



Master's Project

**Fashioning the Migrant Self: Indian Migrants and Dress in Photographs of the Lee Brothers Studio in
Colonial Singapore**

Ananya Athaiya

24009697

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London College of Fashion

University of the Arts London

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Abstract

This research looks at photographs of Indian migrants from the Lee Brothers Studio archive. The Lee Brothers Studio was a prominent studio in early twentieth century Singapore which employed Victorian photographic practices to produce portraits of upper-class residents. Through a postcolonial lens, this dissertation explores the dress practices of the migrants and how they reflected key discursive formations operating within the colonial paradigm. It draws from Homi Bhabha's framework of postcolonial enunciation and from scholars of fashion studies discussing dress as a situated bodily practice. I employ the visual analysis methodology provided by Gillian Rose alongside discourse and archival research methods to bring forth discussions around identity-formation in migrants and shed light on discourses around photographic practices in the early twentieth century. By doing so, my research contributes to postcolonial scholarship and identity formation within fashion studies in South and Southeast Asia.

Keywords: colonial Singapore; Southeast Asian fashion history; diaspora identity; visual culture; self-fashioning; postcolonial theory; Indian colonial fashion

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Introduction

Colonial expansion under the British in South and Southeast Asia saw large scale migration of agricultural, industrial as well as clerical labour. The migrated populations were embedded within a complex network of social and cultural discourses which shaped how they performed their social status and identity within the colonial paradigm. In this research, I aim to understand how Indian migrants to British Singapore performed their social 'self' in photographs taken at the Lee Brothers Studio in Singapore. The photographs, taken in the style of Victorian studio portraiture, depict a variety of Indian migrants from around 1900 to about 1940. This research looks at the way that these migrants utilised clothing and other external elements of self-presentation to negotiate their place in the colonial paradigm.

This research stems from my own experience of migration and interest in colonial migrant networks. In previous research, I have explored fashion trends in colonial India and the process of cultural integration of Indian migrants in British Malay. In the process, I came across the NAS archive online and discovered photographs of Indian migrants from the Lee Brothers Studio. Little research has been done on these photographs with most scholars focusing on Chinese migrants owing to their economically and socially dominant role. The dress practices of the photographed subjects were intriguing, especially in comparison to contemporary self-fashioning in Indian studio photographs. I wanted to explore how Indian migrants interacted with various discursive paradigms in their dress and self-fashioning practices.

In this research, I aim to answer the question of how the Indian migrants photographed in these pictures from the Lee Brothers Studio in the early 20th century projected their social identity through their dress practices. Using the postcolonial lens as given by Homi Bhabha, I want to understand how the notions of 'hybridity' and 'mimicry' were reflected in their self-fashioning and what was the role of the photography studio as a 'site of enunciation'. Through my research, I aim to utilise visual analysis methodology to uncover the discourses surrounding the studio space as well as representation within the Orientalist colonial paradigm. By doing so, I aim to highlight the complex processes that intersect within the

photographs in terms of social and cultural identity of the photographed subjects and the broader narrative surrounding the photographs.

The theoretical framework of this research derives from postcolonialism as it deconstructs the colonialist lens through Homi Bhabha's notions of 'enunciation'. It considers 'hybridity' and 'mimicry' within the 'Third Space' as discussed by Bhabha (2004) and tries to establish the notion of 'self-fashioning' within the framework of 'enunciation'. By doing so, this research brings together the fields of postcolonial thought and fashion studies. It utilises Gillian Rose's (2023) framework to conduct visual analysis of the photographs. My research situates the photographs within the major discursive formations of colonialism and Orientalism as well as micro-discourses such as gender, migration and nationalism. Additionally, I apply archival methods to understand the NAS archive as a site of circulation and audience engagement, using speculative methodology to supplement the visual analysis.

In the first chapter, I highlight the theoretical underpinnings guiding my research and expand upon the theorists that I draw upon from the fields of postcolonial theory, fashion and migration studies. Following that, I outline my research design focusing on the visual analysis methodology expounded by Gillian Rose (2023). In addition to visual analysis, I use discourse analysis, archival research and informed speculation as key research methods. The next chapter provides an overview of the historical background of Indian migration to Singapore as well as the Lee Brothers Studio. The fourth chapter presents an analysis of the self-fashioning practices of migrant women within the photographs while the fifth focuses on men's self-fashioning. The decision to distinguish the analysis into women and men was due to the highly gendered nature of dress practices and the societal expectation of gendered performance conveyed within the photographs. In the final chapter, I look at the NAS archive as a site of postcolonial investigation that adds to the meaning-making process of the photographs.

