

Artists Through An Artist's Eyes

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Introduction

As David Harvey explains in his lectures on Marx's Method of Descent, inquiry starts with everything that exists. This method begins with reality as we see it, experience it and feel it. We begin with descriptions of reality by novelists and political economists, and then we search in that material for some simple concepts. Thus, we move from reality, looking down to some foundational concepts. Once we uncover foundational concepts, we come back to the surface to see what's going on around the surface and to see behind the world of appearance. Thereby we find another way of interpreting reality.

Using Karl Marx's Method of Descent, my practice revolves around the themes of colonialism, post-colonial societies, racialized inequality, institutionalised racism, subordination, dependency, belonging and not belonging, capitalism, and the ideas of feminism. Subjects of hybrid identities and identity crisis are also prominent themes in my practice. I am also interested in sociology and psychoanalytic perspectives.

In this journey of inquiry and exploration, many artists inspire me by their ideas, techniques and artistic productions. My fascination with the works of Shazia Sikander, Isaac Julian, Yinka Shonibare, Kara Walker, and Risham Syed is inquisitorial. They inform the audience essentially on the themes of colonialism, black slavery, black identity, capitalism and feminism.

My practice originates from twentieth-century modern collage styles and evolves into a diverse range of alternative techniques, assemblage and found objects combining contemporary influences. It also encompasses traditional types of printmaking entailing new methods and experiments. Currently, my practice is expanding into different media such as ceramics. Also, having seen Shazia Sikander's latest kinetic animations, I am inclined to do animations.

In this research statement, two chapters have been written extensively on themes and creative processes respectively. Chapter one talks about the themes that I have been exploring in my art practice, such as colonialism and capitalism. Chapter two sheds light on my creative processes that include various methods, techniques, and media for artistic productions. Both chapters showcase my works.

Chapter 1 Themes

a. Hybrid Identities

My art practice constantly investigates what I see, what I hear and what I experience. Being born and raised in Pakistan, my experiences always end in inquisitive conversations, whether the experience is of being surrounded by grand Indo-Saracenic architecture or having tea in a Victorian-style teacup. The questions of belonging & not belonging and hybrid identities have always been hovering.

During the British Raj, many British people travelled to the Indian Subcontinent for work. Some men and women lived and settled there. Earlier, people from Portugal, Holland, France and other Continental countries also travelled and settled in the Indian Subcontinent. As a result of transcontinental settlements, many people in the Indian Subcontinent have mixed ancestry. People with such mixed ancestry were called ‘Eurasians’ – which referred to a European and Asian lineage. In contrast, Anglo-Indian became a more specific term used to refer to a person with mixed Indian and British ancestry and a person who was of British descent living in India. Between the 18th to 20th century the term was only associated with British people living in India.

In my practice, the term Anglo Indian has been used in its broader context and is not limited to people of British descent or mixed lineage. Instead, it is a metaphor to capture notions of belonging and not belonging, hybrid identities and identity crisis, which are still relevant today. Hybrid identities of the Indian Subcontinent raise questions such as: what is originally mine and what have I adopted? Who am I? Do I belong to this part of the region, or are my roots from another place? The feeling of estrangement is a consistent experience for people who live in the area of the Indian Subcontinent.

