

Ummijaan

Making Visible a World Within

Photographs from the early 1950s – early 1970s by Haleema Hashim

Images are fragile for they document memories and loss; at times we attempt to reclaim this loss.

I found these photographs early in 2011 in old dusty photo albums tucked away in a storage cupboard at my great grandmother's current residence in Marine Drive. These photographs were certainly significant for their perfect exposures and expert compositions, but I quickly became aware that their importance lay beyond their aesthetic and technical value. They held immeasurable value as cultural documents – as historic objects, and I found that her apartment had suddenly transformed into an intimate excavation site. Ummijaan herself denies her photographs any special value, and when I mention to her the exhibition that I am putting together, asks “Why? What for? Who would want to see my photographs?” Despite this denial there was something in her voice that led me to wonder if I should claim these words for what they were or if instead I should dig a little deeper.

She had once in the early days of her practice, sent a photograph to an Urdu magazine for a contest that she ended up winning. As a prize, her winning photograph had been published for the first and only time during her active practice. She had also preserved the negatives for all of her photographs, along with their contact prints for decades. From her point of view these photographs were taken for purely personal reasons and were only relevant to her and to the people portrayed in the photographs. They manifested themselves as the result and residue of her constant experimentation with the medium and served to document her family life and domestic space, with the clear and simple intention of saving these moments from the effects of time. Yet what she was unaware of was that in retrospect these photographs provide us with a body of work that allows for a unique understanding of the medium as it was practiced away from the studio or commercial genres and also at a distance from any academic or professional training. Through her gendered practice she also provides us with an alternative insight into the medium, its history, its explorers and what lies beneath its basic motivations. In addition to this, the photographs also seem to function as the documentation of a distinct time and period revealing a specific culture and lifestyle.

The photographs in this exhibition make visible the private domestic world of the Kutchi Memon community situated in Cochin in the decades immediately following the Indian Independence of 1947. The members of this community had migrated from the Kutch region of Gujarat following a large scale conversion of religion from Hinduism to the faith of Islam, having chosen Cochin for its promise of secularism and its prospects for trade. It was into this world that my Ummijaan was born in 1928.

In 1945, at the age of 17, she married Hashim Usman, who was at the time a shopkeeper, and by 1950 had moved to Yasmin Manzil, a house specially constructed for her large joint family. It was in this house that she began her practice of photography. The photographs taken here reveal an intimate documentation of her joint family life played out within the space of her home and its environment. Having taught herself the medium and its possibilities for image making through magazines, foreign and local publications on photography, by viewing studio photographs and through active experimentation, she began applying these principles using the residents and the frequent guests of the house as her models. Equipped with the camera, she would transform the house into her studio and stage.

Within this broader narrative of family life she used recurring elements that through their constant appearance begin to take on symbolic value. One such example is the leitmotif image of women actively engaged in the act of reading. Ummijaan herself had the ability to read multiple languages including Urdu, English and Malayalam and thus reading became an important part of her daily life. It informed and nourished her and was also the source through which she was kept abreast about the power and ability of image making. It also served as a symbol of connection to the outside world accessed from within the confines of her sheltered domestic life. Through the possibilities of self-portraiture she would also insert herself into this narrative and there as many as three self-portraits of her reading. This habit of reading was something she inherited from her mother. Ummijaan's mother had lost her eyesight following a complicated surgery. Still passionate to learn, she would feed her passion by having her daughters read out to her.

I believe that this event had a significant impact on Ummijaan whose practice began shortly after this incident. The camera which appeared in her life shortly after thus became an instrument not just for the preservation of memories but also for the metaphorical preservation of sight.

Although the majority of her photographs are black and white, Ummijaan embodied an eagerness to experiment with new technologies. As early as the 1950s, an American business partner who was aware of her fascination with the medium would bring colour negatives for her to experiment with. On some occasions when she would receive these colour negatives, the women and children of the house would embark on a picnic to Subhash Park located across the sea in Ernakulam. They would be dressed in their most photogenic sarees and frocks ready to pose against the strong light and amidst the colorful gardens. The camera and the act of photography, in this way, became a central feature of the family's life. It became a powerful force that engendered new forms of interaction between members of the family mediated by the camera.

Along with this comprehensive family narrative, she also produced a photographic documentation of the brides of the Kutchi Memon community. This body of work which in its description appears more formal than her other work was also very intimate and personal to her and was the result of her attachment to her own marriage. Her wedding had not been documented and there exist no photographs of Ummijaan as a bride. She was married to her husband for 67 years until his death in 2012 and raised with him eight children. He shared with her an interest in photography and would deliver her negatives to the local photo studio for developing. He was also the man behind the camera, materialising all her self-portraits. Aware of the photograph's ability to record and preserve, she set about this documentary project hoping that despite not having photographs of her own wedding, she could provide the brides and their families with a photograph that would allow them to fondly remember.

Her practice slowly came to a conclusion in the 1970s. All of her children had grown older and that section of her project had thus been completed. Her children, the oldest of whom now had families of their own, had started to use the family camera guided by her and were now actively engaged in taking her photographic legacy forward. The large joint family was also being split up as the number of children in the family grew and there was a need for more space. Along with this occurred an incident where Ummijaan was prohibited by a relative in the family from photographing a bride on the grounds of disrespecting Islamic sensibilities. This deeply hurt and insulted her, leading to the premature end of the bridal project and her endeavour to crystallize those moments with her photographs. Although she continued to take family pictures, this was quite a blow to her, and I suspect the dwindling of her creative spirit began after that incident.

Four decades have now passed since Ummijaan stopped experimenting with the medium of photography and it is at this point that I attempt to contextualise this body of work by displaying it to a public audience. By reclaiming personal memory and family history I wish to provide an insight into a world that might otherwise have been lost forever. This private world becomes a representation of the community it is the roots and heart of, and it is perhaps an important point that there exists no other documentation of this kind on the Kutchi Memon community in Kerala. The family album is here rescued and revived as an archive of a lost history. On a more personal level, as an artist and practitioner of photography, these photographs embody my own practice. In the same way as her birth is intrinsically tied with my own, her practice opens up a path that leads to mine.

- *Nihaal Faizal*, 2014

