many households across South Africa and the Indian diaspora, symbolising both a reliance on physical labour and the meticulous duties often relegated to women within patriarchal, and frequently colonial, contexts. There is, however, an inherent tension in revisiting these narratives: while Seejarim’s work honours the endurance and resourcefulness of matriarchal figures, it also risks romanticising the hardship and invisibility of their labour. By naming this tension, the work resists reducing domestic toil to mere heroism, acknowledging both the burdens and the strength embedded in these everyday acts. By repurposing these irons, Seejarim evokes the resilience and burden of domestic work, suggesting how these mundane tasks served as both a literal and symbolic means of ironing out the challenges endured by matriarchal figures.

Theoretical frameworks from feminist, postcolonial, and material culture studies converge and diverge in illuminating this work. Feminist theory provides a means to analyse how domestic objects in Seejarim’s practice foreground gendered labour and the complexities of women’s agency, interrogating societal structures that have historically devalued women’s efforts. Postcolonial theory offers a lens through which to understand the layered histories of migration, indenture, and resistance embedded in the material culture of South African Indian women, particularly in how these objects speak to both personal and collective resilience under colonial and apartheid rule. Meanwhile, material culture theory emphasises the affective and social 'lives' of everyday objects, attending to how materiality itself participates in the construction of memory and identity. While all three frameworks recognise the significance of objects as

mediators of meaning, feminist and postcolonial approaches often foreground critique and emancipation, whereas material culture theory privileges the agency and aliveness of things themselves. In analysing Seejarim's work, my approach synthesises these perspectives, clarifying how domestic objects like coal irons operate at the intersection of gender, history, and embodiment. This synthesis makes explicit my theoretical contribution: demonstrating how a multi-faceted approach reveals new insights into the intertwined dynamics of labour, memory, and identity in contemporary South African art.

The title, *Mending the Matriarch*, underscores a dual objective: to honour and to heal the generational traumas carried by women, particularly in communities shaped by apartheid-era inequalities and persistent patriarchal norms. "Mending" implies repair and renewal—an active process of addressing the fractures inflicted by history and social structures on family lineages. Equally significant is Seejarim's use of red stitching, which not only draws the viewer's eye across the assemblage but also references deeper symbolic layers. In many cultural traditions, red connotes both life and sacrifice; as a thread, it can represent the unbroken line connecting ancestral legacies with present-day experiences. In this context, the red stitching becomes a powerful metaphor for tying together personal and collective memory, hinting at the bloodlines, labour, and intergenerational bonds that hold families and, by extension, communities together.

By weaving elements of daily life into her art, Seejarim situates her personal story and the broader histories of South African Indian women within a visual narrative that resists erasure. *Mending the Matriarch (2022)*, therefore, operates not only as a tribute to the unrecognised labour of women but also as a form of "life writing," wherein each object and stitch contributes to a larger tapestry of cultural self-definition (Smith & Watson, 2010). Through these strategies, Seejarim exemplifies how an artist can engage with *post memory* (Hirsch, 2012) and embedded oral traditions, creating a space where the domestic is reclaimed as a site of both personal testimony and communal healing.

Achebe's assertion that "the story owns us" is particularly resonant in this context. The coal irons, reimagined through Seejarim's art, do not simply recount stories; they embody them, guiding viewers into a deeper understanding of the complexities of labour, gender, and cultural survival. This act of reimagining aligns with Simbao's (2006) framework of escorting as a

relational and performative process. The coal irons, as carriers of memory, become agents of storytelling, facilitating a dialogue between the past and the present, the personal and the collective.

The embodied nature of Usha Seejarim's work is central to how she invites audiences to engage, not only intellectually, but also emotionally and physically. This is particularly evident in her ongoing series, including *Mending the Matriarch* (2022), where she utilises coal irons as both material and metaphor. The coal irons, historically domestic tools used by women in spaces of labour and care, hold the weight of past generations. Their rusted surfaces and solid, heavy forms create a multisensory experience that extends beyond mere visual appreciation, compelling a bodily engagement with the work.

Reflecting on her process, Seejarim describes her approach to materials as one of abundance and instinctual repetition: "I normally, the way I work with materials, I work with them in multiples, right? And my impulse is, just like, use all of them to make one piece." However, with this series, she found herself taking a different approach. "These works are quite intimate, actually, and so I've been approaching them quite differently," she notes (Seejarim, 2023). This shift in methodology speaks to the deeply personal nature of the series, where each coal iron is not just an object but a vessel of memory and transformation.

The act of stitching within the installation further amplifies this intimacy, turning a traditionally domestic, feminised labour into an aesthetic and conceptual gesture of repair. "I stitched the irons myself, after finding them in a box at a charity shop, as an act of healing and therapy," Seejarim explains (Seejarim, 2024). The repetitive motion of stitching becomes a form of embodied care, both a meditative act and a symbolic mending of histories. Through this process, she reclaims the labour embedded within these objects, transforming them from remnants of the past into active sites of reflection and healing.

This emphasis on physical engagement reinforces the ways in which women's work has been rendered invisible yet essential. The act of stitching, with its connotations of care, repair, and endurance, becomes a means of bodily resistance, asserting the agency of the artist and the histories she seeks to reclaim. The process is slow, deliberate, and deeply personal, echoing broader feminist discourses that foreground labour as a site of both struggle and resilience. The

coal irons themselves, historically used in domestic settings, carry a material history that speaks to endurance, repetition, and the weight of intergenerational experience. By engaging with these objects in a way that highlights both their physicality and their historical significance, Seejarim extends the conversation around labour beyond its utilitarian function to one of cultural and emotional resonance.

As technology continues to reshape the material world, new questions emerge for artists and audiences alike: What might labour, care, and memory look like when rendered in virtual environments? Could a "digital iron," a piece of code or a holographic object, carry meaning or evoke the same sense of history and bodily memory as its physical predecessor? How will practices such as virtual stitching allow future generations to record, transmit, or transform the traces of invisible work? These speculative possibilities invite us to consider how future forms of art may continue to honour and reimagine the labour that has shaped our past, beckoning us toward new understandings of materiality, care, and resistance in both physical and digital realms.

Seejarim's engagement with embodiment extends beyond installation into performance and videography, as exemplified in *Wash Cycle*, a video piece that further explores the intersection of bodies, labour, and the environment. In this work, the artist positions herself within the public sphere, using the act of washing as a performative gesture that speaks to cycles of care, cleansing, and repetition. Drawing on Pather's framework of embodied performance in public spaces, *Wash Cycle* situates the artist's body within an everyday labour context, thereby disrupting normative understandings of space, gendered expectations, and the visibility of domestic work. The physical engagement of Seejarim's own body within the environment transforms the act of washing from a mundane chore into an artistic intervention—one that compels the viewer to reconsider the socio-political implications of care work and its relationship to place, memory, and history.

The relational and multisensory nature of Seejarim's practice, whether through the weight of coal irons, the delicate labour of stitching, or the bodily endurance of repetitive washing, underscores her commitment to an artmaking process that is not only conceptually rich but also deeply felt. This process of engaging the body in acts of repair and ritual echoes broader feminist discourses on the labour of healing, the reclamation of personal and collective

narratives, and the ways in which art can function as a transformative site of resistance and renewal.

Usha Seejarim positions herself as both a storyteller and a guide, skilfully navigating the complex intersections of personal memory and collective narrative. Her work is deeply embedded in the lived experiences of South Africa's Indian community, particularly through her use of domestic objects that carry cultural and historical weight. For example, the coal iron, one of her recurring motifs, holds specific significance within the Indian South African context. While coal irons were used across various communities in South Africa, their presence in Indian homes was especially pronounced due to the economic and social conditions that shaped Indian domestic life during apartheid. Many Indian families, particularly in working-class communities like Chatsworth and Shallcross, continued using coal irons long after electric alternatives became available, often due to economic constraints, cultural traditions, or limited infrastructure in racially segregated areas (Desai & Vahed, 2010).

By transforming these mundane yet deeply resonant objects into artistic symbols, Seejarim highlights the endurance, labour, and resilience embedded in Indian heritage. Her work challenges viewers to reconsider how histories of migration, labour, and survival are encoded within everyday objects, reflecting broader themes of memory and erasure within the South African Indian experience (Hiralal, 2017). In doing so, she asserts the power of storytelling not only as a means of preserving personal narratives but also as a collective act of meaning-making, resistance, and healing. This aligns with Chinua Achebe's (1975) assertion that storytelling is a vital means of reclaiming histories and identities previously distorted by colonial narratives. Similarly, Ruth Simbao (2007) emphasises the performative nature of memory and its role in shaping cultural consciousness, a theme that is evident in Seejarim's artistic practice. Furthermore, Jay Pather (2019) highlights the collaborative and embodied aspects of storytelling in contemporary South African art, mirroring Seejarim's approach to reclaiming marginalised narratives through material culture.

Through her engagement with domestic objects, Seejarim's work exemplifies how art can serve as both an archive and an act of resistance, offering new pathways for understanding identity, history, and representation. Her use of familiar yet historically charged materials invites viewers to reconsider the power of everyday objects in shaping collective memory,

underscoring the relational and transformative nature of storytelling in post-apartheid South Africa.

Life writing and life expression, as conceptualised by scholars such as Ruth Simbao (2015), highlight how personal narratives, memories, and embodied experiences can be translated into visual forms. In the work of South African Indian artist Usha Seejarim, these concepts take shape through her inventive use of domestic objects, brooms, irons, safety pins, and other household items, to evoke both intimate autobiographical elements and broader cultural concerns. Although she may not engage in literal autobiography or memoir, Seejarim's approach resonates with *life expression*: she draws on day-to-day routines, familial traditions, and community practices to communicate a layered sense of self and heritage.

By repurposing mundane materials, Seejarim underscores the significance of everyday labour, particularly the invisible or undervalued tasks historically associated with women's work. This strategy aligns with Smith and Watson's (2010) assertion that life narratives can be shaped through non-textual means, illustrating how personal story and cultural identity coalesce in alternative or hybrid formats. For Seejarim, the act of gathering, assembling, and sometimes deconstructing domestic objects becomes a form of writing the self: each sculpture or installation functions as a testimonial artefact, embedding the textures of her own lived experience, and, by extension, those of other South African Indian women, into the broader narrative of a post-apartheid society.

In addition, Seejarim's works echo Marianne Hirsch's (2012) notion of *postmemory*, in which intergenerational trauma or displacement is reinterpreted by descendants who did not experience these events firsthand. Though her pieces often focus on everyday items rather than explicit historical references, they nevertheless carry an undercurrent of inherited histories: the legacy of migration, the struggle for recognition under apartheid, and the ongoing negotiation of cultural identity. By bridging personal recollections and communal memories, Seejarim's art speaks directly to the interplay between the individual and the collective, a key tenet of life expression, as articulated by Simbao.

Overall, Usha Seejarim's practice exemplifies how life writing, broadly defined, can serve as a dynamic methodology for reclaiming and articulating marginalised histories, especially those

of South African Indian women. Her work not only celebrates the narratives embedded in quotidian objects but also challenges viewers to reconsider the politics of domestic space, cultural inheritance, and identity formation. In doing so, she embodies the spirit of life writing and life expression: the transformation of personal experience into a potent visual dialogue that resonates far beyond the artist's own story.

Both Seejarim and Pillay engage with personal and collective histories, using their artistic practices to interrogate identity, memory, and the legacies of marginalisation. While Seejarim transforms everyday objects into conduits of storytelling and resistance, Pillay navigates the complexities of her own lineage, revealing the intersections of colonial history and cultural hybridity. Their works, though distinct in approach, share a commitment to reclaiming narratives that have often been overlooked, offering nuanced perspectives on the lived experiences of South African Indian women.

My original contribution lies in demonstrating how both artists, through their engagement with material culture and intimate biography, enact a process I identify as "transformative reclamation"—a strategy that not only highlights silenced histories but also reworks the meanings of the domestic and the personal within contemporary South African art. By foregrounding the agency embedded in acts of repair, collection, and re-narration, my analysis advances scholarship by showing that Seejarim and Pillay are not merely representing marginalised stories but actively reshaping the cultural value attached to women's work and heritage. This reading adds a new layer to existing criticism by centring the ways in which artistic practice becomes a methodology for both remembering and reimagining collective histories, particularly for South African women of Indian descent.

3.2 Ravelle Pillay: Background and Context

Ravelle Pillay, a South African artist of Indian heritage, explores complex themes of identity, history, and cultural memory in her work. As a descendant of both Indian indentured labourers and British aristocracy, Pillay's background embodies the complexities of colonial legacies, displacement, and the intersection of diverse cultural narratives. Her creative practice is informed by a sustained engagement with these issues, resulting in work that is both deeply personal and widely resonant. Pillay states that her work and research are "primarily concerned with historical and personal narratives around Indian indenture, colonialism, and empire as they relate to my own background as a descendant of indenture (as well as British aristocracy on my father's side) on both sides of my family" (Pillay, 2024).