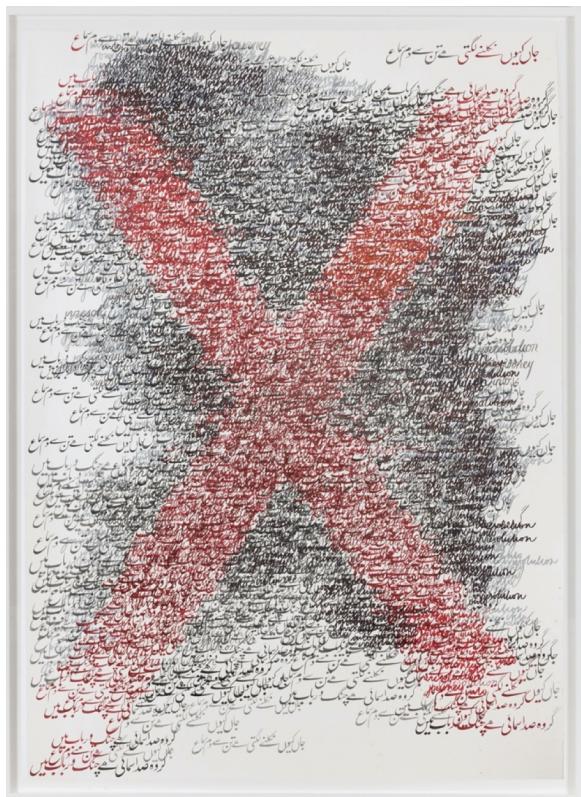
To investigate Hybrid Identities in the context of Anglo Indian, I created the work ‘The House of Lords’ using two digital images by employing layering. The Victorian-style headboard, part of a bed, widely sold in Chiniot Pakistan as a classic Pakistani design frames a vintage photo. The vintage image is of a European family vacationing in India during colonial rule with Indian men, women and children photographed as servants. By juxtaposing these two images, the final image highlights the history of colonization that has brutally impacted the indigenous culture of the Indian Subcontinent.



*Fig. 1. Sana Burney, 2020
The House of Lords
Digital Image
8.6 x 9.4 Inches
5 Editions with 2 APs*

b. Post-Colonial Societies

My practice sheds light on the horrors of colonization and its prevalent damage to post-colonial societies. The impacts of British imperialism in the Indian Subcontinent after more than eighty years of colonization are substantial, and post-colonial societies are still under the shadow of the British Raj. For instance, Pakistani society exhibits discrimination based on skin colour and linguistic prejudices. A person's competency, beauty, credibility and worth are defined by their complexion and their use of language. Shazia Sikander, a Pakistani American artist, also focuses on colonialism and its various forms in the contemporary world.



On the left
Fig. 2. Shazia Sikander
2019-2020
X
Gouache and ink on paper
7.5 x 5 Feet

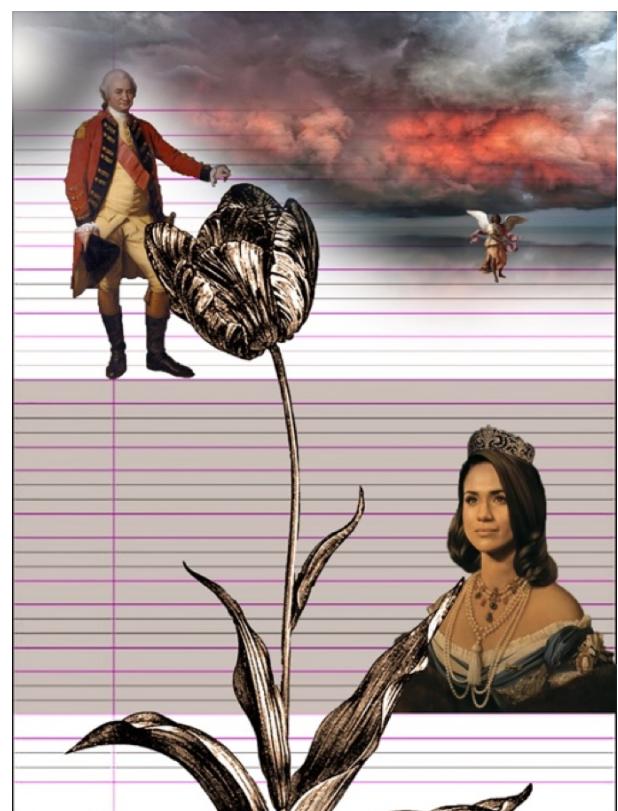


Fig. 3. Sana Burney, 2021
My four line copy
Digital Collage printed on Chenille
8.3 x 11.7 Inches
5 Editions with 2 APs

Shazia uses Urdu and English text to highlight the tensions between the languages; I use four-line English copy pages to underline the subjects of linguistic discrimination.

