

النساء

An-Nisa: *The Women*

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بِسْمِ اللّٰهِ الرَّحْمٰنِ الرَّحِیْمِ

يٰۤاَيُّهَا النَّاسُ اتَّقُوا رَبَّكُمُ الَّذِیْ خَلَقَكُمْ مِّنْ نَّفْسٍ وَّاحِدَةٍ وَّخَلَقَ مِنْهَا
زَوْجَهَا وَبَثَّ مِنْهُمَا رِجَالًا كَثِیْرًا
وَّنِسَاءً ۗ وَاتَّقُوا اللّٰهَ الَّذِیْ تَسَاءَلُوْنَ بِهِ وَاَلْرٰحٰمَ ۗ اِنَّ اللّٰهَ كَانَ
عَلَيْكُمْ رَقِیْبًا

O humanity! Be mindful of your Lord Who created you from a single soul, and from it He created its mate, and through both He spread countless men and women. And be mindful of Allah—in Whose Name you appeal to one another—and 'honor' family ties. Surely Allah is ever Watchful over you.

Quran 4: 1

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A n-Nisa: *The Women*

To begin this journey of artistic introspection, I look to a text by Gabeba Baderoon titled *The Ghost in the House: Women, Race and Domesticity in South Africa*. The text speaks to the trauma of Black domesticity and how it has become a patriarchal symbolic extension of oppression in a post-apartheid South Africa. While Baderoon's piece focuses on the effects of Apartheid with specificity to Black individuals, the historically racist regime discriminated and effected coloured individuals as well. These transgenerational effects can be seen in the traumatic inheritance passed down in coloured Muslim households. It has transformed and exists in the subtle, but ever-present patriarchal hierarchy within these households.

My late grandparents as well as my older aunts and uncles lived through the racist regime and were indoctrinated to being accustomed to segregation as well as oppression. This, coupled with old school values, created an intersectional space of segregation and oppression where women were relegated to the kitchen and cast into the role of domesticity.

Baderoon further unpacks the idea of domesticity and transposes it onto the "built environment" which she states, "reflects the relations of labor in the intimate space of the house" (Baderoon, 2014:7). It is with this quote in mind that I use the idea of the 'built environment' and transpose it onto the kitchen as a site of domesticity as well as trauma.

When looking through the lens of the kitchen as a site of trauma, I refer particularly to the generational trauma women in Muslim households only ever speak of in the space of the kitchen, as, in my experience, women are often relegated to the kitchen to fulfill a supposedly dutiful role of domesticity and thus, creating a safe space within the kitchen. The kitchen then becomes this fragile space of both inflicting and healing trauma. The kitchen also plays an important role in the food making process, a process which plays significant cultural and traditional roles in the Muslim community. It is for this reason that I have chosen to center my exhibition around the Eid celebration and all the cultural significance it holds in terms of the food making process as well as the women responsible for making these foods.

An-Nisa is the fourth surah in the Quran which deals with women in Islam and their rights, and it is with these women in mind that I undertook this project. To represent these women and the food making practice, I have decided to use the kitchen apron as well as traditional Eid dresses collaboratively as an inspiration for this exhibition. In looking at my own family practices surrounding domesticity, I hope there is recognition in my work for other Muslim women to find comfort in. It is my hope that this project provides a platform of safety for women beyond the confines of a kitchen and to give them the recognition they deserve without inherently tying them to domesticity.

The Cape Muslim Vernacular

Below is a compiled list of Cape Malay loan words relevant to this body of work and their meanings (words marked with * are Malay derived words):

Amatie – referring to a paternal aunt

Barakat* – food distributed after a ceremony or occasion

[Malay, *berkat* - 'blessing'] _ [Compare: Batavian - *berkat*, Javanese - *berkat*] < Arabic - *baraka* 'blessings'

Behangsels – curtaining and bedding found in a wedding couples' bedroom (also informally used to refer to extravagance in dress style)

Bismillah – (this word is said before you do something or start eating)

Borduur* – (Embroidery)

[Malay - *bordir*] _ (Compare: Javanese - *bludir/bordir*, Makassarese - *borodirik*, Sundanese - *bordél*; Batavian - *krancang*) < Dutch - *borduren*] _ [local word also - *bordeering*]

Galatie – Referring to a maternal aunt

Korrebaan – (the slaughter of animals during the Eid of sacrifice)

[Arabic word - '*Qurbaan*']

Labarang* – (Eid) – [feast, festival or celebration]

[Malay word - *labaran*]

Labarang Gadjie – (the Eid of sacrifice, when sheep are slaughtered) [Eid ul Adha]