This research falls under the scope of postcolonial enquiry, similar to the scope of Afrofuturistic scholarship which aims to produce emancipatory narratives of the colonial past as a means of imagining a postcolonial future. By highlighting fashion as a site of postcolonial intervention, I hope to contribute to the formation of alternative histories that shed light on lesser-known groups within the colonial paradigm. My research also contributes to existing works on dress practices during the colonial era and provides an avenue for further research into fashion histories of South and Southeast Asia.

Literature Review and Theoretical Framework

In this chapter, I outline the key literature informing my research from the fields of fashion studies, postcolonial scholarship and migration studies. I discuss my theoretical framework which derives from prominent scholarship within postcolonialism, fashion studies, colonialist photography and migration and diaspora studies. The framework is thus highly interdisciplinary, contributing to a nuanced understanding of the theoretical and historical context of the research.

Theoretical Framework

My research utilises a postcolonial approach in conducting an analysis of photographs of Indian migrants from the Lee Brothers Studio in Singapore. Works of key postcolonial theorists like Edward Said, Homi K. Bhabha and Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak and cultural studies scholars such as Stuart Hall and Carol Tulloch inform the theoretical framework of my research. I utilise the postcolonial framework to assess representations of colonised individuals and their relation to the colonial power, Britain.

The Location of Culture by Homi K Bhabha (2004) is the primary text that forms the theoretical basis of this research. In this text, Bhabha introduces several ideas within postcolonial theory that are key to understanding ‘cultural hybridities’ and ‘modernities’. In doing so, he aims to challenge the grand narratives of history and move beyond the accepted notion of ‘modernity’. Bhabha’s postcolonial theory follows from poststructuralist thought and derives from Foucault’s power-knowledge paradigm as well from Frantz Fanon’s *Black Skin, White Masks* (1952). Bhabha (2004) deconstructs power within the colonial context, keeping the notion of cultural hybridity at the center of his theory. He demarcates techniques utilised by colonised populations in instances of resistance to colonial power to move beyond the binary categorisation of ‘ruler’ and ‘subject’.

Bhabha’s (2004) ‘site of enunciation’ is of key importance to my project. He posits that hegemonic accounts of history are embedded with the power structures that produced them, and that critical discourses

seeking to deconstruct power structures cannot replace one dominant ideology with another. Rather, he proposes to look for cultural differences that produce instability within the binary system (p. 37). Within the context of colonialism, the colonial subject is inscribed with meaning through the process of subjectification which constructs the 'Other' in opposition to the 'Self'. The meaning allotted to the colonial subject is fixed and gets incorporated into the system of colonial knowledge production. 'Enunciation' is the process through which the colonial subject transforms from being the bearer of meaning to its producer, actively utilising colonial tools and technologies to initiate a dialectical construction of the self. It breaks down an existing system of reference and provides the space for constant renewal and reappropriation of meaning (p. 111). The 'site of enunciation' allows for the colonised subjects the space to negotiate their native heritage, colonial legacy and contemporary realities. The implications of colonial inheritance are thus transformed "into the liberatory signs of a free people of the future" (p. 55). The aim of postcolonial investigation is to not create a new reality or truth but "to introduce another locus of inscription and intervention, another hybrid, 'inappropriate' enunciative site," (p. 346) that could create a moment of historical transformation.

The enunciative process gives rise to the 'Third Space' where postcolonial agency is asserted through the interaction of multiple identities within the colonial paradigm. Bhabha (2002) discusses two key concepts that contribute to the process of enunciation- 'hybridity' and 'mimicry'. Colonial 'mimicry' is embodied in the creation of the 'Other' "*as a subject of a difference that is almost the same, but not quite*" (p. 122, original emphasis). Through partial imitation, the 'Other' is produced within the ambivalence of colonial discourse. The postcolonial iteration of mimicry then engages with the same ambivalence but with the aim of disrupting the discourse. Colonial authority is displaced through acts of partial imitation that reveal cultural differences and complexify the 'Other'.