Post-colonial societies practice discrimination based on skin colour and linguistics owing to irrational opinions and beliefs. For example, many girls don't get hired in the fashion and media industries based on skin colour. Also, skin colour plays an important role when it comes to getting married. Many families and men prefer fair girls even if they are dark themselves. Additionally, some false opinions and beliefs categorise people of dark skin and their use of language with a particular class in society. The works 'The miracle cream' and 'My four-line copy' reflect on such generalised opinions and behaviours that deepen the class system and establish concepts of inferiority and insignificance.

The artwork 'The miracle cream' underlines discrimination based on skin colour in Pakistani society with its strong roots in the British colonial period. The inferiority complex of being brown is deeply rooted in Pakistani culture. The artwork depicts this discrimination through a facial transformation that initially expresses sadness when the skin is dark and contentment when it is fair. Many fairness cream companies promote these biases by selling their products on TV, print (billboards) and social media. Out of the many brands, one is facilitated by a British-Dutch multinational that has its head office in London. The name of the company is Unilever. In the image, flowers in the foreground symbolise beauty which is the aim of women using these creams.



Fig. 4. Sana Burney, 2020, *The miracle cream*, Intaglio type Etching on Somerset, 8.4 x 5.7 Inches
13 Editions with 2 APs

c. Colonialism

In my works, I highlight the legacies of British colonialism in the Indian subcontinent. British colonisation had monopolistic interests that resulted in impoverishing the Indian subcontinent. I have used the techniques of alter-imagery and layering, for instance, in Figure 11. ‘Mirror of British Merchandise’ I collected a historical photo as found image from the archives of the British Library. I then replaced a few elements to develop imagery on the chosen theme. These images focus on the supremacy of the British over weaker India by juxtaposing historical representations of Britannia.

In this work, a pair of foxes beside Britannia refers to the British's mischief and opportunistic traits at the time. A little boy, with signs of famine, is pivoted in the centre of the picture. On the boy's left side, an elephant is laden with goods, whereas on the right, where the boy looks, is Britannia – the female embodiment of the British empire. The picture suggests that the boy is asking for food and justice in an environment dictated by profit and trade.

Isaac Julian, a British installation artist, utilises archives to think about the present by looking at the past to signify a future direction. Likewise, in my practice, by collecting archives, I dig into the past and make its connection to the present and try to signify a future direction around debates, aesthetics or questions of identity, capitalism, power and powerlessness.



Fig. 5. Sana Burney, 2021
Mirror of British Merchandise
Intaglio type Etching on
Somerset
8.4 x 11.75 Inches
8 Editions with 2 APs

d. Capitalism

Trade has been the route of colonials to capture land. Yinka Shonibare, a Nigerian artist, also explores the issues around colonialism and race. The hallmark of his work is a Batik fabric that was exported from the Netherlands to West Africa. The colonials copied the design from the Indonesian Batik and sold it in West Africa. The Batik fabric is now widespread and integrated into African identity and culture.



Fig. 6. Yinka Shonibare, 2001

Three Graces

3 Fiberglass mannequins, printed cotton textile and 3 aluminum bases.

63.1 x 64 x 89.5 Inches

Similarly, discrimination based on skin colour and linguistics was not part of the culture of the Indian subcontinent before colonisation. Now, this remnant of colonialism is a part of the culture.

The British Imperialists used trade to make a colonial enterprise. Trade and the capitalist approach brought the EIC – East India Company to the Subcontinent in the early 17th century. Trade between the two countries started with spice and expanded to silk, cotton, tea, indigo, saltpetre and opium. The works in this section refer to extractive capitalism and capitalism in the Indian Subcontinent considering colonialism. In the present-day world, Dutch and British manufacturers market fairness creams in the Indian Subcontinent and tanning creams in Western countries for capitalist gains.

