

The Recentring of the Geo-Political Misplaced Asian Identity in a Post-Apartheid South Africa Through the Discourse of Inherited Photographs Pre-1994

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Abstract

The following paper is an analysis of the various Asian communities that had settled in South Africa following the Colonial period into the Apartheid regime and has now been assimilated into the “Asian”, “Indian”, “coloured” and “Malay” racial diaspora in the now ‘democratic’ South Africa. On one level, the paper discusses the reconstruction or *recentring* of the Asian identity in terms of a South African national identity that it possesses in the present day Post-Apartheid South Africa. On another, it unpacks the notions of identity and recentring of the self through a personal narrative. As a product of an Asian ancestry line, the paper unpacks the narrative of my great grandparents and grandparents through memory forms and in particular- the visual narrative preserved through the photographic collections of my family members pre-1994. The sole focus of this paper is that *of memory and identity preservation through photographs* and the last authentic group of Asian communities (my grandparents and those in the generation who had been born and lived through apartheid and racial segregation). Lastly, the paper unpacks what the future of the *recentred* Asian identity will be in terms of the generation that has now been plagued by technological shifts and heightened globalisation. It begs the question: *is there an artistic space for the NEW Asian community in South Africa, myself included, which offers a method of identity shift and historical reclamation and what does it really mean to be an Asian Other in one’s own country?*

Keywords: South African Asian Identity, Reconstructive memory, Post-Colonialism, Post-Apartheid, Visual narration, Asian Other, Memory, Identity, representation, photographs, pre-1994, apartheid, Post-Apartheid

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No one today is purely one thing. Labels like Indian, or woman, or Muslim, or American are not more than starting-points, which if followed into actual experience for only a moment are quickly left behind.

-Edward W. Said, *Culture and Imperialism*

Sundays are a traditional routine. My grandmother prepares the food, always a few types of dishes. Today she is preparing fish-curry with homemade roti and a side of kababs with fresh lemon and sweet yellow-rice. She is also preparing a sweet almond, sago and cinnamon drink called "boeber"- a Cape Malay delicacy. Her father owned the first ever -Indian restaurant in Johannesburg during Apartheid where her mother spent endless hours preparing the Indian cuisine. They are long gone, but their stories fill the four walls of the warm fading-mustard colored kitchen of my grandmother's home. A home we travel to from the suburbs every Sunday for traditional food. Our traditional food. On this Particular Sunday, I realise that I had never before seen my great grandfather. My grandparents are overly excited to show me my heritage, to dictate to me their lineage. My lineage. The photographs are splattered on the red-stained floor and I am surrounded by memories. I am surrounded by my mother as a young girl swimming in the ocean for the first time, by the meals served in the restaurant, by my grandmother on her wedding day and then there it was. I reach out and hold in my hand the only picture my grandfather has of his parents. The picture that started the journey of this paper.

The Apartheid government had not reintroduced racial segregation in South Africa post 1948, but instead re-entrenched it. Rigid laws were introduced that had deepened the experience of racial segregation and in order to live out the imagined whiteness of the space, the government had started with a classification system that forced citizens into a racial classification. The four main racial categories were (and still is) White,

Indian, Coloured, Cape Malay and Black. The various politically affirmed governmental ACTS, such as the Population Act (1950), the Reservation of Separate Amenities Act (1953), the Prohibition of Mixed Marriages Act (1949) and the Group Areas Act (1950) had all contributed significantly to the lives of non-white citizens. More than this, it posed a direct threat to the racial identity of a community.

This paper examines, in five parts, the misplaced identity of the Asian community in Apartheid. It firstly looks at the brief historical background of the Asian communities which settled in South Africa throughout the Colonial period, with a focus on the Indonesian, Chinese, Indian and Cape Malay communities. Secondly, the paper examines the notion of *Otherness* and reiterates the conceptual iterations of Orientalism as Edward Said paints fourth in his two dominant theoretical texts, *Orientalism*, followed by the third part of the paper which almost contradicts or rather, in a less prosaic manner, reiterates the second paper by Said, *Orientalism Reconsidered*, which is a staunch comment on the layering of recentering of multiple multifaceted Asian diasporic identities in South Africa currently. The fourth segment of the paper examines the shift of the Asian Identity in its problematized context and essential existence. In order to conjecture the Asian figure, the need for memory reconstruction is a pertinent one. Memory is looked at as a reconstructive process of identity building, creating, crafting, destroying and re-creating. It is through the photograph that we remember and recollect identity-meaning-making in order to establish a strong present day understanding of “Otherness”- of the Asian Other in a globalised South African context. Lastly, the paper closes with a restructuring of itself- a re-questioning. What is the current stasis of the Asian Other in a globalised and racially-changing South Africa?