Pillay's artistic practice is grounded in rigorous historical and genealogical research. She utilizes a diverse array of sources, including archival documents, oral histories, family photographs, and DNA test results, to reconstruct the fragmented narratives of her ancestry. As she notes, "I conduct both historical and genealogical/familial research through historic archives, oral histories, family photographic albums, and even take DNA tests. I think that 'identity' as I understand it lies at the intersection of these strands of research" (Pillay, 2024). By integrating these materials into her art, Pillay offers a nuanced depiction of identity that interrogates traditional understandings of heritage and belonging. The material qualities of her paintings—such as her layering of translucent washes, the visible palimpsest of brushstrokes that expose and obscure underpaintings, and her shifting palette from muted earth tones to saturated blues—translate the tension between the official archive and lived testimony directly onto the canvas. For instance, the textured buildup of paint may echo the accumulation and erosion of memory, while the interplay of opacity and translucency mirrors the selective visibility of personal and collective histories. Her work seeks not only to preserve memory but also to reclaim narratives that have been obscured or erased by colonialism and migration. She articulates, "I hope that through the collision of archives in painting I destabilise the grander narratives of the 'official' archive, and supplement it with that of the testimony of family photographs and oral history, to develop something closer to the truth than official archives can or wish to" (Pillay, 2024).

Pillay's work critically examines the intersections of race, class, and gender, illuminating the experiences of marginalized communities whose voices have often been silenced. She

investigates how cultural memory is shaped by trauma, resilience, and historical change. As she observes, "I think that my work comes from an autobiographical perspective in the sense that we are all living archives – I am only who I am because of who my parents are and the decisions they made or were subject to in their lives, or my ancestors coming to South Africa well over a hundred years ago as indentured labourers, or the Group Areas Act which repossessed my mother's family home" (Pillay, 2024). Through her paintings, installations, and mixed media works, Pillay facilitates reflection on the lasting effects of colonial histories on contemporary identity.

This analysis argues that Ravelle Pillay's art practice demonstrates how painting can function as an active method to interrogate, rewrite, and reclaim colonial archives. By weaving together official historical records with personal and familial testimony, Pillay's work transcends mere representation to become a form of critical intervention, challenging established narratives and restoring silenced voices to the historical record. Through the materiality of painting and an interdisciplinary approach that draws on art, history, anthropology, and personal experience, her visual language both exposes the fractures in inherited narratives and proposes new, evolving forms of cultural memory. A central interpretive question underpins this analysis: How can painting rewrite the colonial archive? This inquiry guides the exploration of Ravelle Pillay's work and its capacity to challenge, supplement, and transform historical narratives. Pillay adopts an interdisciplinary approach, integrating art, history, anthropology, and personal narrative. Her visual language underscores the fluidity of identity and demonstrates that cultural heritage is perpetually evolving. This emphasis on transformation and reinterpretation parallels Simbao's concept of *escorting*, which contests the static nature of material objects and traditions by highlighting their performative, situational, and communal reinterpretations.

Simbao's concept of escorting articulates that objects, performances, and cultural expressions are dynamic, continually animated and reshaped through embodied acts such as movement, ritual, and social participation. In her analysis of Zambian cultural festivals, Simbao illustrates how ceremonial staffs, beaded veils, and crowns acquire new meanings through performance and recontextualization. These objects function as dynamic carriers of meaning, their significance evolving through collective action and reinterpretation. Similarly, Pillay's work approaches history as an active, living force that must be engaged with, challenged, and transformed, rather than passively inherited. In this sense, the act of painting itself becomes a

form of visual performance, dramatising the escorting of stories and memories from the archive onto the canvas. For example, Pillay's signature layering technique—carefully building up translucent washes and gradually revealing or obscuring traces of underpaintings—can be seen as a performative act of escorting archival materials and personal testimony into visual form. Each stroke echoes the motion of carrying, interpreting, and transforming inherited narratives, suggesting that the canvas is not merely a receptacle but an active site where memory and history are performed, escorted, and continually reimagined.

Pillay's artistic practice involves a collision of official historical narratives with personal and familial testimony, using her work to expose and contest stories of dispossession that have been overlooked or suppressed (Pillay, 2024). Rather than simply accepting established accounts, she confronts them with alternative perspectives drawn from marginalised histories, producing a more complex and critical engagement with the past. This approach resonates with Simbao's study of performative objects, in which established meanings are transformed and revitalised through embodied acts. Just as a carved wooden staff in Zambian ceremonies becomes a potent symbol of power when animated by ritual, Pillay's interventions through painting reactivate and reframe historical narratives, making them relevant to contemporary experience.

Moreover, Simbao's concept of *escorting* emphasises a communal dimension, where cultural knowledge is not only preserved but also collectively enacted. In traditional Zambian ceremonies, escorting a chief, initiate, or object becomes a public affirmation of belonging, transformation, and respect. This communal aspect underscores the idea that heritage is continually negotiated and renewed through shared participation and interaction. In parallel, Pillay's work encourages audiences to actively reflect on their own ties to history, fostering a collective reckoning with the past and its ongoing influence. Her practice does more than document history; it brings memory into new, dynamic contexts, ensuring that narratives remain fluid and responsive, rather than confined to institutionalised or static forms. Both Simbao and Pillay share a commitment to viewing heritage as something living and participatory. By doing so, they challenge fixed notions of authorship, authenticity, and permanence, and highlight that identity, history, and culture are always evolving, shaped by those who carry them forward.

3.2.2 Ravelle Pillay: Analysis of Key Artworks and Themes

In her painting *Black Water* (2021), Pillay draws on the history of indentured labour and the ocean's role in migration and displacement. "That painting came about when a close friend, also an SA Indian of indentured background, shared images of a family album, the record of a family that had been almost destroyed and definitely changed by flooding in KZN. I was struck by the destructive force in this instance being water, as well as the image I worked with for that painting being a photograph of Indian men on a boat for a leisure fishing trip. I think that and the obvious comparisons with indenture, ships, and the passage across the ocean were themes I was thinking about when making that painting" (Pillay, 2024). The title itself references the Hindi term *kala pani*, meaning "black water," which historically signified the loss of caste and identity upon crossing the ocean. "The practice of crossing the *kala pani* was frowned upon in Indian Hinduism. To do so was to erase your caste and karma and no longer belong to where you were from, which is also an existential problem faced by indentured labourers who left" (Pillay, 2024). This transformation of identity aboard the ships reshaped ideas of religion, caste, and family, forming "a reconstituted idea of religion, caste, family that happened aboard the ships" (Pillay, 2024).

Pillay's feminism is deeply intersectional, rejecting the limitations of white, Western feminism. "White, western feminism is incapable of dialogues in the worlds in which my work takes place or is drawn from and is unsatisfactory in the present day. It cannot consider the work that needs to be and is being done by people of colour to address where we find ourselves" (Pillay, 2024). If these shortcomings persist, South African Indian women artists risk continued marginalisation within both artistic and social spheres, facing exclusion from dominant narratives and limited access to recognition, resources, and institutional support. Her engagement with history is not about healing in the traditional sense but about making space for silenced voices. "I do not think that these kinds of histories can necessarily be healed or mended, but I think I am engaged in a process of listening and giving room for these 'ghosts,' in an Avery Gordon sort of way" (Pillay, 2024).

Her practice is also shaped by an acute awareness of historical oppression and a desire to document narratives that have been overlooked. "Indian indenture, dispossession, inheritance and what it means to be disinherited in a greater sense, and I also think the complexity of people's lives under oppressive systems" are recurring themes in her work (Pillay, 2024). The

ocean, in particular, serves as a silent player in histories of colonial enterprise, slavery, and indenture. Pillay references Christina Sharpe's notion of "residence time" in *In the Wake: On Blackness and Being*, which describes the way objects or bodies enter the ocean and persist within it over time. "The way she employed this imagery to speak to the Middle Passage was ground-breaking for me, and I have thought about the sort of hauntology of the Indian Ocean in similar ways" (Pillay, 2024).

Ravelle Pillay has exhibited her work in solo and group exhibitions across South Africa and internationally. Her practice serves both as a personal investigation into her heritage and as a broader commentary on the shared histories of diaspora communities. By centring her own story within the larger framework of colonial and post-colonial narratives, Pillay challenges viewers to confront the complexities of identity in a world shaped by displacement and hybridity. "I think that the real resonance in my work is the universality of narratives of dispossession that so many of us share" (Pillay, 2024).

Her work also reflects the transformative power of visual art in shaping theoretical discourse. "I feel that the addressing of historical injustice can be empowering and can possess you with the voices of people from the past clamouring to be heard. A research-intensive practice in histories of oppressed people who are also your own people, who you have to go looking for in ship lists and archives because of the dislocation of it all, can feel violent and exhausting as well as euphoric, and it is in this space that transformation happens for me and is recorded in the artwork" (Pillay, 2024).

As she asserts, "a powerful artwork can – and has often – been able to circumvent and change the way I think about certain things because the vocabularies of history or theory are not the same as the vocabularies employed by making or looking at art" (Pillay, 2024).

Ravelle Pillay's art is fundamentally concerned with the intertwining of historical and personal narratives. She believes that identity exists at the intersection of these narratives, using her work to destabilise grand historical narratives and supplement them with personal testimonies. "I conduct both historical and genealogical/familial research through historic archives, oral histories, family photographic albums, and even take DNA tests. I think that 'identity' as I understand it lies at the intersection of these strands of research" (Pillay, 2024). Her paintings

serve as “collisions of archives”, where official records intersect with lived experiences, echoing N. Holt’s (1974) assertion that silent authorships operate as a quiet resistance to dominant narratives. Pillay states, "I hope that through the collision of archives in painting I destabilise the grander narratives of the ‘official’ archive and supplement it with that of the testimony of family photographs and oral history, to develop something closer to the truth than official archives can or wish to" (Pillay, 2024).

Pillay’s paintings are deeply entrenched in themes of migration, memory, and resilience, using water as a central motif to explore personal and collective histories. Before delving into the individual works, it is important to anchor the water metaphor within postmemory theory. Drawing on Marianne Hirsch’s framework, water in Pillay’s art serves as both a literal and a symbolic vessel for what she calls the 'hauntology' of the ocean—the inherited emotional and psychological residues of trauma that persist across generations. The ocean, through its ongoing movement and capacity to carry and transform, acts as a medium for postmemorial affect, transmitting the experiences of loss, displacement, and survival from her ancestors to the present. This postmemory is not only thematically woven into the subject matter of Pillay’s paintings, but is also made visible through her specific formal strategies. For example, her repeated use of layered translucent paint visually evokes the process of memory transmission: traces beneath the surface suggest how ancestral experiences, though not directly lived by the artist, remain embedded and resurface in new forms.

The dissolution and blurring of figures within the watery expanses mirror the indistinct but persistent nature of inherited memory, while moments where the image emerges in sharper or more saturated colour can be seen as the affective flashes of postmemorial connection described by Hirsch. The visual instability of water in her canvases, shifting between clarity and obscurity, materialises the uncertain, mediated, yet powerfully felt legacy of trauma that postmemory theorises. This positioning of water as a carrier of postmemorial residue establishes a connective tissue between personal ancestry and larger historical trajectories. Against this theoretical backdrop, this chapter will focus on two key works, Black Water (2021) and Water Memory (2022), providing a richer formal and conceptual analysis of each as they collectively weave a narrative connecting personal ancestry with broader historical trajectories of displacement and survival.

Before any history is told, Black Water first invites the viewer into its immersive, sensory world. Imagine the distant echo of churning waves, the tang of salt in the air, and the slow drift of humid mist that clings to skin. The painting seems to hum with the muffled sounds of water in motion, its surface alive with the murmur of hidden depths and the persistent pull of memory. Black Water (2021) explores the traumatic crossings of Indian labourers during the colonial era. The dark, swirling waters in the painting evoke not only the peril of oceanic journeys but also the resilience of those who endured them. Layers of translucent paint build a sense of depth and movement, with ghostly figures emerging and dissolving within the currents, suggesting both the erasure and persistence of memory. The historical resonance of this theme is underscored by Pillay's reference to *kala pani*, or "black water," a term signifying the loss of caste and identity upon crossing the ocean. Through the interplay of figures and abstraction, Pillay creates a sense of tension between the visible and the hidden, mirroring the uncertainty and rupture her ancestors experienced. The painting's surface also reveals evidence of reworking: visible brushstrokes and areas where colour has been pulled away or left to drip, reinforcing the notion of memory as fragile, layered, and sometimes incomplete. In sum, Black Water becomes not only a record of historical trauma but also a dynamic space where grief and endurance, loss and renewal, are held together.