The work ‘My poppy factory’ is an intaglio print. The imagery uses two found images that were lithograph prints created by artist W. S. Sherwill in 1850. They depict the scenes of mixing and balling from Opium manufacturing rooms in the city of Patna, and I stitched them together to show two floors with an arch on top. The rooms display the massive scale of the manufacturing activity. The vast space is demonstrated by depth using perspective in both the top and bottom rooms. White poppy flowers and their buds have been added in different places to highlight extractive capitalism. Opium had been widely used in Europe and Britain as drugs and as a relaxant Laudanum.

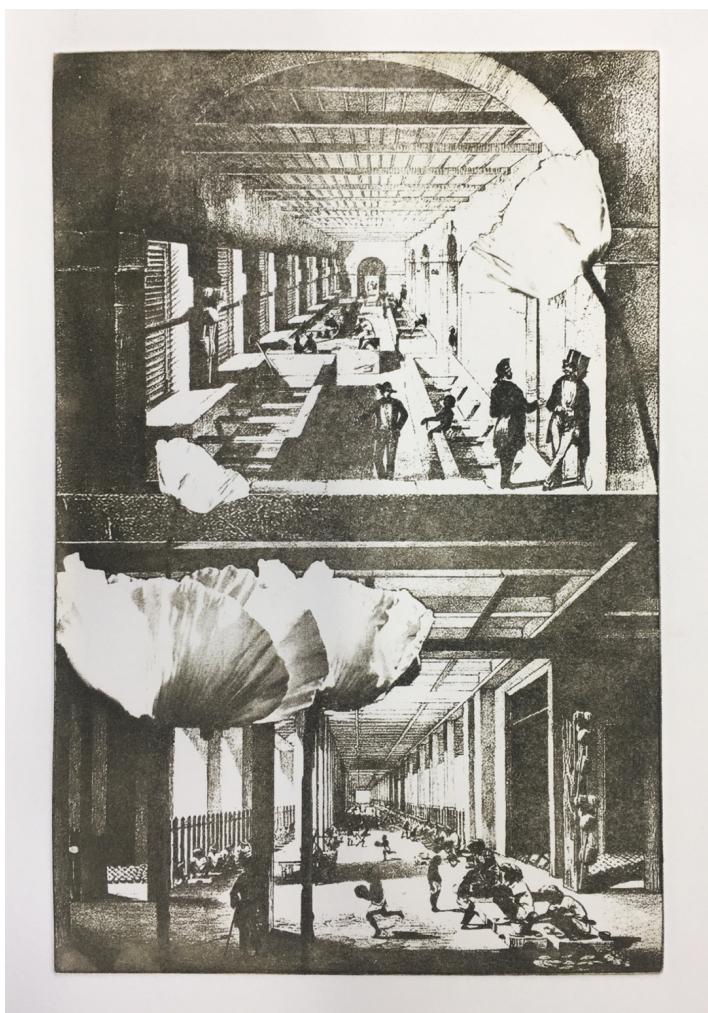


Fig. 7. Sana Burney, 2020
My poppy factory
Intaglio type Etching on Somerset
7.7 x 11.7 Inches
8 Editions with 2 APs

e. Subordination and Dependency

Through making art, I remember and underscore the history of slavery, subordination and dependency in the Subcontinent of India. Subordination and dependence have had a lasting impact on the Indian Subcontinent. For instance, the British rule that introduced the Western education system exacerbated the gap between the existing social classes. We became dependent on the Western education system, and till today it dictates the class system in the post-colonial Indian Subcontinent.