The social articulation of difference, from the minority perspective, is a complex, ongoing negotiation that seeks to authorize cultural hybridities that emerge in moments of historical transformation. (Bhabha, 2004, p. 3).

‘Hybridity’ refers to the creation of culture beyond the limits imposed by the binary. It refers to the way colonised populations might engage with cultural artefacts of the coloniser and reappropriate them to produce a state of culture which is characterised by its difference from both the culture of the coloniser and the colonised. The notion of hybridity opens the space for continuous reimagining of history, thus upholding the objective of postcolonial enquiry. The ‘site of enunciation’ examined by Bhabha (2004) is comprised of both ‘hybridity’ and ‘mimicry’. It can be witnessed in Sumanta Banerjee’s *The Parlour and the Street* (1989) which discusses the emergence of ‘Babu’ culture in colonial Bengal in India. It introduces the idea of cultural hybridity under colonialism and the formation of a ‘Third Space’ under colonial rule. In my research, I posit that the photographs from the Lee Brothers Studio act as a ‘Third Space’ where Indian migrants enunciate their presence in colonial Malay through self-fashioning. I explore how ‘hybridity’ and ‘mimicry’ are enacted within the visual as well as sartorial narrative of the Indian migrants. Bhabha’s (2004) ideas provide a model of postcolonial analysis that is fluid and cognizant of complex interactions within the colonial paradigm, thus giving way to a nuanced understanding of the self-fashioning practices of Indian migrants to Malay and Singapore studio portraits.

Banerjee (1989) also touches upon the idea of the Dominant Representational Paradigm introduced by Stuart Hall (1997) in the first edition of *Representation*. Hall (1997) combines the Foucauldian notion of power with photography as a mode of representation, presenting photography as part of the power/knowledge construction of Western supremacy and the discursive formations that governed colonial photographic practices. Thus, photography is not understood as an indexical, objective representation but rather as a gear within the system of power and knowledge production. Hall (2019) elaborates on Foucault and discursive formations outlining the various ways discourses are formed in the context of ‘The West and the Rest’. He highlights that multiple discourses can enact upon the same setting

or group of cultural objects and that discursive formations are fluid and multifaceted in nature. Ultimately, discursive formations produce a regime of truth that is rooted in structures of power.

One discursive formation that Hall (1997) discusses in detail is ‘Orientalism’ which is what Edward Said termed the discourse that produced the ‘Orient’ as an object of knowledge (p. 160). Said was a Palestinian American scholar whose 1985 work *Orientalism* was a landmark text in postcolonial studies. ‘Orientalism’ refers to the cultural as well as ideological discourse that creates the ‘Orient’ within European imagination through institutions, vocabulary, imagery and scholarship. The ‘Orient’ is constructed to stand in contrast to the ‘Occident’ and helps reinforce the West as having authority over the ‘Orient’ (Said, 2003). The ‘Orient’ is defined by the West and becomes a means for the West to produce its own superiority. Colonial imagery is part of the discourse that constructs the Orient- maps, surveys and travelogues are enmeshed within the Orientalist discourse and reconstruct the Orient within European imagination. The Orient is fixed in perpetuity through images and texts depicting the ‘exotic’ East. ‘Orientalism’ is thus a key concept within postcolonial theory and underpins the norms of colonial photography that are discussed in the next section.

Gaytri Chakravorty Spivak is an eminent Marxist-Feminist scholar whose writings have contributed greatly to the development of postcolonial theory. In her seminal work *Can the Subaltern Speak?* Spivak (1988) critiques Western discourses around power and agency and demands revision within the postcolonial tradition that makes space the voice for the subaltern- the labouring class, women and marginalised groups- within imperialism’s setup. Spivak called for an epistemological shift within poststructuralist scholarship that derived from her Marxist background and feminist leanings. My research, though neither Marxist or Feminist in nature, responds to her call for “political-economic and multidisciplinary ideological reinscription of the terrain [of imperial power-knowledge systems]” (Spivak, 1988, p. 82). It explores deviation from the colonial ideal and undertakes the task of ‘measuring silences’ within visual representation.