Labarang Ramadan – (Eid, celebrating the end of Ramadan) [Eid ul Fitr]

Merang – (a Cape Muslim event where a big variety of foods are served)

[Javanese – *marang* ‘to, toward’ [Probably the meaning changed from ‘(to come) to/towards (i.e., an event)’ to an ‘event’]

Miedourah* – (an embroidered, decorative bride’s headgear)

[Malay word; - *Mudawarah*]

Mielayat, Milaayah* – (veil) _ [An embroidered lady’s shawl]

[Arabic *milaayah*; Malay word; - *Melelat*]

Motjie* – (locally, wife)

[Two possible etymologies, (Javanese - *munci*, 'housekeeper, concubine') or (Malay - *makcik* 'lady')]

Nifka – (the Islamic legal term for the financial support a husband must provide for his wife, Islamically the husband is responsible to pay for his wife's housing, food and clothing)

[Arabic word: *Nafaqah*]

Sajie* – (locally; the preparation and serving of food at an event)

[Malayu (*menjadji* [to serve food]) from Sanskrit (*sajjiker*)] _ [Malay word; - *Saji* - meal, dish] _ (Javanese - *saji*)

A *matie & Galatie*

Having a sit down with my aunts and asking them about their 'roles' in the household and what they feel about these roles felt a lot more vulnerable than I imagined it would. There was some resistance at first and a reluctance to speak ill of their partners – *"Therefore the righteous women are devoutly obedient, and guard in (the husband's) absence what Allah would have them guard."* – this includes safeguarding a husband from 'ill talk' or backstabbing (Quran 4:34). After explaining my research as well as my hopes for this body of work, I was able to have a frank conversation with each aunt individually and asked them to reflect on their role as a wife and mother in the household.

Each of the aprons I have made for my exhibition represents a female family member of mine, namely my aunts, grandmother and mother. Having these conversations with the women in my family was imperative for the success of this artwork. I reiterate my previous statement about women feeling safer to express themselves to one another in the kitchen and find myself humbled with the position of being allowed into these discussions now that I am considered an adult.

Ayesha



“I was raised by an independent, single working mother so domesticity wasn’t an expectation for me, but the husband that I married has those expectations and so I grew into that role. I feel like it would be frowned upon by older generations for a woman to prioritize a career. I’m fortunate enough to have been able to accomplish both *Alhamdulillah*”
(Jassiem,2021)

Noerria



“I think my idea of domesticity is slightly different because I enjoy cooking and cleaning, but I do think it would be unfair to *expect* those things from your wife, especially if she doesn't necessarily enjoy doing those things and if you as the husband aren't willing to do it too or to help in any way. Marriage should be a 50/50 partnership, so domestic duties should be 50/50 too and not just expected of the wife alone.”
(Jassiem,2021)

Safaah



“I was reared in the ‘old school’ way, and I just continued with the traditional role of the housewife. I am, however, raising my son to be more self-sufficient so that he doesn’t have those expectations of his wife one day and so that he may be a more helpful husband.”
(Allie,2021)

Suhayr



“I do my part as a wife, I see that the cooking and cleaning is done, the house is clean and that the ironing is done – without it being asked of me. It’s just something that I feel is my duty as a mother and a wife, a duty that has been ingrained in me since I was young.”

(Abrahams,2021)

Nawaal



“I firmly believe that women play an important role as wife and mother and that they are integral to a household. Their position acts as the glue of the family and so I am honored to hold that role. Domestic duties are just part of the role of wife and mother.” (Marcus,2021)

Zaytoen



“The domestic duties I do are done willingly, but it’s also something that I consider a part of life. It was taught to me from a young age and as a youngster, you follow in your parent’s footsteps. I see it is as my duties as a wife and a mother.”
(Jassiem,2021)

Zurainah



“I think the role of a woman and especially a mother, is that of mentor, nurse, counselor, friend and confidant. She is the foundation of the family and the household. She is the heart of the family from which all life flows and I’m grateful to be one.” (Ismail,2021)

Oemie



“My ideas around domesticity are different because I’m a single mother. It’s something I feel everyone in the household must do their part in. Yes, there are days when I am able and willing to cook, bake and clean, but there are also days when my illness doesn’t allow for that, and I rely on my children to do those things – I think this should be the norm in any household.”
(Ismail,2021)

*M*a Faizah



“Growing up in my generation, it was a necessity for the woman to see to her husband and children. It was your duty to see that the house was clean and that you cooked for them along with other household chores. I fully embraced my role, but now that all 5 of my sons are grown and have families of their own, I realize I’ve enabled them. Ek het hulle baie *gespoil*. I’m glad that the younger generations are teaching boys the same values as girls so that they may become more capable men in the household.” (Jassiem,2021)