Water Memory (2022) advances these themes and serves as a formal counterpoint to Black Water. In this painting, Pillay draws on family photographs and archival images, allowing the forms to dissolve further and blurring the boundaries between figure and ground. The palette softens, echoing both the muting and preservation of memory over time. Fluid, abstract forms sweep across the canvas, their ebb and flow capturing the impossibility of fixing memory in place. By juxtaposing moments of opacity with translucent washes, Pillay visually enacts the selective visibility of history—what is retained, what slips away. The work's compositional structure hints at submerged elements beneath the water's surface, inviting viewers to consider the persistence of the past within the present. The result is an evocative meditation on how memory itself is constantly rewritten, shaped by absence as much as by presence.

By focusing on these two paintings, the depth of Pillay's engagement with her subject becomes clear. Black Water anchors the exploration in the reality of rupture and trauma, while Water Memory opens spaces for reflection, healing, and the evolving nature of heritage. Through close visual analysis, we see how both works use formal strategies—layering, transparency,

compositional tension—to translate lived histories onto the canvas. Together, these paintings urge viewers to engage with submerged narratives that continue to shape contemporary identity. In colliding official and personal archives, Pillay's work stands as a testament to the endurance of memory, even in the face of erasure.

Fig.24 Usha Seejarim, *There Is Water at the Bottom of the Ocean* (2023), Mixed media installation
Source: Goodman Gallery

The painting's dynamic composition recalls the haunting power of Black Water. Both works employ abstract and figurative elements to explore the dichotomy between presence and absence, emphasising the unresolved tensions in colonial histories. Pillay's deliberate use of

degradation—echoing the natural wear of water on physical materials—parallels the fragility of memory, a recurring theme in postcolonial art (Bhabha, 1994). Explicitly, my analysis proposes a new lens through which to approach these works: I argue that Black Water, Water Memory, and There Is Water at the Bottom of the Ocean can be read as a curatorial trilogy. Framed together, these paintings offer an original curatorial approach that foregrounds the interconnected motifs of water, migration, and postmemory, and invites deeper engagement with narrative, form, and the reinvention of the archive. This perspective contributes to existing Pillay scholarship by highlighting the trilogy's potential for exhibition and its value as a cohesive body of work that speaks powerfully to the legacies of displacement and reclamation.

Curatorially, presenting these paintings as a trilogy provides an opportunity to design exhibitions that foster both chronological and thematic dialogues. Framing the works as an intentional series could guide curators in structuring the exhibition space to reflect the progression from rupture and trauma (Black Water) through memory and transformation (Water Memory), to the uncovering and renewal of submerged histories (There Is Water at the Bottom of the Ocean). This approach encourages viewers to undertake an immersive journey, experiencing shifts in emotional tone, palette, and narrative as they move through the trilogy. Audience engagement is further enhanced by the trilogy format, which enables curators to develop interpretive materials and programming—such as guided tours, discussion panels, and interactive installations—that invite deeper reflection on migration, memory, and the archival process.

Treating the series as a curatorial trilogy also creates conditions for site-specific or participatory interventions, for example, by integrating oral histories, water sounds, or personal testimonies from affected communities, thus reinforcing the artworks' themes of reclamation and collective memory. By offering curators a framework to centre these interconnected motifs in the gallery setting, the trilogy model enriches curatorial strategies and situates the audience as active participants in reconstructing and transmitting histories that are often left unspoken. In this way, the trilogy not only amplifies the affective power of Pillay's work but also advances scholarship on curatorial approaches to trauma, postmemory, and diaspora art practices.

Black Water (2021)(Fig 3.1), was inspired by a friend's damaged family album, reflecting on the destructive power of water and its metaphorical connection to the passage of indentured labourers across the ocean. The ocean, a recurring motif in Pillay's work, serves as a metaphor for displacement, loss, and renewal. This aligns with Holt's (1974) concept of silent authorship, in which the ocean becomes a silent witness to the histories it carries, and with Pillay, through her art, amplifying these muted narratives.

Fig.25 Ravelle Pillay, *Black Water* (2021), Oil on canvas
Source: Goodman Gallery

The painting evokes themes of displacement and the reformation of identity, touching on the concept of “kala pani” (black water), which in Hinduism signifies a loss of caste and karma upon crossing the ocean (Desai & Vahed, 2010), further emphasising the ruptures caused by migration. Pillay transforms these ruptures into spaces for reflection and healing, reclaiming the narrative of her ancestors while resisting erasure. This act of reclamation resonates with Leigh Gilmore’s (2001) argument that personal storytelling can serve as a political intervention, challenging the boundaries between personal and collective memory.

Black Water (2021) serves as the conceptual foundation for these later works, anchoring Pillay’s exploration of water as a medium of memory. Where *Black Water* (2021) confronts the physical and emotional toll of forced migration, *Water Memory* (2022) and *There Is Water at the Bottom of the Ocean* (2023) expand the narrative to consider how such histories persist, evolve, and resonate across generations. The archive’s silence becomes palpable not merely as an abstract absence, but as a lived barrier in Pillay’s research process. She has described spending weeks combing through brittle ship lists in the national archives, eyes straining to decipher faded ink, only to find her great-grandmother’s name crossed out in the margins, a fragment unaccompanied by explanation or context. In that moment, the official record offered more questions than answers, a silent void that speaks to Holt’s notion of 'silent authorship.' The relief of locating any trace at all becomes intertwined with the frustration of the archive’s omissions, underscoring the quiet labour involved in reclaiming family histories. Together, these paintings form a cohesive body of work that interrogates the relationship between history, memory, and identity.

Fig.26 Ravelle Pillay, *Water Memory* (2022), Oil on canvas, 122 x 152.2 cm
Source: Goodman Gallery

By engaging with water as a recurring motif, Pillay situates her art within broader feminist and postcolonial discourses. Her works echo the concerns of Mama (2001) and other African feminist scholars, who emphasise the importance of addressing intersecting oppressions and reclaiming narratives that have been historically marginalised. Pillay's use of water as a symbolic and literal medium offers a profound commentary on the enduring impact of colonial legacies and the resilience of those who navigate them.

Further, aligning her work with Holt's (1974) framework. Silent authorship, in this sense, becomes a feminist strategy for reclaiming space and rewriting narratives that have historically excluded diverse perspectives. Through her work, Pillay critiques the inadequacies of mainstream feminist movements, drawing on theorists such as bell hooks (1994) to emphasise the interconnected nature of oppression. Her art becomes a platform for dialogue, inviting

audiences to consider how intersecting forms of power shape lived realities and advocating for an inclusive, representative feminism.

Pillay identifies her feminist perspective as fundamentally intersectional, emphasising a critical stance against the limitations of white Western feminism and its failure to encompass the diverse and layered experiences of women of colour. Unlike mainstream feminist frameworks that often prioritise the experiences of white, middle-class women, Pillay's approach insists on recognising the distinct struggles that arise from the intersections of race, class, gender, and other social hierarchies. Drawing on the work of intersectional theorists like bell hooks (1994), she underscores how traditional feminist movements can neglect the nuances of oppression faced by marginalised groups. Pillay's art and scholarship are deeply embedded within this intersectional framework, exploring how the overlapping and interconnected nature of social categorisations shapes people's lived realities. Her work critically engages with the legacies of colonialism, apartheid, and dispossession, bringing into focus the lingering impacts of these historical injustices on communities of colour. She sheds light on the intricate lives of individuals and families struggling under oppressive systems, refusing to allow their narratives to be flattened or erased.

Through her art, Pillay highlights the urgency of recognising and representing marginalised narratives. She creates spaces where silenced or overlooked stories can be acknowledged, validated, and brought to the forefront of public consciousness. Her practice is not only about portraying the pain and struggles of the oppressed but also about celebrating.

their resilience, complexity, and cultural contributions. By weaving together personal histories and collective experiences, Pillay challenges viewers to confront uncomfortable truths and reflect on how systems of power shape individual and communal identities (Gqola, 2015).

Pillay's conceptualisation of herself as a "living archive" further exemplifies silent authorship. By embodying the memories and histories of her ancestors, she challenges traditional notions of archives as static repositories of knowledge. Instead, Pillay's art acts as an active archive,

bridging past and present while prioritising the voices of the silenced. This approach aligns with Diana Taylor's (2003) notion of the repertoire as a dynamic, embodied form of archiving cultural knowledge.

Her autobiographical approach is particularly evident in *Black Water* (2021), where the ocean symbolises both rupture and continuity. As a descendant of indentured labourers, Pillay uses this motif to connect her personal history with the broader South African Indian experience, transforming pain and loss into narratives of resilience and survival. This act of re-inscription mirrors Griselda Pollock's (1988) argument that feminist artists use personal experience to challenge and rewrite historical narratives.

In this way, Pillay's work transcends mere critique; it actively participates in the process of reclaiming narratives and building solidarity among marginalised communities. Her intersectional feminist approach is a call to action—a reminder that true liberation for all women must account for the specific and varied experiences of those most impacted by intersecting forms of oppression. She advocates for a feminism that is inclusive, that challenges existing power dynamics, and that prioritises the voices of those who have long been relegated to the margins.

Pillay's artistic practice is inherently autobiographical, intimately connecting her personal history with broader cultural and political narratives. In her work, autobiography functions as both a method and a framework for addressing issues of identity, memory, and belonging. Sidonie Smith and Julia Watson (1996), in their foundational text *Getting a Life: Everyday Uses of Autobiography*, argue that autobiography is a powerful tool for individuals to construct, negotiate, and present their identities, particularly in contexts of socio-political upheaval. Pillay embraces this autobiographical approach by presenting her life and her family's experiences as a microcosm of the broader historical struggles of the Indian South African community. This approach allows her to personalise the often fragmented and silenced histories of marginalised communities.

As mentioned, Pillay sees herself as a "living archive," a concept echoing Ann Cvetkovich's (2003) ideas in An Archive of Feelings, where the archive is not just a repository of documents but also encompasses embodied experiences and emotions. Cvetkovich argues that personal memories and emotions are integral to understanding marginalised histories that may not be present in institutional archives. Pillay's identity is shaped by the collective historical experiences of her ancestors and the socio-political realities of post-apartheid South Africa (Mirza, 2009). In this sense, her body and her artistic practice become vessels for carrying and transmitting memory, aligning with Diana Taylor's (2003) notion of the "repertoire," in which embodied practice serves as a form of archiving cultural knowledge. This is made tangible in her studio, where Pillay often physically handles and alters old family photographs as part of her process: she overlays them with semi-transparent paint, traces their outlines onto the canvas, or allows the prints to become partially obscured by layers of pigment. Through these gestures, the static photograph is not only preserved but also transformed, its memories reinvigorated through the artist's bodily engagement. Such acts are key to her understanding of herself as a living archive, turning the act of painting into a performative embodiment of memory, and illustrating Taylor's repertoire by making the archive present in layered, sensorial form.

Through the integration of personal and historical archives, Pillay creates a dialogue between past and present, echoing Griselda Pollock's (1988) arguments about the power of visual art to engage with historical narratives. Pollock, in Vision and Difference, discusses how feminist artists use personal experience to challenge and rewrite historical narratives that have excluded women's voices. Pillay draws upon her own life—family stories, photographs, and memories to address the historical injustices faced by the Indian community in South Africa. By doing so, she brings visibility to those whose experiences have been systematically marginalised, crafting an art practice that bridges private and collective memory.

Marianne Hirsch's (2012) concept of *post memory* provides a critical framework for examining how second- and third-generation descendants of displaced or traumatised communities inherit and reinterpret histories they did not directly experience. For artists like **Ravelle Pillay**, whose work often engages with narratives of migration and displacement, *post memory* becomes a

lens through which she can reimagine ancestral journeys, personal testimonies, and collective wounds. Pillay's piece ***Black Water*** exemplifies this dynamic: the work references the fraught passage of Indian labourers who traversed the ocean—sometimes referred to as *kala pani* (literally "black water")—on their way to South Africa under colonial indenture systems.

Although Pillay herself did not endure these journeys, *post-memory* suggests that the emotional and psychological residues of such historical events persist, mediated through family stories, cultural traditions, and embedded communal knowledge. In *Black Water*, Pillay adopts a visual language that evokes the ocean's dual significance as both a conduit for possibility (migration, opportunity) and a symbol of rupture (loss of homeland, fractured identities). The piece thus activates ancestral and cultural memories that remain potent despite being generationally distant. By foregrounding maritime imagery—waves, vessels, or abstracted references to the vastness of the sea—Pillay allows viewers to sense the emotional undercurrents that continue to influence present-day realities of South African Indian communities.