Bill Ashcroft (2001) thus refers to postcolonialism as “a range of material conditions and a rhizomic pattern of discursive struggles, ways of contending with various specific forms of colonial oppression” (p. 12). His work expands upon the relation between postcolonialism and cultural identity, placing importance of the resistive and transformative nature of postcolonial theory. In doing so, he provides an overview of key sites of postcolonial intervention. Shantini Pillai (2007) also derives from the abovementioned postcolonial theorists in her work discussing postcolonial writings of Malaysian Indian authors reconfiguring the colonial experience. She produces a narrative of resisting the colonial discursive formation through the act of remembering and writing about the subaltern experience. The hegemonic ideal of Western modernity is disrupted by placing the lived experiences of ‘coolies’ at the center of the postcolonial investigation. Through imaginative and creative processes of representation, the colonised subject is interpolated into the dominant historical narrative and inscribed with the postcolonial notion of ‘agency’. My research utilises aspects of all these works to construct a theoretical basis for the accompanying analysis.

Self-Fashioning

My research is situated within the discipline of fashion studies, highlighting literature that considers fashion, clothing and the body in relation to their social and cultural contexts. Two key works that inform my research are *The Fashioned Body* by Joanne Entwistle (2015) and *The Face of Fashion* by Jennifer Craik (1994). Both of these texts discuss fashion and dress practices within the ambit of body and society relations, emphasizing how dress is rooted in societal norms and culturally constructed. By establishing fashion within spatial and temporal formation, the two texts provide a foundation for studying fashion and dress practices that is suitable for the purpose of my research. As per Entwistle (2015), ‘dress’ constitutes social practices administered on the body that govern the meaning making and identity formation for an individual. The ‘dressed body’ is representative of the cultural formations within which it is formed and presents a constructed ‘self’. Similarly, Craik (1993) describes the process of dressing or clothing the body

as “an active process or technical means for constructing and presenting a bodily self” (p. 1). She further establishes a relationship between individual practices of fashioning the body and the dominant discourse surrounding dress and fashion, thus placing the study of dress within a cultural studies framework.

My research uses the term ‘dress’ to refer to practices of clothing the body as it encompasses aspects such as jewelry, body modification, scent and other ornamentation (Eicher and Roach-Higgins, 1992). It also ties into Entwistle's (2015) notion of the ‘dressed body’ that proposes clothing and ornaments to be embodied experiences that articulate the body. Welters and Lillethun (2018) shed light on the various terms used within fashion studies, - ‘costume’ is associated with historical dress, unchanging, as opposed to ‘fashion’ which is signified by continuous change. ‘Clothing’ is limited to material garments, often excluding other adornments while ‘dress’ is considered a general and inclusive term. By using ‘dress’ or ‘dress practices’ I draw attention to the constructive nature of dressing as well as the social and cultural norms that are realised through clothing in order to present a particular image of the ‘self’. Pereira-Ares (2018) carries out a similar study of dress practices in literary texts to look at Asian diaspora clothing within Asian British diasporas. She links dress to identity, emphasising the way clothing is utilised in the construction of the diasporic ‘self’.

My research employs the terms ‘dress’ or ‘dress practices’ under the broader umbrella of ‘self-fashioning’. Self-fashioning is a literary practice from early modernist traditions that was used to understand how authors construct their own self through their writing. Stephen Greenblatt (1980) informs my understanding of self-fashioning as “a way of designating the forming of a self...a distinctive personality, a characteristic address to the world, a consistent mode of perceiving and behaving” (p. 2). Moreover, the performance of the author’s identity, the fashioning of the representative self, is governed by cultural institutions which are “inseparably intertwined” with the process of self-fashioning (Greenblatt, 1980, p. 256). Self-fashioning, when considered within a fashion studies framework, can be understood as the construction of the social self through dress and clothing practices. As Delbrugge (2015) expounds, the

core of self-fashioning is closely associated with the conscious or unconscious exercise of individual agency in constructing one's identity. Within fashion studies, Carol Tulloch explores the exercise of individual agency in the process of construction of the self through dress. In her article, *Style-Fashion-Dress: From Black to Post-Black*, Tulloch (2015) establishes an ontological continuity between the terms style, fashion and dress and places them within the context of Black diaspora dress practices. The self is constructed through choices of garments, accessories, beauty routines and other rituals of the body that articulate the autobiographic experiences of the individual. Style, as per Tulloch (2018), is closely associated with 'agency' that expresses the self through an "assemblage of garments and accessories, hairstyles and beauty regimes" that might not follow the dominant fashion of the time but is intrinsically related to the Black diaspora experience.