Tasbih

Faizah Jassiem (*nee Daniels*) is one of six siblings and is simply known by everyone as *Ma Faizah*. My Ma has always been known as an avid baker by the community and my earliest memories of her are in the kitchen. I recall an oversized solid wooden table taking up most of the kitchen space on brown Moroccan tiles. I remember seeing that table constantly being covered in brown boxes filled with cakes, biscuits and more. The kitchen seemed to come alive with her calculated chaos of unfolded boxes, piping nozzles, flour on every surface and the smell of whatever warm and delicious thing she was baking. Above all of this is the fond memory of my Ma making donuts. The mixing and the kneading of the dough always felt therapeutic to watch and to do. These memories ingrained a sense of comfort in the kitchen for me, despite the clutter and baking paraphernalia. It was with this sense of comfort and the underlying *discomfort* of the kitchen that I decided to create 'beads' out of dough. The beads began as perfect little rounds reminiscent of mini donuts and evolved into an uncomfortable amorphous shape created by the hand impressions of my Ma's and aunts' fingers.

A tasbih is an Islamic rosary used during dhikr and is made up of 99 beads, representing the 99 names of Allah (SWT). A tasbih invokes calm and is therapeutic in its repetition. I draw parallels between the therapeutic nature of tasbih beads and the kneading of dough in the kitchen, once again portraying the kitchen as a site of safety and comfort. This piece deals with the polarity of the kitchen inflicting and healing trauma through repetition. I used play dough to represent edible dough mixed with wood glue to create a non-brittle, hard exterior. During these experiments, I found it interesting that the 'beads' dried with a bone-like finish to it, adding to the discomfort factor. These beads will be present throughout the exhibition in various ways – displayed on a table with the earlier experiments of dough shapes, which represents a cluttered table much like my ma's table during her baking and during large family events where there are many foods present, such as Eid. They will also be attached to the aprons and used as embellishments like that of fabric applique.

Amorphous 'impression' beads



Roti-like dough objects



*B*ehangsels

Labarang or Eid is an auspicious occasion for Muslims after fasting for the month of Ramadan, and it is a day to celebrate amongst family with cultural and traditional foods. It has become a tradition in my family for the women to have their Eid clothing tailor made and often, the clothing will either have a common theme or match in some way or the other. I use these tailor-made Eid clothing as inspiration for the next art piece in this catalogue. There's this idea that women should 'maintain' themselves by always dressing well and looking 'presentable', which I find to be prevalent in the Muslim community. I find it particularly unnerving that while these women are expected to project a certain appearance on both their person and in their household, they are also expected to do the dirty work required to keep up these appearances, which often goes unappreciated.

We are faced once more with the women in the kitchen, where all the hard work is put into creating these amazing dishes of foods and the presentations of these foods, while being unappreciated for these efforts by the simple fact that it is *expected* of these women. During my research on domesticity, my interest caught on the apron as a uniform for women doing domestic work in households. This apron then transcended to the apron worn by the women in my family to protect their appearance, while still upholding their domestic 'duties'. It was with this concept of the apron and the Eid dress that I sought to collaborate the two ideas into one dichotomous piece.

My late grandfather was a tailor and I remember him sewing Eid pieces for the women in my family. I look fondly on the memories of him lamenting about having to sew a new dress for my grandmother on every occasion but doing it anyway. My grandmother was a seamstress and loved to wear beautiful clothing and my grandfather lovingly indulged her by sewing anything she asked of him. I felt it was important to pay homage to him in this artwork as he had a major influence on my life and was part of the reason that I decided to question my 'role' as a woman. He may have been considered 'old school',

but he always advocated for the rights of all and that gave him a broader mindset than his peers, which in turn inspired an open-mindedness in his children and grandchildren.

It was with my grandfather's influence in mind that I decided to create an apron made from dress material, specifically bridal satin. These aprons seek to question this fragile state women have been relegated to where they are expected to look, dress and act a certain way in order to be seen as 'dutiful'. The aprons are meant to be beautiful and non-functional as a protective barrier for clothing. The artwork seeks to disrupt the ideas around domesticity and to allow a space for women to be confronted by their realities in a safe way that enables them to question their positionality. It aims to let women know that their traumas and experiences are valid and heard and that the discomfort of those around them is not more important than their own healing.