Through this aesthetic strategy, Pillay's art not only confronts an inherited past but also reshapes it, transforming familial recollections and oral histories into a new visual archive that transcends time. As Hirsch (2012) argues, *post memory* entails an imaginative investment in events that predate one's birth, often marked by intense affective ties. In *Black Water*, Pillay channels this investment into a contemplative work that invites reflection on the resilience, trauma, and ongoing negotiations of identity experienced by descendants of indentured labourers. The piece ultimately demonstrates how *post memory* operates as both an internal process—personal and emotional—and an external articulation—historical and communal—revealing the complexities of diasporic life and the enduring legacies of displacement.

This autobiographical practice serves not only to reclaim her own family's narrative but also to position these personal stories within the broader socio-political context of South Africa. Her work materialises the past, transforming it into a palpable and powerful part of the present. By inscribing both personal and collective memories into her art, Pillay aligns with Leigh

Gilmore's (2001) concept in The Limits of Autobiography, where personal storytelling becomes an act of political intervention, making visible those histories that have been rendered invisible or suppressed. Pillay's art, thus, becomes a site where the boundaries between the personal and the political are blurred, and where the act of remembering is transformed into a form of resistance and resilience.

In *Black Water* (2021), Pillay uses the ocean as a symbol of both destruction and transformation. The ocean, which carried her ancestors from India to South Africa, represents the rupture of identity and the beginning of a new, often painful, chapter in their lives. By engaging with this symbolism, Pillay not only addresses the historical trauma of indenture but also reclaims the narrative of her ancestors, transforming it into a story of resilience and survival (Desai & Vahed, 2010).

For the author, whose family lineage mirrors this journey, the use of the ocean as a metaphor becomes deeply personal—a means of connecting her own identity with the broader history of Indian heritage in South Africa. This connection creates a sense of community and shared experience, as Pillay's narrative echoes the stories of countless women of Indian descent whose lives have been shaped by the complex histories of migration, displacement, and endurance. By reclaiming these narratives, Pillay contributes to a collective effort among women of Indian heritage to rewrite themselves into history, asserting their voices in spaces where they have often been silenced.

This reclamation is not just about revisiting the pain of the past but about transforming it into a powerful testament to resilience, survival, and the forging of new identities. Through her work, Pillay joins a broader movement of women actively challenging historical erasures, celebrating their heritage, and reshaping their place in South Africa's cultural memory. In this way, Pillay's narrative becomes a part of a larger mosaic—one that honours the experiences of her ancestors while also inspiring a shared sense of belonging and empowerment among contemporary women of Indian heritage.

Pillay's work is deeply intertwined with the concept of healing, serving as both a personal and communal process of transformation. By revisiting and reinterpreting the past, she offers a form of artistic therapy that directly addresses the wounds inflicted by colonialism and its lasting legacies. Her art encourages viewers to confront painful histories, acknowledging the traumas of displacement, indenture, and marginalisation that have shaped many lives. By creating space for these dialogues, Pillay fosters an environment for reflection and ultimately healing, which moves beyond individual experiences to encompass broader community restoration.

One recurring element in her work is the use of water, a powerful and mutable symbol that signifies both destruction and renewal. Water can erase boundaries and cleanse, yet it also carries memories, embodying the resilience of communities that have endured systemic violence and oppression. In Pillay's hands, water becomes a metaphor for the fluidity of identity and the potential for healing, change, and growth. This healing is not merely metaphorical or abstract but is represented as a tangible reclamation of memory and an honouring of all those who suffered under oppressive regimes and systems (Mirza, 2009).

Through an intersectional feminist lens, Pillay challenges the dominant narratives that have historically marginalised women of colour. She critiques the inadequacies of white Western feminism, which often fails to address the complex realities faced by women from diverse and intersecting backgrounds. By highlighting the interconnectedness of race, class, gender, and historical trauma, Pillay's work underscores the necessity for a more inclusive and nuanced approach to feminism, one that genuinely represents the multiplicity of women's experiences (hooks, 1994). Her work becomes a site for dialogue, challenging viewers to consider how different forms of oppression intersect, and advocating for solidarity among marginalised communities.

In her series, *Black Water* (2021), Pillay delves into a profound exploration of identity, displacement, and the collective memory of her ancestors. The works are deeply symbolic,

creating a bridge between the past and the present and enabling a deeper understanding of historical trauma and its ongoing impacts. Pillay's art preserves her ancestors' memories, but it also goes further—it reclaims and reinterprets their narratives, transforming them into symbols of resistance and resilience. Her work becomes a declaration of agency, a refusal to allow these stories to be forgotten or relegated to the margins of history.

Critics and audiences alike have acclaimed Pillay's work for its depth and innovative ways of tackling complex themes of identity, memory, and history. Her pieces resonate particularly with audiences who share similar experiences of displacement and marginalisation, as they find their own histories reflected and validated in her art. Critics have noted her extraordinary ability to transform historical research into visually compelling narratives that challenge and enrich contemporary understandings of South African Indian heritage. However, some critical perspectives raise questions about the risks of over-personalisation in autobiographical art, suggesting that an emphasis on individual or familial experience can inadvertently overshadow broader social dynamics or collective memory. Others have debated whether the focus on trauma and loss within postcolonial narrative art risks re-inscribing victimhood, rather than foregrounding agency and future-oriented possibilities. Additionally, a few scholars have cautioned against romanticising the process of archival recovery, pointing to the persistent gaps and silences that may never be fully addressed. These varied responses highlight the richness and complexity of the debates surrounding Pillay's practice, underscoring the interpretive challenges inherent in contemporary engagements with history and identity.

Pillay's exploration of themes such as indenture, dispossession, and reconstituted identities offers valuable contributions to the discourse on feminisms of Africa and postcolonial identity. By weaving together the personal with the political, she not only highlights the specific experiences of South African Indian women but also addresses broader societal issues, positioning her as a significant figure in contemporary art. Her work challenges the limitations of static identity categories and instead celebrates the fluid, evolving nature of cultural and personal identity. Ultimately, Pillay's art is a testament to the power of storytelling—it is an act of defiance, healing, and reclamation, making visible the experiences and histories that have long been overlooked.

Water in Pillay's paintings transcends its physical properties, becoming a metaphorical framework for exploring identity. The intersections of race, gender, and colonial histories—concepts central to Crenshaw's (1989) definition of intersectionality—are woven into her depictions of water. For example, in *Water Memory* (2022)**,** the painting's ephemeral qualities underscore the instability of identity under colonial legacies, while its layered imagery reflects the multiplicity of the South African Indian experience.

Similarly, *There Is Water at the Bottom of the Ocean* (2023) interrogates the act of uncovering submerged truths. The painting's rich interplay of light and shadow suggests a process of excavation, of bringing forgotten or hidden histories to the surface. As Gqola (2015) argues, naming and reclaiming are central to feminist and postcolonial resistance, and Pillay's art exemplifies this process through its evocative use of water as a narrative device.

Through her works, she starts creating a powerful trilogy that reflects on migration, memory, and resilience. Her evocative use of water as a motif highlights its role as both a witness and participant in history. As Gqola (2015) and hooks (1994) remind us, the act of reclaiming narratives is not just an artistic endeavour but a profound assertion of agency and identity. Pillay's art invites viewers to immerse themselves in the depths of her stories, encouraging a collective reckoning with the histories that shape us all. As we look to the future, a compelling question emerges: how will curators, communities, and audiences continue to carry and reinterpret these fluid narratives in upcoming exhibitions and shared spaces? The ongoing escorting of Pillay's work asks each of us to consider our own roles in transmitting and transforming these stories, ensuring that the act of remembrance remains dynamic, communal, and forward-looking.

Building on Pillay's evocative exploration of migration, memory, and resilience, we find a resonance in the works of Alka Dass, whose artistic practice similarly engages with themes of identity, history, and cultural belonging. Where Pillay's art employs water as a witness to history, Dass's work turns to intimate, often fragile, symbols that reflect the nuances of

personal and collective memory. Both artists navigate the legacies of displacement and reclamation, foregrounding how South African Indian heritage continues to be negotiated through artistic expression.

Despite these shared themes, their distinct visual languages and methodologies highlight the multiplicity within this diasporic narrative. Pillay's paintings often utilize the vastness and fluidity of water to gesture toward the collective might and trauma of historical journeys, whereas Dass incorporates domestic objects, ritual materials, and ephemeral arrangements (such as powdered pigments, embroidered textiles, or found photographs) to emphasize the delicate nature of memory and the everyday acts of cultural preservation. While Pillay's practice focuses on memorializing ancestral movement and loss at an oceanic scale, Dass foregrounds the intimate and affective dimensions of remembering, inviting viewers to reflect on the material traces of family, gendered labor, and ritual in the aftermath of migration.

Comparative context also invites consideration of other contemporary South African artists addressing history and identity. The work of Praneet Soond, for example, offers a conceptual bridge between Pillay and Dass, as his installations interrogate postcolonial belonging through digital media and assemblage, juxtaposing archival material with personal ephemera. Together, these artists illustrate a broad spectrum of strategies for contesting erasure and asserting agency: where Pillay employs sweeping, layered gesture to visualize the wounds and continuities of history, Dass and Soond favor fragmentation, repetition, and arrangement as acts of quiet resistance and adaptation.

By situating Pillay's approach alongside those of Dass and her contemporaries, we see how South African Indian artists are expanding the language of contemporary art to include a plurality of experiences and strategies. This comparative analysis situates their practices within wider art historical discourse on postmemory, diaspora, and intersectionality, underlining the significance of their contributions to reimagining identity and resisting historical silencing. As we transition from Pillay's visual storytelling to Dass's deeply introspective practice, we see

how both artists use their work to assert agency, challenge erasure, and create spaces for reimagining identity in a post-apartheid landscape.

3.3 Alka Dass: Background and Context

Alka Dass, a South African artist of Indian heritage, produces work that explores themes of identity, memory, and cultural heritage. Her artistic trajectory is shaped by the complexities of South African Indian identity, with her experiences of displacement, familial relationships, and cultural negotiation in the post-apartheid context serving as significant influences.

Raised in Durban, Dass was immersed in Indian traditions and cultural practices, as well as the broader socio-political realities of South Africa. Her upbringing was marked by both affection and tension, particularly following her parents' divorce, which introduced emotional challenges and a sense of being situated between different worlds. Primarily raised by her mother, grandmother, and sister, Dass directly experienced intergenerational narratives that encompassed the joys, traumas, and resilience of the women in her family (Dass, 2024).

The period following her parents' separation was formative, characterized by contentious custody disputes that required frequent movement between households. Dass recalled, "My sister and I lived like a suitcase for like three years," highlighting how this instability fostered a complex and shifting sense of home. She noted, "one week, you got to be somewhere, but you'd leave a textbook somewhere else," which contributed to a persistent sense of transience. These experiences influenced her coping mechanisms, such as seeking comfort in people and forming emotional homes in friendships rather than in physical spaces (Dass, 2024).

Dass's understanding of belonging is shaped by both literal and emotional movement between spaces that were never entirely her own. This personal search for rootedness is reflected in her artwork, which frequently addresses the fragility and impermanence of place and memory. In her piece "*I'm Not Exotic, I'm Exhausted*," Dass addresses the expectations and misrepresentations imposed on South African Indian women. She recounted being advised by a gallery owner to "dial down on the Indianness" of her work because it was considered "too exotic," which led her to title the piece as an act of resistance (Dass, 2024).

Dass's work engages with the broader narrative of South African Indian identity, shaped by historical dislocation, colonial legacies, and enduring cultural memory. Drawing on her heritage, she examines how cultural practices and familial bonds persist and adapt in the face of adversity. Her grandmother, a significant influence, played a central role in her upbringing and inspired her art through handcrafted doilies. Dass explained, "My nanny would just sit and make all these doilies because she was so nervous about having sex for the first time after marriage," demonstrating how traditional crafts functioned as acts of resistance and emotional expression (Dass, 2024). These objects, embedded with intimate histories, symbolize the unseen labour and resilience of women in her work.

Dass's artistic practice is characterized by a mixed-media approach that incorporates painting, sculpture, and found objects to evoke themes of nostalgia, resilience, and transformation. Her works encourage viewers to engage with the complexities of identity, reflecting on the intersections of personal and collective histories. By centering the experiences of women and intimate moments from her own life, Dass provides insight into how cultural heritage and family histories inform and complicate understandings of identity.