'Self-fashioning', as used in this research, builds upon Tulloch's works (2015, 2018), and relates to a broader system of social and cultural elements within the colonial paradigm that dictated the dress practices and self-presentation of individuals in the photographs from the Lee Brothers Studio in Singapore. The term 'self-fashioning' places individual dress practices within the wider system of fashion trends and discourses. It bridges micro- and macro-discursive formations, establishing a relationship between the notion of individual style 'agency' with the customs and trends of Colonial Singapore.

Fashioning Africa by Jean Allman (2004) examines fashion and dress practices as sites of enunciation from a postcolonial lens, focusing on the changing economic, political and social landscape of Africa and its relation to material culture, specifically dress. By doing so, the book asserts clothing as an alternative archive for postcolonial enquiry, an assertion that is central to my research. Teleica Kirkland (2023) further connects dress practices of the African diaspora in Britain during the Windrush era to the construction of the self, using photographs as 'sites of enunciation' of Black 'respectability' that refuted colonial representation. My research seeks to build upon her work in the context of Indian migrants to

British Straits Settlements. 'Self-fashioning' thus considers the multifaceted and layered nature of dress practices within a dominant sociocultural paradigm.

Colonialist Photography

The Orient, as proposed by Said (2003), was constructed through textual and visual representation, in the form of paintings, literature and photographs. "The camera was the latest device conscripted to the task of Orientalist knowledge production, whether in the formation of a state archive or a tourist album, a newspaper cover or a picture postcard" (Behdad and Gartlan, 2013, p. 3). The indexical nature of the camera lent it a degree of scientific authority that contributed to its power in constructing the narrative of Orientalism in Western society. The camera was a means of colonial knowledge production that created a distinct image of the Orient as a way of separating it from the Occident. Rooted in anthropological and ethnographic enquiry, colonialist photography was used to support notions of social evolution that addressed European races as evolutionarily superior while deeming colonised population to be racially inferior.

A key text that discusses the idea of the colonial lens is *Colonialist Photography: Imag(in)ing Race and Place* by Eleanor Hight and Gary Sampson (2002). The text highlights how "...images produced a dynamic rhetoric of racial and ethnographic difference between white Europeans and Americans and non-European 'races' and 'places'" (p. 1). One way that the colonial lens created the Orient within Western imagination was through images of vast swathes of uncultivated land and forest areas, geographical imagery that suggested lack of industrial development within colonial societies while at the time promising resources for European industries to exploit. These topographical representations, while deemed to be part of a process of scientific enquiry and classification, were part of the ideological mechanism, establishing the Orient as an object to be exploited by European capitalism.

The notion of documenting and classifying the 'exotic' Orient was extended towards its people as well. Anthropological classification, inspired by theories such as social Darwinism, led to the creation of a racial hierarchy among colonial populations shaped solely by the European perception of them. Projects such as *The People of India* by J.F. Watson and J.W. Kaye (1868) were part of this anthropological project which sought to designate easily identifiable characteristics to Indian races and record their existence. The colonial camera dehumanized the populations it captured, treating them as objects and neglecting their own customs and notions of privacy. The photographed subjects were often unaware of what they were being photographed for, and many were photographed without their consent. The colonial camera was the exercise of the Orientalist gaze where native populations were photographed against deliberately native setups to accompany the image of the 'savage'. They were photographed against forests and unruly landscapes that suggested their racial inferiority and stunted civilisational development. These photographs were not meant for the photographed subjects, rather their intended audience was the ordinary citizen in Britain who would see these photographs and construct the imaginary 'Orient' in their minds. In doing so, they presented a visual 'truth' to their audiences of what the colonised subjects looked like, directed by their own representational paradigm.