A Brief History of Asian South Africans

As mentioned above, Apartheid did not differ much from the segregation policies existing previously. The only difference was that racial segregation was a process of law-making. Drawing from the intensively detailed historical work of Dr. Yoon Jung Park (2012), the history of migration of the Chinese started in the mid to late 17th century, where the first Chinese, in miniscule numbers of no more than 100 at a time, landed in South Africa as Company slaves and convicts of the Dutch East India Company. Given their small numbers, they struggled to maintain a national South African Chinese identity and were repatriated into a growing mixed-race community and later labelled as “Coloured” (a term used in South Africa to refer to any citizen who was not of direct Indian or Malay heritage and were often a product of mixed-marriages or *Khoi-San* descent- the indigenous people of the Cape). Between the period of 1904 to 1910, many Chinese labourers were returned and from the 1870s to the 20th century, small numbers from Canton arrived and settled in South Africa as indentured mine workers. Those Chinese citizens who did not return to China were trapped in South Africa and had to face the racist apartheid laws. Many of these members assimilated into Mixed-Race/Coloured areas and the generations to follow this particular group were English and/or Afrikaans speaking citizens with often little/no connection to Chinese identity/heritage/culture.

Alongside the historical settling of the Chinese, the Indian community landed in South Africa through a harsh line of indentured labour and sugar-cane plantation slavery. In reference to the SAHO, South African History Online archive (2011),

Indians in South Africa are a homogenous group of languages, food, culture and traditions. The first Indians arrived in the Dutch Colonial Era in 1684 as slaves. In the time span of 1690 to 1725, eighty percent of slaves in South Africa were Indian. In the latter half of the 19th Century, Indians entered the country as indentured labourers and as “free” passenger Indians meant to work for the Natal Colonial government on Natal’s sugar plantations. Contrary to many beliefs, Indians who travelled as ‘free’ arrived in the country in order to trade and had entered at their own expense. Many, who had money, could establish businesses and attain property. One of the key distinguishing factors around the Indian community in terms of the preservation of their racial category (to a point that it stood independently from the other Asian groups) is the significant amount of political contribution made throughout Apartheid. They had established their own prominent political party called the NIC (National Indian Congress) established by Ghandi in 1894.

The final Asian Lineage that will be discussed in this paper is the Cape Malay community, who were known for shaping the history and diverse culture of the Cape. The narrative begins with Sheikh Yusuf of Makassar, a reputable man who resisted Dutch occupation of the East Indies. He has been accredited with introducing and establishing Islam in the Cape, where he sought exile after his attempts to overthrow the Dutch. On the 2nd of April, 1694, Yusuf, along with 49 other Muslim exiles landed in the Cape from the now “Indonesia”. The term “Malay” has become synonymous to the term “Cape Muslim” in present day South Africa. Majority of the Cape Malays are self-identified as “Malay” yet bear no heritage or lineage to Malaysia (not the larger majority that is). This simply stemmed from *Malaya*- before Indonesia and Malaysia had been split. It is therefore an open discussion and more than this- an unfinished discussion- about the Indonesian identity of the Cape Malays.