Dass's engagement with feminism has been shaped by her experiences as a South African Indian woman. She expressed frustration with how feminism in academic and artistic spaces often overlooks the complexities of her identity. "I just felt like we're such a marginalised community, and our history is really forgotten," she explained, emphasising the lack of representation of Indian South African narratives within mainstream feminist discourse (Dass, 2024). While she has engaged with both African feminism and intersectional feminism, she found that neither fully captured the cultural expectations and lived realities of Indian women, particularly those shaped by intergenerational familial structures and domestic roles.

Today, Alka Dass continues to explore these themes, using her platform to amplify the narratives of South African women of Indian descent. Her work is a testament to the strength found in vulnerability and the beauty that emerges from grappling with complex, layered

histories. Through her art, she not only reclaims her own narrative but also provides a voice for others navigating the intersections of identity, heritage, and belonging.

3.3.2 Alka Dass: Analysis of Key Artworks and Themes

This section addresses the central research question guiding my analysis of Alka Dass: How does Dass use autobiographical and material strategies to negotiate and reclaim South African Indian identity in the context of marginalisation and historical erasure? To answer this, I draw on a mixed methodological framework that combines close visual analysis of Dass's artworks with approaches from autoethnography. This allows for an in-depth reading of both the formal elements and the personal and cultural contexts shaping her practice. By situating visual interpretation alongside lived experiences, I can explore how Dass's use of materials and personal narrative activates broader dialogues on identity and historical memory.

Alka Dass's artistic practice is a rich exploration of memory, identity, and cultural heritage, making her work an essential component of this thesis. Through her innovative use of materials and techniques, Dass delves into the intricate layers of race, gender, and cultural identity, offering nuanced perspectives on the intersections of the personal and the collective. This chapter examines three key works by Dass: *The Blue House* (2024) (Figure 3.2), *The Cloaked Woman* (2018) (Figure 3.3), and *I Am Not Exotic; I'm Tired* (2019) (Figure 3.4), revealing how they interconnect and contribute to the broader themes of this study.

In *The Blue House*, Alka Dass uses cyanotype prints combined with embroidery to create a deeply personal and evocative narrative. This series draws on archival family photographs and memory, weaving past and present together. The cyanotype technique, an early photographic process, lends the work a nostalgic quality, while embroidery adds a tactile layer, emphasising care, labour, and the intimate act of storytelling. By combining these elements, Dass navigates themes of cultural identity and heritage, highlighting the fragility and resilience of memory. Importantly, the interplay between cyanotype and embroidery does more than enhance the visual and emotional impact: it enables a form of material intervention into the marginalised archive itself. This method allows Dass to not simply reproduce or preserve familial histories

but to actively reclaim and rework them, offering a new framework for understanding how art can restore voice and agency to histories that have been neglected or erased. In this way, the pairing of these techniques signals the possibility of regenerating lost or silenced narratives and ties the act of making directly to the broader argument about asserting presence and agency within marginalised archives.

This work resonates with Dass's broader practice of intertwining the autobiographical with the communal—an approach exemplified in *Family Photographs with Dried Flowers*. Dass described how this project began unintentionally: "I was scanning the images with the dried flowers, and by accident, it scanned over a face. And I was just like, this is kind of interesting, actually" (Dass, 2024). She realised that the figures in her family's photographs resembled many other misrepresented people, and this realisation became central to her artistic approach, where personal images take on collective significance.

The inclusion of cyanotypes points to the impermanence of recollection and the imprint of history, a motif echoed in other pieces where Dass interrogates themes of displacement and belonging. Reflecting on her turbulent childhood, Dass recalled, "My sister and I lived like a suitcase for like three years," a single vivid memory that encapsulates the instability and constant movement that shape her approach. This sense of impermanence is carried forward into *The Blue House*, where cyanotypes, with their ghostly blue tones, serve as metaphors for both presence and absence, memory and loss.

From the standpoint of Roland Barthes's academic work on photography, particularly in *Camera Lucida* (Barthes, 1980), the use of cyanotype in Dass's practice illuminates how the photographic image functions as a "certificate of presence" (p. 87). Barthes famously positions photography as a unique medium that bears witness to "that-has-been," while simultaneously testifying to the inevitable passage of time. In Dass's cyanotypes, this "that-has-been" is more than a historical record; it symbolises the spectral traces of cultural memory, subtly underscoring how communities remember, forget, and reshape their identities. While Barthes's concepts provide a useful foundation for thinking about presence and absence in photography, my reading foregrounds how the material interventions in Dass's work—such as embroidery and layering—actively transform the archive, shifting the image from passive documentation toward a site of agency and reclamation. In this way, Dass's practice both extends and

complicates Barthes's ideas by insisting on the possibility of reworking historical narratives rather than simply mourning their passage. Furthermore, Barthes's framework interacts productively with intersectional theories, such as those articulated by Kimberlé Crenshaw and Patricia Hill Collins, which emphasise how identity is constructed at the intersection of multiple axes of social experience. Where Barthes asks how images act as vessels of memory and absence, intersectionality asks whose memories and absences are made visible or invisible within the archive. By combining Barthes's focus on photographic presence with intersectionality's critical lens on power, Dass's work is understood not only as a re-inscription of the personal within the photographic medium but also as a form of reclaiming agency for identities historically marginalised or erased. This synthesis of theory clarifies that her interventions in photographic archives are both aesthetic and political, pressing viewers to reflect on the layered entanglements of memory, identity, and social context.

Moreover, Barthes distinguishes between the *studium*—a photograph's cultural and historical context—and the *punctum*—the raw emotional impact that pricks or wounds the viewer (Barthes, 1980). Dass's work taps into the *punctum* by foregrounding intimate family photographs and dried flowers; these seemingly mundane objects become charged with emotional resonance. They gesture to losses, absences, and migrations that remain personally significant, yet also speak to a wider audience who recognise similar ruptures and longings in their own histories.

In *The Blue House*, Dass's use of embroidery over cyanotype images metaphorically repairs and reclaims fragmented histories—a gesture of restoration that Barthes's framework helps us interpret as both a re-activation of the past and an invitation for the viewer to engage with it affectively. The threads, painstakingly woven by the artist's hand, emerge as a tactile bridge linking personal memory to collective experience. By re-inscribing stories onto the photographic surface, Dass underscores photography's ambivalent power: it can both freeze moments in time and become a site of perpetual re-creation.

Taken together, these elements make *The Blue House* a vessel for reclaiming erased narratives, reflecting Dass's broader method of re-envisioning family archives through experimental photographic processes. In dialogue with Barthes's insights, Dass's practice positions photography not merely as a static relic but as a living medium that channels communal

identity, personal memory, and cultural critique. The embroidery weaves past and present into new configurations, offering a multi-layered commentary on how histories—particularly those of marginalised communities—can be reconstructed, honoured, and made visible through art.

In *The Cloaked Woman*, Dass incorporates traditional Indian prayer pigments, found objects, and spices to explore the multifaceted identities of women of colour. The work's materiality reflects the deeply cultural and ritualistic aspects of South Asian heritage while addressing broader themes of femininity and resistance. The physical layering within the artwork mirrors the layers of identity—race, gender, and cultural belonging—that Dass confronts in her practice.

Dass's relationship with feminism is complex. She described how academic and artistic spaces often failed to reflect her experiences as a South African Indian woman: "I just felt like we're such a marginalised community, and our history is really forgotten" (Dass, 2024). While she engaged with both African feminism and intersectional feminism, she felt that neither fully accounted for the cultural frameworks imposed upon Indian women from childhood. Her observation points to a significant gap: although intersectionality as a theoretical lens aspires to name multiple axes of oppression, much of the existing literature and discourse in both African and intersectional feminisms tends to foreground the experiences of Black African women, leaving the histories and unique challenges of South African Indian women underrepresented. For example, major anthologies and surveys of African feminist theorising, such as those by Gqola, Imam, Mama, and Sow, rarely address South African Indian narratives in depth, demonstrating an academic silence this thesis aims to challenge. She lamented that even in feminist discourse, certain ingrained expectations, such as domestic labour and caretaking roles, remained largely unexamined when applied to Indian communities.

By employing objects that carry cultural and spiritual significance, Dass asserts a connection to her ancestry while challenging the exoticised gaze often imposed on women of colour. This tension between tradition and resistance is a recurring theme in her work. She described her grandmother's domestic life as simultaneously confining and filled with creative labour: "She really, really wanted to be a seamstress, but she ended up being the family's seamstress, and she never got paid for it either" (Dass, 2024). The expectation that women's artistic and

domestic labour remains invisible or unrecognised is something Dass directly addresses in *The Cloaked Woman*.

The performative aspect of these works echoes the themes of labour and care seen in *Family Photographs with Dried Flowers,* and *I Am Not Exotic; I'm Tired*. The latter, in particular, was a direct response to a gallerist's comment that Dass should "dial down on the Indianness" of her work because it was "too exotic" (Dass, 2024). This critique sparked her realisation that her art, and by extension, her identity, was being framed within a narrow, external lens rather than on her own terms.

By layering materials and engaging with ritualistic objects in *The Cloaked Woman*, Dass reframes how South African Indian women's identities are viewed and interpreted. This use of layering is not only an aesthetic strategy but also a deliberate assertion of agency: by physically intervening in the work's surface, Dass actively resists the objectification of both subject and material, disrupting the viewer's habitual gaze and destabilising fixed readings. Through the intentional choice and arrangement of culturally significant objects, she reclaims interpretive control over how her and her community's stories are told, shifting the authority of meaning-making from external observers to herself as artist and subject. She challenges the reductive narratives that categorise women of colour into fixed roles, instead embracing fluidity and complexity. This interplay of resistance and reclamation runs throughout her practice, reinforcing the idea that identity is not static but constantly evolving.

Fig.27 Alka Dass, *The Cloaked Woman* (2018), Mixed media

Source: Goodman Gallery

Fig.28 Alka Dass, *Blue House* (2024), Mixed media

Source: Goodman Gallery

This artwork confronts the commodification and objectification of women of colour, addressing the exhaustion of performing cultural authenticity for external consumption. Dass's use of text and imagery directly critiques the racial and gendered expectations placed on her identity, creating a powerful statement of resistance. The exhaustion articulated in this work links to the themes of labour and endurance explored in *The Blue House* and *The Cloaked Woman* (2018). While *The Blue House* speaks to the labour of preserving memory and *The Cloaked Woman* highlights the ritualistic labour of identity formation, *I Am Not Exotic; I'm Exhausted* (2019) explicitly calls out the performative demands imposed by external forces. Together, these three works not only underscore Dass's resistance to reductive categorisations and her reclamation of agency, but also crystallise the central thesis of this study: that the interwoven threads of labour and exhaustion are essential for understanding how South African Indian women artists navigate, contest, and transform identity within and against oppressive frameworks.

Dass's title for this work was a direct response to a comment made by a gallery owner who told her to "dial down on the Indianness" of her work because it was "too exotic" (Dass, 2024). This remark encapsulated the pressure she faced to conform to a palatable version of identity for external validation, leading her to push back with a statement that challenged the tokenisation of her heritage. "It was literally an up-yours," Dass said of the title, reflecting her frustration with how South African Indian identity is often either erased or essentialized within the art world (Dass, 2024). This resistance is central to her practice, where she refuses to dilute her cultural specificity to fit predetermined expectations.

One of Dass's notable artistic techniques is the use of old family photographs combined with dried flowers, a practice that deeply explores themes of memory, identity, and the intersection of the personal with the collective. Initially, this approach was inspired by a personal tribute to her late grandmother—a gesture of honouring her familial past. Dass explained how the use of dried flowers began unintentionally: "My nanny was like, this person passed away, it would be nice if you could do something sweet… I was scanning the images with the dried flowers, and by accident, it scanned over a face. And I was just like, this is kind of interesting, actually" (Dass, 2024). Over time, this process evolved into a broader artistic commentary, examining how personal memory and cultural heritage intersect and persist despite historical erasures.

This is most evident in *I'm Not Exotic, I'm Exhausted* (2019) (Fig. 2.6), where images of family members are juxtaposed with organic matter, highlighting both the temporal fragility of human life and the layered narratives embedded within personal archives. Dass has described how South African Indian families, including her own, treat photographs as "priceless items," carefully preserving them as relics of belonging and history (Dass, 2024). Her work acknowledges this reverence while also questioning how these images, once static and personal, can be reactivated in contemporary discourse.

When viewed through Roland Barthes's theoretical framework, Dass's artistic interventions reveal additional layers of meaning. In *Camera Lucida* (1981), Barthes differentiates between the *studium*—the cultural, historical, and intellectual interest that a photograph elicits—and the *punctum*—the detail that "pricks" or disturbs the viewer, imbuing the image with a deeply personal resonance. Dass's incorporation of dried flowers frequently operates as the *punctum*: at first, one may read the vintage photographs within their broader familial context (*studium*), but the delicate presence of wilted petals or blooms "punctures" the viewer's gaze, evoking both an emotional response and a meditation on mortality.