James Ryan (1997) discusses various facets of the colonial lens in his work *Picturing Empire*. He builds upon Hall's (1997) and Tagg's (1988) notions of photography as a social practice rooted in discourses of power and representation. Ryan (1997) focuses particularly on 'imaginative geographies' within colonialist photography as it sought to capture Occident audiences and create an idea of what the Orient looked like. These images, despite seemingly scientific and indexical in nature, were propelled by social and political considerations of colonial rulers as well as individual image-makers. The photograph of the Dal Lake in Kashmir by Samuel Bourne has been used as an example within the text to showcase how the colonial lens fixed the image of colonised lands within an idyllic aesthetic location, often neglecting to capture social realities in favour of what they wished to record instead, or what they thought would be

more appealing to audiences. Landscape and nature photography were thus closely related to the imperial project which painted the Orient in a specific light. Ryan (1997) also explored anthropometric photographs which equated the colonised individual with research specimens to be measured and noted using photographic practices. The purpose of these photographs was to establish racial superiority of the British and connecting physiognomic features with racial denominations. Photographic surveys of the colonies were therefore implicit within power-knowledge systems that constructed the ‘Orient’.

At the same time that colonialist photography was being carried out in colonised lands, the Victorians were constructing another kind of photographic practice. This was the studio portrait, which captured individuals within the enclosed studio space. The Victorian studio portrait derived from earlier artistic traditions of portraiture, aiming to create an idealised image of the represented subject. Asa Briggs (1989) and Audrey Linkman (1993) shed light on the norms and practices of Victorian portraiture, underscoring the various techniques used by studios to present an idealised image of the photographed subject through the use of props, backgrounds, clothing and light. They highlight the performative nature of the studio photographs echoing Barthes’ (1980) ideation of photography as a kind of “primitive theatre” (p. 32). In my project, Victorian studio photography is explored as a juxtaposition to the colonialist lens in affixing social identities of the photographed subjects.

The idea of the studio portrait as a site of postcolonial enunciation has been explored by Caroline Molloy in *Rethinking the Photographic Studio as a Politicised Space* (2020) where she presents the idea of the studio as a transcultural space where the studio itself becomes a site where migrant identity and culture are negotiated. Migrant communities utilise studio portraits as a Third Space, enunciating their social position within the postcolonial landscape and actively reimagining their colonial past to situate themselves within postcolonial realities. Geeti Sen’s *A Collage of Family Portraits* (1996) takes an autoethnographic approach in its analysis of the self-fashioning practices of the author’s female relatives within studio portraits. Sen’s chronological discussion interspersed with personal stories of the

photographed women and their lifestyle provides a deeper insight into women's self-fashioning in colonial and postcolonial landscapes. It also reveals how colonised subjects utilised the studio portrait as a way of establishing their own lineage and legacy within the colonial paradigm. My project draws from Molloy (2020) and Sen (1996) as it explores the studio space as well as studio photographic practices as liberatory practices for the colonised subject to enunciate their lived realities and experiences of social 'self'.

Migration and Diaspora

Sunil Amrith's *Migration and Diaspora in Modern Asia* (2011) sheds light on the multiple channels and phases of migration in Asia from 1850 onwards, highlighting the main debates around Asian migration. He elucidates on the role of colonial power and the networks that were established to promote the movement of labour and capital. Amrith (2011) provides a critical understanding of the different streams of migration and the developments in technology and economy that enabled them. He also points out key political events that prompted colonial subjects to move to different places. In doing so, he provides insights into the nature of the diaspora and its historical formations. This ties into the postcolonial understanding of the global system proposed by Appadurai (1990) which understands the global economy as a disjunctured whole constructed through the intersection of historical, linguistic and political factors (Appadurai, 1990, p. 296). Appadurai (1996) gives much importance of diasporas as crucial units in a postcolonial, postnational political order, highlighting their role in providing an intersectional understanding of colonial legacies. Taken together, Amrith (2011) and Appadurai (1990; 1996) provide a framework for looking at diaspora cultures as relevant sites of social research.

Arasaratnam (1970) provides the historical background and context along with European writers such as Hall (1955) and Tate (1979). This has been done keeping in mind Arasaratnam's positionality as a Ceylon origin scholar who worked at the University of Malaya. Within the Introduction, the author acknowledges the shortcomings of relying on colonial records and narratives in constructing histories of previous

colonies (p. xxi) and thus his work, alongside European accounts, allows for a multifaceted and critical understanding of the history of British Malay and Singapore.