Fig. 8. Sana Burney, 2021
Resurrection
Intaglio type Etching on Somerset
12 x 16.4 Inches
6 Editions with 2 APs

The artwork 'Resurrection' explores the subject of the slave trade during the East India Company's (EIC) rule in the Indian Subcontinent. Significant transcontinental slave trading of the indigenous people of Africa, the Persian Gulf, the Red Sea and British India took place. There were 321,283 slaves in EIC territories according to Thomas Ward, who

writes in his book 'Slavery and the Slave Trade in British India': "*It is evident, that, during the earlier periods of the East India Company's authority in the East, considerable traffic in slaves was carried on, not merely for the supply of its own subjects, but also for the supply of foreign states.*

There was an external or foreign slave tradeThere was also an extensive internal slave trade carried on for the supply of the home market".

The artwork uses the found image of a banknote issued for the British Raj under King George V of the United Kingdom, Emperor of India. The image shows King George V looking at the statue of a black woman. The statue, 'A surge of Power (Jen Reid) 2020', is based on Jen Reid - a Black Lives Matter activist shown as a young black female protestor, raising her arm to show Black power.

The foreground has an image of the toppled statue of Edward Colston, who was a slave trader in the RAC – Royal African Company. Protestors toppled the statue during the protest of Black Lives Matter in Bristol, UK, in 2020. The total number of slaves in EIC territories in British India replaces the serial number of the banknote. The centre of the banknote says 'Calcutta', which serves as a reminder that it was a prominent eastern port through which boats were filled with slaves and moved coast-to-coast. Thomas Ward also said: 'Many of you, I presume, have seen large boats filled with such children coming down the river for open sale at Calcutta; nor can you be ignorant, that most of them were stolen from their parents, or bought, perhaps[^] for a measure of rice in a time of scarcity" {East India Slavery[^] p. 24).' Whereas the banknote symbolises business and money flow, the two statues each suggest the resurrection of black power.

My fascination with the works of Kara Walker allowed me to inspect the histories of the slave trade in the Indian Subcontinent. Kara Walker's 'Resurrection Story with Patrons' is the inspiration for 'Resurrection'.



*Fig.9. Kara Walker, 2017, Resurrection Story with Patrons
Etching (Spit-bite, dry-point and aquatint-lift), 39.75 x 30; 39.75 x 49; 39.75 x 30 Inches*

The work 'Little Henry and His Bearer' is based on the baroque painting 'Madonna with the Christ Child' by the Italian artist Giovanni Battista Salvi da Sassoferato circa 1609-1685. Virgin Mary's image with the baby Christ highlights female servants' role as custodian mothers and wet nurses during the British Raj. These women used to take care of English children as their own, breastfeed them, dress them, rock them to sleep, take them to town and stayed awake for them at night to offer food, comfort and tenderness. The artwork features a baby in the lap of an Indian servant who is a bearer or an ayah.



*Fig. 10. Sana Burney, 2021
Little Henry and His Bearer, Digital Print on Chenille
17.6 x 22.5 Inches, 5 Editions with 2 APs*

The artwork borrows its title from a story written by Mrs. Sherwood. Her stories highlight themes of English orphans, parental void and neglect, dhaye and ayah.

The love between the child and the bearer was reciprocal. For instance, on separating the child from their bearer, the child threw fits. Thence, this work romanticises the relationship between a child and their Indian caretaker. It also idealises racial dichotomy by using a black bearer with unimaginable love for a white child and vice versa. A bond of love is beyond racial, class, religious and ethnic differences.

After seeing works of artists such as Risham Syed, I have started working with classical paintings. She works with historical paintings in the canon of art history and remakes them with a scale change.

f. Feminism

My practice raises the issues of post-colonial societies, extractive capitalism, class and racism; it also advocates the radical ideas of feminism. One of the impacts of colonialism is discrimination based on skin colour, which directly impacts women and thus is a subject of feminism. Since I am talking about skin colour discrimination, which is in practice in the Indian Subcontinent, I propose rejecting an understanding of beauty based on fair skin colour.