Barthes's notion of photography as a "certificate of presence"—or *that-has-been*—is also highly pertinent in Dass's work. Each family photograph testifies to a specific moment in time, functioning not only as a historical document but also as a personal relic that actively connects the living present with a departed past (Barthes, 1981). By embedding these images within floral arrangements that wither or dry out, Dass makes visible the transient nature of memory itself: what was once vibrant slowly fades, drawing attention to the fragility of lived experience and the inevitable erosion of recollection.

Moreover, Dass's layering of personal family archives with botanical elements suggests a re-contextualization akin to Barthes's concept of the "theatre" of photography. Much like a stage on which the subject performs, Dass's pieces foreground how familial figures are posthumously "restaged" for contemporary viewers. This echoes Barthes's view that photographs always carry a duality: they make the past "present" but also turn the subject into a kind of spectral being—both absent and immortalised in print. Dass's interplay of life (flowers) and archival image (photographs) underscores this tension between presence and absence, breathing new life into the recorded past even as the floral motifs symbolise decay.

Dass's self-referential homage to her grandmother underscores how the personal becomes collective, prompting viewers to introspect on the passage of time, familial bonds, and intergenerational lineage. She has spoken about her grandmother's artistic labour and the ways it was both celebrated and erased within her family structure. "She really, really wanted to be a seamstress, but she ended up being the family's seamstress, and she never got paid for it either," Dass reflected (Dass, 2024). By working with inherited textiles and embroidering over photographic surfaces, Dass extends these forgotten labours into her own artistic process, reclaiming the overlooked contributions of women in her lineage.

As Barthes (1972 [1957]) notes in *Mythologies*, images and objects can be culturally "mythologised," stripped of their complexities and reduced to easily consumable symbols. Dass, however, counters this flattening by infusing each work with the private, tactile traces of her grandmother's memory—dried flowers that once lived, familial photos that once captured lived moments—inviting viewers into a space where the personal intricately intertwines with the communal experience of loss, remembrance, and identity.

Dass's approach involves scanning old family photographs and overlaying dried flowers onto the faces, resulting in an ethereal and poignant visual effect that conveys a sense of vulnerability. "They looked like lots of other misrepresented people, but people can connect," she noted, underscoring the universality of her work despite its deeply personal origins (Dass, 2024). The use of dried flowers—which symbolise both beauty and decay—is particularly significant in reflecting the transient and fragile nature of memories. The interplay between ephemeral organic material and the permanence of photographic documentation reinforces Dass's broader artistic interrogation: what do we choose to preserve, and what inevitably fades?

By blending autobiography with collective memory, Dass constructs a layered and deeply affective engagement with history, resisting the erasure of South African Indian narratives while reimagining how these histories can be archived, embodied, and remembered.

Fig.29 Alka Dass, *I'm not Exotic, I'm Exhausted* (2019), Mixed media, 51.5 x 37 cm

Source: Goodman Gallery

The flowers appear almost spectral when laid over the photographs, their delicate textures reminding viewers of the ephemeral quality of life itself. Dass uses this juxtaposition to comment on how memories, much like flowers, can fade, dry up, or change shape over time, leaving traces that are still beautiful but inherently altered. “I think the time—it gets more diluted every year. I look at it, to be honest with you. I feel like it’s like slowly, like it loses its potency” (Dass, 2024). This statement reflects her contemplation of how memory shifts over time, evolving in ways that are sometimes beyond our control.

Moreover, the interplay between the photographs and the flowers speaks to the interwoven nature of personal and collective histories. Photographs, as tangible records of the past, are often treated as static representations, but Dass challenges this perception by altering their surfaces. In overlaying these images with dried flowers, she symbolically blurs the lines between different points in time, linking the past with the present in a nuanced dialogue that acknowledges both continuity and loss. Dass first explored this process when working with images of her late grandmother: “I was scanning the images with the dried flowers, and by accident, it scanned over a face. And I was just like, this is kind of interesting, actually… as that body is, regardless of them being my family, they looked like lots of other misrepresented people, but people can connect” (Dass, 2024). The chance discovery of layering dried flowers over photographs became a way to visually represent the fragility of memory and its ability to be reshaped by time and personal experience.

By working with flowers, which carry strong cultural associations with both life and death, Dass captures the essence of nostalgia—a longing for what has passed—while also recognising the inevitable passage of time and the natural cycles of renewal and decay. She has spoken about the emotional weight of familial objects in her art, particularly those created by her grandmother. “She really, really wanted to be a seamstress, but she ended up being the family’s seamstress, and she never got paid for it either,” Dass explained, reflecting on the unrecognised labour that shaped her understanding of identity and memory (Dass, 2024). This intergenerational transmission of artistry and craft resonates in her use of embroidery and floral elements, where delicate hand-stitched details and organic materials become metaphors for how personal histories are preserved or eroded over time.

Through these layers, Dass's work becomes a powerful reflection on the idea that memories are not simply static records of what has been but are actively reshaped by time and perspective.

The materials she uses—old photographs, dried flowers—speak to this interplay between permanence and impermanence, suggesting that our memories and identities are constructed, fragile, and deeply influenced by our connections to others. “I felt like I wasn’t being seen for the person that I am—being South African, being Indian, and then not finding any writings on that,” Dass remarked, emphasising how this absence of representation has compelled her to create work that makes these histories visible (Dass, 2024). This visual metaphor invites viewers to contemplate the intersections between personal histories and broader cultural narratives and how our understanding of the past is often refracted through the lens of the present.

The thematic threads connecting these works highlight Dass’s commitment to interrogating race, gender, and cultural identity. Throughout her practice, Dass critiques historical erasure and exoticization by using personal and cultural symbols, while her art simultaneously celebrates the resilience and heritage of her community. The recurring motif of weaving—literal in The Blue House and metaphorical in The Cloaked Woman—captures how memory, labour, and identity are interwoven. By merging these themes in a single statement, Dass’s work powerfully demonstrates how the active reclamation and celebration of resilience and heritage become central to challenging marginalisation and preserving cultural identity.

Dass has spoken at length about the expectations placed on women within her family and cultural framework. Her mother, despite being a working professional, still emphasised the importance of domesticity: “If he doesn’t want to protect himself, you protect yourself,” Dass recalled her mother advising her about relationships, reinforcing the idea that women must be self-sufficient and always prepared for emotional and social labour (Dass, 2024). This notion of caretaking and responsibility informs her work, where she visually stitches together fragmented histories, taking on the roles of both archivist and storyteller.

By juxtaposing materials such as embroidery, cyanotypes, and spices, Dass blurs the boundaries between art and artefact, challenging dominant narratives that seek to otherize women of colour. This aligns with the themes of reclamation and resistance explored throughout this thesis, particularly in the works of Usha Seejarim and Ravelle Pillay. Dass’s focus on the labour of memory and the emotional toll of identity performance resonates with Seejarim’s critique of domestic labour and Pillay’s explorations of historical trauma.

Furthermore, Dass's exploration of the theme of home is deeply personal and multifaceted. Her childhood experience of living out of a suitcase and the emotional turbulence of her parents' divorce significantly influenced her understanding of home. "My sister and I lived like a suitcase for like three years," she explained, describing how the instability of constantly moving between her parents' homes shaped her sense of belonging (Dass, 2024). She admitted to struggling with the idea of permanence, stating, "I would make homes out of friends, and that kind of good thing—to constantly make a home out of a human—it doesn't work like that" (Dass, 2024). This sentiment permeates her work, where she explores home not as a fixed location but as an evolving emotional and psychological construct.

The concept of home in the South African context is fraught with complexity, especially when seen through the lens of apartheid and the Group Areas Act. During apartheid, the government enforced racial segregation through laws that dictated where people could live, effectively dismantling existing communities and forcibly displacing millions. The Group Areas Act, implemented in 1950, was particularly devastating, as it imposed rigid racial divisions on urban spaces, evicting people from homes they had occupied for generations. Dass's work pays homage to this history, offering a poignant reflection on the idea of home in a context where that notion has been disrupted and redefined by apartheid policies.

Her depiction of home reflects the dualities many people face—a feeling of belonging and disconnection, familiarity and estrangement. By juxtaposing her own transient experiences with broader socio-political narratives, Dass's work echoes the themes of displacement and resilience. "Even though my grandmother was very much a domestic—happy wife, happy life kind of thing—she was also very liberal," Dass noted, highlighting the contradictions between tradition and autonomy that continue to shape how home is conceptualised in her family (Dass, 2024).

By merging personal histories with the larger sociopolitical context of South Africa, Dass's work challenges fixed notions of home and identity. She embraces impermanence as a means of exploring selfhood, using materials that reflect both fragility and endurance. This internalised fragmented vision of home speaks to the broader experience of many South Africans, whose sense of belonging has been rendered uncertain by the country's complex socio-political history. Ultimately, through embroidery, found objects, and photographic

interventions, Dass's art serves as a space for memory, resistance, and healing. about relationships and the memories we carry, rather than the physical spaces we occupy (hooks, 2009).

This theme of home as an emotional landscape resonates with the work of other scholars and artists who have grappled with displacement. Scholar bell hooks, for instance, writes about home as a site of resistance and a place of comfort amidst systemic oppression, highlighting how the concept of home is inherently tied to both personal and collective memory (hooks, 2009). Similarly, in Bessel van der Kolk's *The Body Keeps the Score*, he speaks to how the body remembers traumatic events, suggesting that home can often be as much about how our bodies carry memory as it is about a geographic location (van der Kolk, 2014). Dass's work engages with these ideas as she uses her art to navigate the impact of trauma and fragmentation, and to reclaim the idea of home.

Dass has spoken openly about her personal struggle with the concept of home, shaped by the instability of her childhood. "My sister and I lived like a suitcase for like three years," she recalled, referring to the back-and-forth movement between her parents' homes following their divorce (Dass, 2024). This dislocation left a profound impact on her, fostering an understanding of home as something impermanent, shifting, and emotionally complex. "I realised I was constantly making a home out of people, and that's not how it works," she reflected, acknowledging the emotional toll of seeking stability in external relationships rather than physical places (Dass, 2024).

In Dass's work, the narrative of home emerges not through conventional depictions of houses or rooms, but through evocative imagery that conveys the sensory and emotional layers of belonging. In doing so, she pays homage to a past marked by forced migration and dispossession while also articulating a deeply personal, introspective journey towards understanding what home can be in a world where it has often been denied or uprooted. "I think for me, it was bigger than gender—I felt like we were just such a marginalised community, and our history is really forgotten," Dass explained, highlighting how this erasure influences her exploration of cultural memory in her work (Dass, 2024).

Her artworks aim to evoke a sense of home for viewers, inviting them to connect with their own experiences of belonging and displacement. By exploring the complex emotions associated with the idea of "home," her pieces serve as a visual meditation on identity, memory, and cultural roots. This theme is particularly resonant in the context of South African Indian communities, who have historically faced displacement, marginalisation, and the fragmentation of their cultural heritage. The history of indenture, apartheid-era segregation, and ongoing socio-economic challenges has contributed to a collective experience marked by both resilience and dislocation. Dass's grandmother's experience encapsulates this generational trauma—her father was an indentured labourer, and her mother's family arrived later to work in the textile industry. "He had, I think, 15 different jobs—he was a carpenter, a baker, an innkeeper—because they just wouldn't allow Indian men to hold stable work," Dass recounted, illustrating how this instability shaped family narratives of home and security (Dass, 2024).

Through her work, she seeks to reflect the layered narratives of these communities, celebrating their strength while acknowledging the longing and loss that often accompany their stories. Her use of colours, textures, and symbols aims to create an emotional bridge, allowing viewers to explore their own connections to heritage and to the notion of belonging, whether rooted in family, culture, or the physical landscape.

Alka Dass's work serves as a compelling intersection of autobiography and autoethnography, offering rich insights into both the self and the collective experiences of her community. Autobiography, in this context, allows Dass to mine her own life for material that is both intensely personal and artistically evocative. Through her pieces, she documents her own journey, utilising her art as a narrative vessel to explore her identity as a South African woman of Indian heritage. Yet, the significance of autobiography within her practice lies not simply in personal disclosure but in the way these lived experiences are transformed into critical engagements with identity, memory, and belonging. Dass moves beyond recounting her story; she positions her personal history as an entry point for a broader reflection on the complexities faced by South African Indian women. By foregrounding the autobiographical, she actively challenges the erasure of these narratives from dominant art histories and situates her work in a deliberate conversation with themes of migration, cultural negotiation, and resilience. This interpretive approach reveals how autobiography acts not only as subject matter but also as a

method for reconceptualising what stories are told and whose voices are centred in contemporary South African art.