Initial apron designs



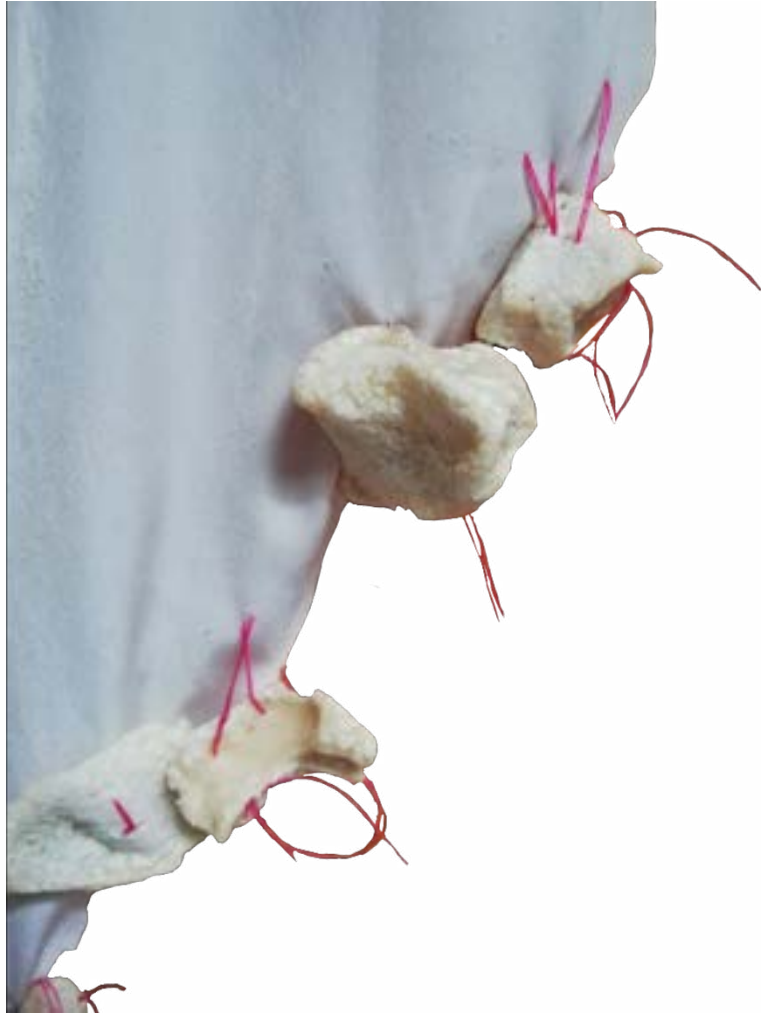




Test Apron



Borduur: Impression beads sewn on apron



Test apron with fondant flowers



Fondant flowers close up



Final aprons without accessories and appliques

This apron was purposefully made to fit a small child to incite discomfort at the thought of preparing a little girl for her domestic role. It was fashioned with my younger self in mind.



Aprons made from bridal satin

These aprons represent the Eid clothes tailored and worn by the women in my family.







Conclusion

The research involved in this project, while introspective, was extensive and allowed me to better understand the dynamics within my family and the broader society. I will admit, I undertook this project to debase the notion that women alone should uphold the role of 'domesticity' in any given household. While I still believe this to be true, I also understand that for some, it is a duty they are willing and happy to perform and through reflecting this, I understand now that ultimately, it is about choice. Women get to *choose* whether they want to solely partake in these duties or not. They get to dictate what 'presentable' means to them and they get to choose whether they would like to divulge their traumas or not, and that choice should not be contingent on societal expectations or what people may think of them. It is my hope that this project brings a comprehensiveness that allows for that choice to be made, whatever it may be.

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Acknowledgements

All praise is due to Allah (SWT) and for my Creator, I give all thanks.

Shukr to my Rabb for my parents, my family, my friends and their endless support.

Shukraan to my mother Widaad Ismail for her tireless support and who I would not have gotten this far without.

To my brother Tariq Ismail for always helping, thank you and Dobby is a free elf for now.

To my supervisor Jane Alexander for going above and beyond, I can't thank you enough and your compassion meant everything.

A special thanks to my aunts and Ma Faizah for partaking in the research of this project and their brave vulnerability. Shukraan aunty Ayesha for all your efforts.

For my late grandmother Aziza Jamodien and my late grandfather Abdul-Latief Jamodien, may the Almighty fill their kabrs with Nur.

An enormous thank you to Kariema for teaching me how to sew and for your endless patience.

Cole, Kelly and Laylaa, thank you my loves for always pushing me to do my best.

Thank you to the Ryan family for offering up your home as a sanctuary at a time when I needed it most, I truly appreciate it.

To Shaggy, I haven't forgotten your help before every exhibition in the past, thank you.

To anyone who may have helped, no matter how big or small, I will always cherish and appreciate you.

And finally, to myself; despite everything, you persevered.