In ‘Revolt’, I present a protagonist wearing a Greek helmet, referencing the goddess of war Athena. Added to the helmet is the winged horse of Prophet Muhammad, ‘Buraq’, which is a feminine creature according to the history of visual arts. Although, according to some references, Buraq is a sexless creature. Buraq signifies speed and power since it took the Prophet to the seven heavens in a matter of seconds. The fact that the Prophet was given or chose a creature, likely to be feminine, to assist him on his ascension is a matter of pride for women. The protagonist is looking at a flower that symbolises beauty. Here the protagonist is a self-portrait of a female from the present time fighting against the romantic notions of beauty.

My interrogations of Shazia Sikander’s works have provided me with the grounds for Feminism in my practice. Shazia uses a female from a Mughal court as a protagonist, whereas I use a contemporary female protagonist. The background depicts a map of the war of Plassey used to relate discrimination based on skin colour to colonialism. A feminine, black-skinned angel has also been placed in the background to challenge the notion of colour goodness.



Fig. 11. Sana Burney, 2021
Revolt
Intaglio type Etching on Somerset
11.6 x 17.1 Inches
5 Editions with 1 AP

Chapter 2

Creative Processes

a. Methods

My investigative process starts by collecting visual data, including illustrations, prints, photographs, paintings, sketches/drawings, and advertisements. I collect visual data from libraries, papers, and online using web searches such as the British Library. I also try to establish contact with people who post the visual to know more about the image. To me, ‘found images’ is visual data. For instance, to investigate discrimination based on skin colour in the Indian Subcontinent and trace its roots to British imperialism, I used ‘found images’. These found images are collected as evidence and examined critically by reading elements and details in each image. Different methods are employed to explore these found images and produce new variations. The explorative journey of found images incorporates both contemporary and historical visuals.



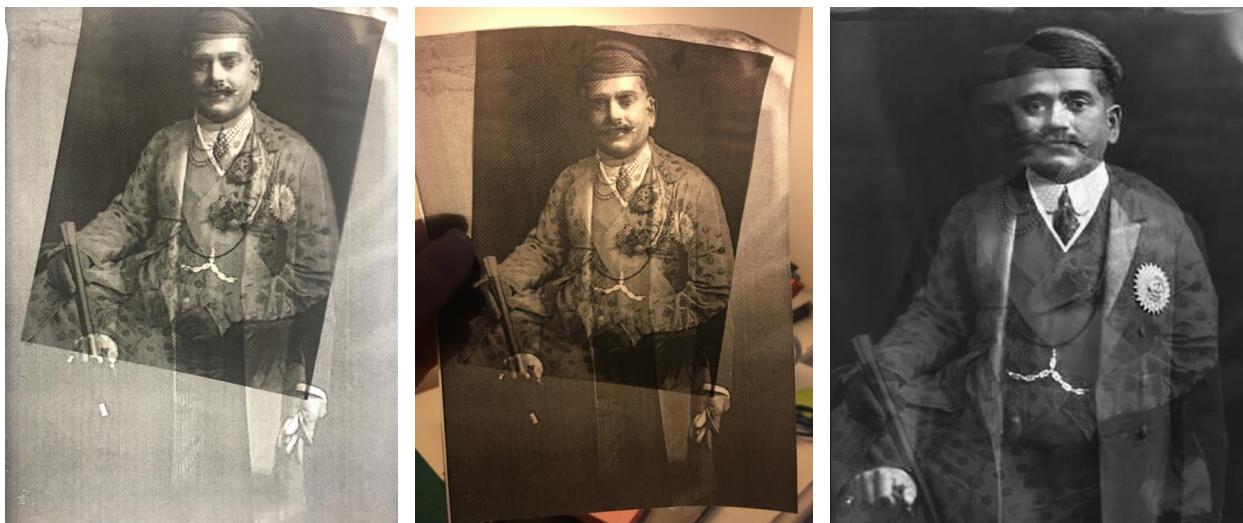
On the left
Fig. 12. Found Image, 2021
13.70 x 10.30 Centimetres