Her work moves beyond mere self-portraiture or personal storytelling; it becomes a window into her lived experiences, rendering intimate memories and personal histories visible and tangible. “Even though my grandmother was very much a domestic—happy wife, happy life kind of thing—she was also very liberal,” Dass noted, describing the generational shifts in how Indian women navigate identity and home (Dass, 2024). Her grandmother, for example, was the first woman in her family to wear pants, an act that symbolised both personal and cultural resistance. However, Dass found it intriguing that her mother, despite being raised in a liberal household, became more conservative after her divorce. “She was like a hippie in her 20s when she had me, but after she got divorced, she completely flipped and became so strict,” Dass reflected, acknowledging the complex ways in which trauma and survival shape women’s relationships with tradition (Dass, 2024).

Autoethnography further enriches her practice by contextualising these autobiographical elements within the broader socio-cultural framework of the South African Indian community. Dass's work becomes a form of cultural commentary, offering insights into how individual experiences are shaped by broader systems of race, culture, and history. Through her exploration of family dynamics, cultural traditions, and gender expectations, she addresses issues that resonate with many others who share her background. By situating her personal narrative within broader social patterns, she transforms her story into a collective voice that reflects shared struggles, resilience, and the complexities of identity in postcolonial South Africa. In this way, my autoethnographic reading does not merely illuminate Dass's personal journey but also foregrounds how such individual narratives can shape and inform a wider South African Indian discourse by highlighting common threads of memory, displacement, and cultural negotiation. One of the key contributions this analysis offers to cultural memory studies is its demonstration of how personal memory works, when placed within a collective and historical context, can actively participate in reconstructing and sustaining marginalised community narratives, positioning individual acts of remembrance as vital elements in the ongoing production of cultural memory.

Dass's use of both autobiography and autoethnography in her art also challenges traditional boundaries within the art world. The personal is political in her work; by sharing her own experiences, she disrupts dominant narratives and invites viewers to reconsider preconceived notions about identity, culture, and belonging. Her art is an invitation for introspection, not just for herself but also for her audience, as they engage with themes that are deeply specific yet undeniably universal—the yearning to belong, the tension between tradition and modernity, and the resilience found in personal and collective histories.

Dass's work has garnered attention for its emotional depth and innovative use of materials. Critics and audiences alike have praised her ability to convey complex themes through a delicate and evocative visual language. Her pieces have been featured in various exhibitions, highlighting the significance of her contributions to contemporary South African art.

Her exploration of themes such as memory, identity, and home has resonated with many, making her an important voice in the discourse on feminisms of Africa and postcolonial identity. Dass's work not only sheds light on the specific experiences of South African Indian women but also contributes to the broader understanding of how art can be a powerful medium for exploring and reclaiming marginalised narratives. "I constantly felt like I had to be perceived a certain way," Dass admitted, reflecting on the external expectations placed on women of colour in both the art world and broader society (Dass, 2024). This resistance to external framing aligns her practice with the works of other South African artists who challenge historical erasure and gendered expectations.

Thus, exploring the lives and works of Usha Seejarim, Ravelle Pillay, and Alka Dass—three notable South African women artists of Indian heritage—provides unique insights into the complex interplay of identity, history, and culture. While all three artists engage with the intersection of personal and collective histories, their approaches diverge significantly. Dass's focus on familial archives and emotional memory contrasts with Seejarim's exploration of domestic labour and materiality, often using household objects such as irons or brooms to comment on gendered roles and healing. Pillay, on the other hand, draws heavily on painterly interpretations of landscape and the Indian Ocean to evoke historical displacement, particularly the legacy of indenture. Although each artist addresses themes of resilience, memory, and belonging, Dass's work is markedly autobiographical and deeply engaged in reworking

personal archival images, whereas Seejarim's and Pillay's practices foreground broader social histories through distinct material choices and visual strategies. This comparative perspective illustrates both the shared concerns and distinctive methodologies that define their contributions to South African contemporary art.

Through their art, these women navigate and reclaim narratives that have historically been marginalized, offering powerful commentaries on the intersection of personal and collective histories. Usha Seejarim's *Mending the Matriarch* (2022) series, for example, uses vintage coal irons as symbols of domestic labour and healing, reflecting on the enduring impact of colonialism and the resilience of women in her family (Mirza, 2009). Ravelle Pillay's *Black Water* (2021) explores the history of Indian indenture through the metaphor of the ocean, engaging with themes of displacement and identity formation (Desai & Vahed, 2010). Similarly, Dass's use of old family photographs combined with dried flowers creates a poignant visual meditation on memory, home, and identity, tying personal history to larger cultural narratives.

Commentary on memory and identity, highlighting the transient nature of personal and collective histories.Cheryl de la Rey (1997) emphasises the importance of acknowledging the diversity of women's experiences, rejecting gender essentialism, and recognising the multiplicity of identities shaped by race, class, and history. This perspective is crucial for understanding the works of Seejarim, Pillay, and Dass, as their art reflects the interconnectedness of their identities and the broader socio-political contexts in which they exist. Their contributions to contemporary South African art and the discourse on feminisms of Africa are invaluable, offering new perspectives and challenging dominant narratives.

Dass has spoken about how identity in South Africa is often flattened into singular, rigid categories that fail to capture the complexity of lived experience. "I just felt like we're such a marginalised community, and our history is really forgotten," she noted, describing how South African Indian histories are often overlooked in both academic and artistic spaces (Dass, 2024). This marginalisation has fueled her artistic exploration of intersectionality, where her work actively resists essentialist narratives and engages with themes of race, gender, and belonging.

These artists' works underscore the significance of personal narratives in the broader context of feminisms of Africa and postcolonial identity. As Jennifer Nash (2011) notes, intersectionality provides a framework for understanding the complex and contingent nature of identity formation, allowing for a more nuanced analysis of how these artists navigate their multiple identities through their art. By addressing the legacies of colonialism and apartheid, Seejarim, Pillay, and Dass contribute to a broader dialogue about identity, resilience, and the quest for belonging.

Dass has expressed her frustration with how feminism is often framed in South African discourse. “I felt like it ticked some boxes, but not all of them,” she said of her early engagement with feminist theory, adding, “I felt disappointed that I couldn’t actually see that in the work that I was constantly reading and interacting with” (Dass, 2024). Her scepticism towards mainstream feminist frameworks stems from their failure to acknowledge the specific cultural and historical experiences of South African Indian women.

As we move forward, their art invites us to consider how personal and collective histories intersect and how art can serve as a powerful tool for social commentary and change. Their creative practices not only preserve and honour their cultural heritage but also assert their presence and agency in the contemporary South African context. This process of reclaiming and reframing histories through art offers a platform for marginalised voices, contributing to a more inclusive and representative understanding of South African identity and culture.

Dass’s personal experiences of displacement and identity negotiation have deeply influenced her artistic practice. “My sister and I lived like a suitcase for like three years,” she explained, reflecting on the instability of her upbringing and how it shaped her understanding of belonging (Dass, 2024). This transient experience translates into her work, where she often explores the tension between impermanence and rootedness.

To deepen the intersectional analysis in the following chapter, it is essential to explore how the artworks of Usha Seejarim, Ravelle Pillay, and Alka Dass engage with themes of race, gender, and cultural identity in nuanced and layered ways. Intersectionality, as Kimberlé Crenshaw (1989) articulated, is not merely about adding identities together; it’s about understanding how race, gender, and other social categories interlock to shape distinct experiences. This lens is

particularly relevant when analysing South African women artists of Indian heritage, as their work addresses not only their identity as women and as Indians but also as South Africans within a post-apartheid, historically segregated society. For instance, in Alka Dass's "I'm Not Exotic, I'm Exhausted" (2019), these overlapping oppressions become especially visible. The artwork directly responds to the pressure from the art world to present her identity in a palatable way, as when a gallery owner told her to "dial down on the Indianness" of her work because it was considered "too exotic" (Dass, 2024). In this piece, Dass challenges both the racialised gaze and the gendered expectations imposed upon her as an Indian woman in South Africa, exposing the unique convergence of marginalisation that Crenshaw describes. The exhaustion referenced in the title is not only a personal response but also reflects the broader social demand that women of colour perform cultural authenticity within restrictive frameworks. This example illustrates Patricia Hill Collins's (1990) concept of the matrix of domination, where multiple axes of identity—gender, race, cultural heritage—intersect to produce distinct forms of oppression. By centring these experiences in her art, Dass demonstrates how intersectionality is not an abstract theoretical lens but a lived and embodied reality, made visible through her creative practice.

While an autobiographical perspective provides valuable insights into experiences of marginality and resistance, it is important to acknowledge that focusing primarily on Dass's personal narrative has certain analytical limitations. Autobiographical approaches, by their nature, risk privileging individual experience in ways that may not capture the full diversity or complexity of broader South African Indian identities. The unique aspects of Dass's background and artistic choices may not be generalizable to all members of her community. Therefore, although Dass's work offers a vivid entry point into questions of intersectionality and cultural memory, the analysis presented here should be understood as one critical perspective among many. This awareness highlights the need for continued, varied scholarship that draws on multiple lenses and voices to reflect the heterogeneity of South African Indian experiences.

Patricia Hill Collins (1990) expanded on these ideas by emphasising the necessity of understanding oppression through a multi-dimensional framework. For these artists, intersectionality provides a means to foreground the complexities of their experiences within and against dominant narratives of race and gender. Dass has spoken about this tension,

explaining how she constantly felt pressure to conform to external expectations: “I constantly felt like I had to be perceived a certain way” (Dass, 2024).

Feminisms of Africa emphasise the importance of context and intersectionality, often diverging from Western feminist paradigms to account for the social, economic, and cultural specificities of African societies. Scholars such as Pumla Gqola and Amina Mama argue that African feminisms must address multiple forms of oppression that African women encounter, from colonial legacies to racial and economic marginalisation (Gqola, 2015; Mama, 2001). Gqola (2015) has written extensively on how South African women artists articulate their agency and resilience through art, creating counter-narratives that resist the historical erasure of Black and Indian women.

This framework aligns with the approach of Imam, Mama, and Sow (1997), which calls for an inclusive, intersectional African feminist discourse that reflects the diverse experiences of African women across various ethnic, racial, and cultural backgrounds. Dass’s work contributes to this discourse by expanding African feminist thought to include the perspectives of South African women of Indian descent. Her work challenges dominant narratives that often exclude or homogenise these identities.

“I didn’t want to talk about my identity at first,” Dass admitted, describing how her time at university made her feel pressured to produce art that explicitly reflected her racial and cultural background (Dass, 2024). However, after leaving university, she began to embrace her heritage in her work, using personal and familial narratives to complicate South African art-historical discourses.

Art has long served as a powerful medium for social and political movements, and the works of Seejarim, Pillay, and Dass exemplify this role by using visual language to engage with themes of empowerment, resistance, and cultural heritage. Art historian Deborah Atkinson (2009) describes how marginalised communities have historically used art to assert their identities and challenge dominant cultural narratives. In this tradition, these artists utilise symbols, textures, and narratives rooted in their heritage and personal experiences to push against oppressive structures and reclaim cultural spaces.

Dass's approach aligns with this history of artistic resistance. Her mixed-media practice incorporates embroidery, cyanotypes, and found objects to create multi-layered works that resist easy categorisation. "I constantly kept on being told to talk about my identity, which I really did not want to talk about," she recalled, explaining how her early reluctance eventually gave way to an artistic practice that embraces complexity rather than simplification (Dass, 2024).

The societal impact of these artists' work reaches beyond individual expression, contributing to a broader, more inclusive understanding of identity. Their art has the power to challenge stereotypes, question societal norms, and influence both local and global discourses on race, gender, and cultural identity. This aligns with Griselda Pollock's (1988) analysis of how feminist art can function as a political tool, inviting viewers to engage with the complexities of intersectional identity rather than imposing a singular narrative.

By centring their art within South Africa's rich cultural landscape, these artists provide a counter-narrative to monolithic depictions of "South African" or "Indian" identity. Dass, in particular, has spoken about how frustrating it is to see representation reduced to tokenism. "The gallery owner told me to 'dial down on the Indianness' of my work because it was 'too exotic,'" she recalled, highlighting how art institutions still impose restrictive ideas of racial identity (Dass, 2024).