Otherness

Central to the sociological approach as explored in George Herbert Meads’ classical text *Mind, Self and Society* (1934), the idea of otherness permeates to the analysis of how minority and majority group identities are constructed. His text is implicated in the notion that the individual reads their own identity through the perceived negotiation of self-reflection through the mirroring of social exchanges interchangeably. Instead of focusing on the innate identity, sociologists examine the constructed identity and the methodological approach of the individual to absorb and internalise racial constructions, language, culture...etc. Within the South African context, identity is read as a *negotiation of identity*. That in order to understand the self -racially, one undergoes a negotiation of identity. An example of this is the inability (innocent inability to some extent) of the Cape Malays to re-identify themselves as Cape-Indonesian as it taints the imaginary/re-imagined social construction of racial identity negotiated through a history of slavery. In his text, *Orientalism: Western Conceptions of the Orient* (1978), Edward Said addresses the Western conceptions of the Orient. However, for the purpose of this essay and in terms of my personal positioning, the Western gaze as proposed in Said’s essay will rather refer to the western/colonial construction of the other- *the Asian body*- the fetishized Asian other.

Said looks at the Orient (in this case- Asian Other) as a constellation of ideas that has enabled its own existence through the discourse of power-relations. His point is that it

is not some European fantasy that preserves the Orient-positionality but rather “a system of knowledge *about* the Orient.” He stresses that the discursive construction of the Oriental serves a vital purpose: it extends/affirms the exclusionary process upon which White is predicated, that the idea of white identity is a superior one in comparison to all non-white people and their respective cultures. *Whiteness*, as a result, is read as a collective notion of “us” and “them”. However, the Asian identity is more fractured in the South African context and the goal of Said (our goal as Fractured Asians) in South Africa is to reconcile with its general and hegemonic context.

“orientalism is accordingly not a mere political subject matter or field that is reflected passively by culture, scholarship or institutions; nor is it a large collection of texts about the orient; nor is it representative and expressive of some ‘western’ imperialist plot to hold down the ‘oriental’ world. It is rather a distribution of geopolitical awareness into aesthetic, scholarly, economic, sociological and historical texts. It is an elaboration not only of a basic geographic distinction but also of a whole series of ‘interests’ It is above all, a discourse that is by no means in a direct corresponding relationship with the political... to generate the ideas about what “we” do and what “they” cannot do or understand as “we” do.” (12)

The Re-centering of the Self: Orientalism reconsidered

In his second prominent text, *Orientalism Reconsidered* (1985), Said problematizes the critique of his own work. The first in the positioning of the one who gets to discuss the ‘other’ and the second is the methodology of implementation of this knowledge production within the context of power-institution. “Orientalism reconsidered in this wider and libertarian optic entails nothing less than the creation of new objects for a new kind of knowledge.” My positioning in the wider schemata of this essay is that of a personal one. What is at the heart of this premise is my otherness as a conscious orientalism. A process of orientalism and otherness in terms of reclaiming a racial identity handed down to me through generations of misplaced Asian bodies in my genetic line.

“...so saturated with meanings, so overdetermined by history, religion and politics are labels like ‘Arab’ or ‘Muslim’ as subdivisions of ‘The Orient’” is re-written as, “so saturated with meanings, so overdetermined by South African history, religion and Colonial Politics are labels like ‘Coloured’, “Cape Malay”, “Indian” as subdivisions of “The South African Other.”

Paternally, my great-grandfather had arrived from India as part of the sugar plantation slaves and lost his paperwork along the way. In order to classify him, the government handed him the surname *Khan*. The surname my father now carries- as well as myself. The original surname of my great-grandfather is *Sayed*. A surname that is now lost. My great-grandfather was labelled Indian, his son was labelled Indian and my father was labelled Cape Malay (having no Indonesian/Malaysian lineage).

As seen in the picture above, my grandfather has one (a single) image of his parents that documents his history. His father is presented in Communist Chinese attire whilst his mother is presented in traditional Jakarta wear. The photograph was taken after their marriage and brought with them into South Africa. It certainly raises many unanswered historical questions such as why a man would migrate to South Africa

when situated as fighting for the Communist wing in China- *the 'winning' side at the time*. These are the fractured memories of identity formation that still persists. My grandfather's father was documented as Chinese, his mother as Cape Malay but him as – *Coloured*. My grandmother's father was labelled Indian and was a prominent activist throughout Apartheid. He was the first owner of an Indian restaurant in Johannesburg and he housed many ANC meetings with the then young ANC collation of youthful activists, Nelson Mandela being one of them. My great grandfather was labelled Indian and my grandmother was labelled Cape Malay but my mother was labelled Coloured.