*Fig. 13. Found object, 2020
8 x 8 Inches*

I also work with found objects. I visit markets such as flea markets, where I find objects with a historical background. Sometimes their form by itself is captivating. Found objects play an essential role and are the source using which I start my discourse.

b. Techniques



*Fig. 14a & b: The two pictures of the great prince printed on tracing sheets and seeing through the backlight
Fig. 14c. Sana Burney, 2020 The Duplet Prince, Digital Print, 5 x 6 Inches, 5 Editions with 2 APs*

My method of investigation also consists of the technique of layering, both digital and manual. The artwork 'The Duplet Prince' is created using found images of the great prince of Baroda, Sir Sayajirao III. Both photos are intriguing portraits; he is in his traditional eastern attire in one picture and western dressing in the other picture. I initially printed both pictures on tracing paper to explore possibilities manually. However, the image was flat with no signs of the underneath layer, both with and without backlight. Next, I tried the same technique using photoshop, and that worked well. The first image became the first layer on top of which I placed the second image. The work suggests how British Imperialism impacted Indian culture and how people adapted to a new reality. Physical attire is a metaphor for the identities of the ordinary people of Hindustan who modified their identities as per the new western culture. This generated perplexity with regards to identity. The technique of layering implies how the British took over India by layering it up with its strong presence of British identity and culture.

My practice stems from late 19th and 20th-century photographic collage. It includes combination prints, cut & pasted images, multiple exposures and other non-photographic devices. The style of 1850s Danish writer and artist Hans Christian Anderson, specifically his striking productions of paper cuts and collages, is a point of departure in my practice. It evolves into modern styles and inventions of collage with contemporary influences.



On the left
Fig.15. Hans Christian Anderson, 1850s
Stork,
Collage

The work 'Britannia' was created by employing an alter-image technique based on an illustration 'Britannia' by the Canadian illustrator Rex Woods. In my work, Britannia wearing a Corinthian helmet (Greek), is bearing a trident, a shield with the Union Flag, and has a lion at her feet. The trident represents Britain's historic naval power, whereas the lion is one of Britain's prominent national symbols. She is also carrying a golden bird in her muscular right hand, which implies capturing the Mughal empire. She is standing atop steps with Indians showed working on handlooms representing Britain's monopolistic interests in the textile industry of India. Added is a scene from Madras during a famine that symbolises British rule's economic impact, which contradicts Britannia who is generally associated with solidarity and patriotism. The punch line 'Gentlemen The King' is juxtaposed to add sarcasm to the scene and depict the idea of ruling the Indian Sub-continent with mischief. This work is on the back cover of the book.

My practice employs the unorthodox medium and process of visual arts such as layering, and digital collage. I have just stepped into exploring assemblage where collage marries the third dimension to allow unlimited possibilities. I also employ the fascinating process of image transfer in my practice wherein I transfer images on different surfaces such as mirror, porcelain and clay.

Additionally, I use alternate materials to support my investigation. For example, I experiment with creams: both fairness and tanning, to investigate their reaction on paper and I use a range of cosmetic pigments of different skin tones to create my inks. I also experiment with the intaglio process. Lately, I have been working with the technique of Chine Collé.



Fig. 16. Cosmetic pigments – Making of inks using cosmetic pigments – Rollers after using cosmetic inks showing three different tones



*Fig.17. Sana Burney, 2021, You're Not Welcome
Intaglio type Etching on Somerset 8.1 x 6.75 Inches*

c. Media

My artistic productions are mainly digital images presented on a projector, printed on paper and other surfaces. Sometimes I work in mixed media, for example, I apply washes on prints and paint specific elements in the imagery of my intaglio prints. I also paint on digital prints and then layer them with translucent material having imagery or text.

In printmaking, I mainly work with the photopolymer process. The image is initially created on a computer and then used to prepare a photopolymer plate. Finally, with the plates, prints are created using the technique of Intaglio.

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