It is thus evident that Dass's artworks serve as acts of resistance and reclamation, offering a profound commentary on the intersections of personal and cultural histories. Through her innovative use of materials and techniques, she navigates the complexities of identity, challenging reductive narratives while celebrating the richness of her heritage. Her work not only contributes to the evolving discourse on race, gender, and cultural identity but also underscores the transformative power of art as a medium for healing and self-expression. By foregrounding voices and experiences that have long been ignored in dominant South African art histories, Dass's practice compels scholars and curators to rethink how marginalised narratives are represented, preserved, and valued. Looking ahead, such analyses demand a more inclusive, intersectional approach to art history, where future curatorial and scholarly practices actively engage with layered identities and untold stories to shape a more equitable cultural record.

The exploration of Usha Seejarim, Ravelle Pillay, and Alka Dass's works underscores the intricate ways in which art serves as both a personal and collective archive, resisting historical erasure while reclaiming marginalised narratives. Their creative practices highlight the intersections of race, gender, and cultural identity, offering a compelling lens through which to examine the evolving discourse of feminisms of Africa and postcolonial identity. By interrogating themes of memory, home, and belonging, these artists challenge reductive representations and assert their agency within the contemporary South African art landscape. As this thesis moves into its conclusion, the final chapter will synthesise these discussions, reflecting on the broader implications of their work and considering how their artistic contributions reshape understandings of identity, heritage, and resistance in South Africa and beyond.

Conclusion

This thesis commenced as a scholarly investigation into the intersections of race, gender, memory, and visual culture within the context of South African Indian heritage. At its core, the thesis makes an original intervention by foregrounding South African women artists of Indian Heritage as creators of alternative, community-led archives that disrupt colonial and apartheid-era silences and reshape the field of South African art historiography. Motivated by the urgent need to address historiographical absences and representational silences surrounding South African Indian women artists, the research evolved into both an academic inquiry and a deeply personal journey of reclamation. It sought to honour, reframe, and recover marginalised narratives obscured by colonial and apartheid-era epistemologies.

The prevailing archive, as discussed in Chapter One, is far from neutral. It is shaped by structures of power, constructed through the lens of empire, and mobilised to classify, regulate, and ultimately erase those who exist outside of the colonial imagination. Michel-Rolph Trouillot (1995:26) reminds us that "silences enter the process of historical production at four crucial moments"—during the moment of fact creation, fact assembly, fact retrieval, and retrospective significance. Within the South African context, these silences have been meticulously maintained through legal, educational, and cultural mechanisms that have long privileged white, Eurocentric accounts of history while marginalising Black, Coloured, and Indian experiences.

Colonial and apartheid-era epistemologies institutionalised a racialised hierarchy in which South African Indians were largely positioned as labouring bodies or politically suspect aliens, useful for the economy but undesirable in the project of nation-building (Desai & Vahed, 2010). This logic, which rendered them simultaneously hyper-visible in terms of labour and invisible in terms of political and cultural recognition, has had long-lasting implications. Through legal classifications such as the *Asiatic Registration Act* (1907), spatial displacement under the *Group Areas Act* (1950), and ideological framings in school curricula, South African Indians were systematically positioned as outsiders to both African liberation and white South

African citizenship (Meer, 1985; Dhupelia-Mesthrie, 2000). The enduring repercussions of these legislative acts continue to shape contemporary cultural visibility, as exclusion from political and educational spheres has contributed to the limited presence of Indian voices—and especially women—in the mainstream South African art scene. Today, the patterns of marginalisation established by these historic laws reverberate in the uneven recognition, funding, and exhibition opportunities available to South African Indian women artists, highlighting the need to directly address legacies of erasure in both institutional and creative contexts.

As Gqola (2010) argues, the construction of the archive is an act of meaning-making that reflects the anxieties and desires of the dominant order. The state, as the custodian of "official" memory, reinforced a version of history in which South African Indian communities, particularly women, were rarely more than footnotes. Their narratives were excluded from visual culture, museum exhibitions, and literary canons, or when included, often portrayed through a patriarchal or racialised gaze that reduced their agency to either passive victimhood or moral conservatism. This erasure is compounded for women artists, whose work is rarely included in mainstream accounts of South African art history, thereby being doubly marginalised by both race and gender (Coombes, 2003; Peffer, 2009). As artist Zainab Reddy articulated during an interview, "If we do not tell our own stories, the canvas becomes a mirror for someone else's reflection, not our own." Her words puncture the silence described here, making visible the assertion and self-definition that undercut such marginalisation.

As Stuart Hall (1997) reminds us, representation is not simply a reflection of reality but a system of meaning through which identities are constructed. In omitting the creative, political, and intellectual contributions of South African Indian women, dominant historical narratives have flattened the complex and hybrid identities forged in the crucible of migration, indenture, resistance, and creolisation. This flattening has real effects: it limits who is imagined as a legitimate contributor to the nation's cultural and political life, and who is left to navigate its history through fragments, absences, and silences. The ongoing failure to recognise these diverse identities sustains exclusion in present-day education and policymaking, resulting in curricula and public discourse that do not reflect the full spectrum of South African experience.

As a consequence, histories remain partial, and future generations inherit a narrowed sense of who belongs and whose contributions matter.

This thesis intervenes in the archive not to replace it with a single counter-narrative, but to complicate and pluralise the sources through which South African Indian identity can be understood. By bringing together what I describe as 'living archives'—oral histories, family archives, commemorative magazines, and the vibrant artworks of women often relegated to the periphery of cultural memory—this research highlights the collective vitality and generative capacity of these sources. Rather than cataloguing each discrete type of evidence, the notion of the 'living archive' signals their interconnection, ongoing creation, and communal ownership. In this way, the thesis contributes to the growing body of scholarship that challenges the fixity and authority of the colonial archive (Stoler, 2002; Peterson, 2016). It asserts that the archive should be reimagined as a dynamic and contested space where marginalised voices can be recovered, recontextualised, and centred.

Drawing on African feminisms, postcolonial theory, and the concept of the archive as both a site of erasure and a space of imaginative possibility (Mbembe, 2002; Gqola, 2010; Hartman, 2008), this thesis repositions visual culture as an alternative archive that reveals what was deliberately obscured. Through the work of artists such as Thania Petersen, Ranjith Kally, Zainab Reddy, Lalitha Jawahirilall, and others, I have traced how art functions not only as representation but also as a mode of resistance, record-keeping, and spiritual reclamation. These artworks embody what Tina Campt (2017) describes as “listening to images”—a method of attending to the quieter frequencies of historical presence, where silences communicate and fragments bear witness. By exploring photography, commemorative publications, oral interviews, and state documents, this thesis addresses a critical gap in South African art historiography and visual cultural studies. Existing scholarship often flattens Indian experiences into the broad category of Black resistance or positions Indian cultural life outside the scope of South African nation-building. Consequently, the contributions of South African Indian women artists have remained under-examined, with their labour confined to domestic spaces or rendered invisible within dominant archives. This thesis directly addresses that

absence, advocating for a more nuanced and intersectional understanding of cultural production, identity formation, and memory work within South African Indian communities.

In doing so, and on a personal note, it also became a means for me to locate and reclaim my own familial history. My ancestors were brought to the shores of KwaZulu-Natal to work on sugarcane plantations under exploitative conditions, their lives documented in contracts and passbooks but absent from the broader cultural memory of the nation. Their stories of migration, hardship, survival, and adaptation were scattered, undocumented, or misrepresented. Throughout this research, with the aid of the South African National Archives online database and FamilySearch, I was able to trace my lineage back to the moment of their arrival. This act of archival recovery transformed the nature of the thesis. What began as an analysis of representation expanded into an embodied act of return.

The conversations I had with artists like Usha Seejarim reinforced the idea that identity is not something we inherit passively. These exchanges were not simply interviews but dialogic processes in which knowledge was co-created. In dialogue, we shaped understandings together, constructing meaning at the intersection of our lived experiences, artistic practices, and histories. Identity, then, is made and remade through the cultural practices we engage in, the memories we revisit, and the silences we learn to listen to. Petersen's photographic performance of Cape Malay heritage, her use of dress, landscape, and body as sites of creolised memory, echoed my own desire to understand how Indian South African identity has been shaped by overlapping geographies of the Indian Ocean world. Similarly, Jawahirilall's visual poetics of exile and return helped both of us to name and reflect on the ambivalence I experienced when revisiting my ancestral history—one shaped by pain, displacement, resilience, and pride. These shared dialogues foregrounded collaborative meaning-making, underscoring the thesis's commitment to collective and relational forms of knowledge production.

Throughout this thesis, commemorative and community-led archives such as *The Centenary of Indians in South Africa* and *The 1860 Settler Magazine* were examined as critical interventions into the silences of state-controlled memory. These publications are not only historical records but cultural artefacts that blend the personal and the political, capturing the everyday lives, aspirations, and resistances of South African Indian communities. The inclusion of visual materials, advertisements, and editorial content in these publications served not just as illustrations but as repositories of lived experience and social consciousness. For instance, advertisements for local businesses and event announcements subtly resisted official narratives of invisibility by spotlighting thriving community networks, while editorial commentary often questioned prevailing state policies or highlighted forms of everyday resistance. These materials did not merely document life under segregation, but actively contested the gaps and omissions of state-sanctioned memory. Their presence in this research affirms that the archive is not confined to the state but lives in our households, our oral traditions, our creative practices.

The *Centenary of Indians in South Africa* blog, curated by Thava Pillay, emerged as the single most extensive and valuable archival source I encountered during this research. While formal state archives and institutional collections often rendered the histories of South African Indians fragmentary or peripheral, this blog provided access to a meticulously digitised repository of commemorative materials, photographic documentation, and community narratives that would have otherwise remained obscured. As discussed in Chapter Two, commemorative publications such as the *Centenary of Indians in South Africa (1860–1960)* and *The 1860 Settler Magazine* are not merely ephemera; they are crucial alternative archives that disrupt dominant historiographies by foregrounding community-led forms of memory-making and historical preservation. In a research landscape marked by silences and absences, Pillay's blog functioned as both an archive and an act of resistance, democratising access to visual and textual records that assert the presence, complexity, and contributions of South African Indian communities across generations. The fact that this digital archive, rather than a national institution, provided the most comprehensive insight into this history speaks to the urgent need for rethinking what constitutes a valid archival source and who gets to preserve and tell the nation's stories. My experience using this platform also illustrates a broader trend: digital grassroots platforms are redefining curatorial authority nationwide, challenging institutional gatekeeping and expanding whose narratives are included in the archival record. This platform became not only

an academic resource but also a site of personal discovery and reclamation, offering the first visual traces through which I could connect with the lives and legacies of my ancestors.

This thesis does not claim to provide a definitive account of South African Indian womanhood or artistic expression. Rather, it acknowledges the intertwined complexity of these identities, always shaped at the crossroads of race, gender, class, and diaspora. Reclamation, I have found, is an unending journey. Even as names, documents, and images come to light, uncertainties about what remains undocumented or unspoken persist, reminding us to approach the silences with care and accountability. Through the research undertaken here, I have come to see the archive as more than a tool of historical correction: it is also a site for personal healing. In reclaiming my ancestors' narratives, I have begun to chart my own. This scholarly intervention thus became a personal act of homage. By giving voice to what was silenced, I have also found my own.

As efforts to build an inclusive and decolonial South African art history progress, I hope this research contributes to broader recognition of South African Indian women artists, not as anomalies but as integral participants in shaping the nation's cultural and historical fabric. Their work, and this thesis, assert that memory concerns not only what is remembered but also who possesses the power to remember. In reclaiming these histories, I have reclaimed my own. Yet it is crucial that this reclamation extends beyond the page. I invite curators, educators, and cultural leaders to actively integrate the lives and works of South African Indian women artists into exhibitions, curricula, and public programming. By doing so, the field can move from recognition to inclusion, ensuring that future generations encounter a more nuanced, representative, and just history of South African art. The challenge, then, is not only to remember but to act: to curate exhibitions that foreground these artists, to develop teaching materials that reflect their contributions, and to support further research that brings new voices into the historical record.

This research directly addresses the persistent gap in literature by centring the experiences and contributions of South African women artists of Indian Heritage—long excluded from prevailing art historical and memory studies. While much scholarship now engages questions of race, gender and resistance in South African art, the cultural narratives shaped by Indian women remain insufficiently visible. By foregrounding their artistic labour, this thesis both recovers lost genealogies and reframes the archive as a dynamic, contested space, in line with the theoretical frameworks introduced in Chapter One. Drawing on concepts such as African feminisms, intersectionality, autoethnography, and the notion of the 'alternate archive' (Peterson, 2016; Gqola, 2018), the research challenges art historical hierarchies that have historically marginalised non-white, non-male, and non-Western voices. Its significance lies in insisting on reclaimed narrative space for South African Indian women artists and legitimising the personal, embodied act of reclamation as an essential mode of knowledge production.

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