I consciously labelled myself "Other" following 1994.

Memory, Identity and the Photograph

In the essay, *Telling Stories: Memory and Narrative* (2010), Freeman conceptualises the act of remembering as a reconstructive process that has destabilised the idea of memory itself. Reflecting on the abovementioned example, my grandfather has a fractured memory around the context of his father's history or geographical intentions from China to South Africa, but the memory is reconstructed in the narrative my grandfather created in order to preserve his historically-inherited identity. "Autobiography is hopelessly inventive" (67) and in this context it is only through the process of storytelling and photographs that there is a *narrativisation* of the fractured Asian identity.

The process of remembering the personal past is always already permeated by narrative as well-if not the full blown sort we find in memoirs and autobiographies, then the more inchoate sort, the rough draft-that exists the moment we try to make sense of the movement of experience. Indeed, it has been the argued strenuously that the process of living is itself permeated by narrative, that indeed to be human is to live and through the fabric of time. (274)

In *Visualising Memory, Photographs and the Art of Biography*, Deborah Willis (2003), connotes that photograph is as powerful a storytelling instrument as an instrument of memory preservation.

"I have found that photographs of the family, pictures that function as biography and autobiography are an important way to re-enter the past and to comment on societal issues." (20)

Hall (1989), stipulates that "identities are the names we give to the different ways we are positioned by, and position ourselves within, the narrative of past." Which directly speaks to the national plethora of South African identity-struggles constantly at play. The problematic nature of the broader South African situation is that the South African citizen does not have a national identity and cannot, amongst themselves, agree on who they are and thus- the new consciousness of "*self*" is itself susceptible to a multitude of interpretation and negotiation.

It is only from this second position that we can properly understand the traumatic character of "the colonial experience". The ways in which black people, black experiences, were positioned and subjected in the dominant regimes of representation

were the effects of a critical exercise of cultural power and normalization. Not only, in Said's "Orientalist" sense, were we constructed as different and other within the categories of knowledge of the West by those regimes. They had the power to make us see and experience ourselves as "Other". (40)

It is hence through the performance of genetic preservation of my great-grandparents' photographs that my identity is preserved as an Asian other in the South African context. Without the last documentation that my grandfather holds of his parents- I would lose the ability to document and preserve the visual narrative of memory reconstruction which I hold as a process of my Asian-Other- identity making in the globalised post -Apartheid context.

The Future of the Asian Identity

Speaking back to Said, the construction of the Asian is a colonial project which dissects the fractured identity accordingly. He points out that the prevailing assumption is that knowledge is non-political (in terms of the social, historical, academic.... etc.) He argues that no one has ever devised a method for detaching the scholar from the circumstance of their life from the fact of involvement (consciously/unconsciously) with class, ideologies and social positions or from the fact of being a mere member in a participation-endorsed society. I argue that my generation who were born as a result of the Colonial Project of racial identity/classification by the Apartheid system must either understand through academic/classification embodiment of the past which has contributed to the South African Asian *Othered* identity or through artistic forms of self-making, such as art, novel, poetry..etc. The methodology I chose to use was a means of memory and identity recollection through the photographic collections preserved by my grandparents. The melancholic reality however, is that the previous generation are dying out and the current/future generation are not overly consumed with the photograph or the processes of storytelling as we are dispersed into a heightened reality of technology, social media and globalisation. It is also a reality that perhaps South African Asians exist within a simulacrum of their own unique and personal identity. By this I mean that even though many Cape Malays may travel to Malaysia and not understand the language or even the foods or perhaps to Indonesia and realise that there are minor similarities but would experience a culture far from the one they have known. *This* realisation may not take away from the fact that there is an existent and consciously-lived culture that permeates the Cape Malays today. Certain foods for example could demonstrate this. The *Koeksister* is a specific sweet baked treat covered in a sugary coat and coconut that is a part of the culture of South African Malays and then there is the Indian delicacy known as the *Bunny chow* which is a hollowed out bread filled with a spicy curry only found in South Africa as an Indian dish.

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