Paul Gilroy (1994) in *Diaspora* acknowledges the plurality within narratives of migration and posits diasporas as ‘contested spaces’ where social and cultural lives are fluid formed in accordance with the nature of migration. He proposes that diasporas focus their identity on memory and tradition and adapt with new experiences and circumstances of the individuals and the community. The fluid quality of diasporic communities is of interest to our research as it provides insight into the myriad ways of self-fashioning undertaken by the photographed subjects. It sheds light on their relationship with memory and tradition and how they embodied these factors in their self-fashioning.

Intimate Archives by Namiko Kunimoto (2004) builds upon this idea in the context of Japanese Canadian photo albums made during their internment from 1939-45. She argues that these photographs provided a sense of stable identity and enabled the accumulation of community memory narratives during a period of social and political instability. She discusses the composition of these photographs, highlighting the family portrait as site of meaning-making where embodied experiences, memory and social status intersect. This is quite similar to Molloy (2020) who discusses family photographs in a vastly different context, using a postcolonial and transcultural lens. While Kunimoto (2004) is concerned with the memory narratives embedded within family photographs, Molloy (2020) focuses on hybrid identities and the studio as a politicised space. This paper utilises both of these approaches to present a multifaceted understanding of migration and diasporic identity within Indian migrants in early 20th century British Malay and Singapore.

Research Design- Methodology and Research Methods

The methodology utilised in this paper derived largely from cultural studies and used qualitative methods of enquiry. Visual analysis was the primary method used, alongside archival research methods and discourse analysis. Interviews of descendants of Indian migrants to Singapore could not be conducted due to paucity of time, however oral history records from the National Archives of Singapore (NAS) were used to gain insights into the lifestyle of Indian migrants to the Straits as well as the workings of the Lee Brothers Studio. Alongside this, newspaper articles and dress histories were consulted to understand the prevailing fashion trends and dress practices of the time. The method of informed speculation was applied to fill in the gaps present within the archive and other secondary sources.

My project sought to follow in the steps of Desille and Nikielska-Sekula (2021), bringing together cultural studies, postcolonial theory and visual anthropology in order to uncover the narrative embedded within representations of migratory populations, in my case, the photographs from the Lee Brother Studio which represent a particular narrative of the migrant experience under British colonial rule.

Visual Analysis

Gillian Rose's *Visual Methodologies* (2023, 5th Edition) informed the methodological framework of this paper. Within this seminal work, Rose (2023) provided a structured approach to visual analysis in what she termed 'critical visual methodology'. Her theoretical model recognized four sites of meaning making and three modalities of analysis in visual sources. The three modalities refer to the technological, compositional and social aspects of the image when seen in conjunction with specific sites of meaning making. The four sites outlined in this approach are the site of production, the site of the image itself, site of circulation and the site where it is exposed to an audience. Through the intersection of modality and sites of meaning making, images and visuals are understood as constructed notions that are culturally produced and read in congruence with other forms of text. Rose (2023) provided the framework to synthesise multiple strands of visual research methodology and provide an interdisciplinary reading of a visual text. The research method I applied consisted of studying the intersection of the modalities with the sites of meaning making, and in doing so, highlighting the various social, cultural and technological processes that governed the making of the visual. My analysis was then placed within the discursive formations of early 19th century Straits Settlement that contributed to the complexity of the narrative presented within the images.

My research examined the site of production of the image, in this case the Lee Brothers Studio in Singapore, and the image itself within the context of the technological changes that enabled photography to become a widespread phenomenon within British colonies. It delved into how the practices of 'being

photographed' were constructed under the purview of Victorian norms of self-fashioning that pervaded the turn of the century and continued to influence image-making tropes, even as fashion trends changed. Analysis of the image highlighted the compositional strategies utilised by the photographers as well as the photographed subjects to represent a certain ideal. Other key elements within the photographs were the props, location, poses, and, most importantly, clothing of the subject (Bate, 2016). Exploring the site of circulation of the image and the site of audience engagement entailed investigating the original as well as present sites of image circulation and audience engagement. This required detailed research of the archive where the photographs were located, thus necessitating the use of archival research methods discussed later in this chapter.

Samat et al (2022) used Rose's visual analysis framework in their journal article on a photograph of the inaugural Durbar Conference at Kuala Kangsar in 1897. The photograph was taken by G R Lambert & Co., a prominent studio in Singapore. Samat et al (2022) focused on the site of production, outlining the technological, compositional and social aspects of the image in relation to production techniques, use of props and ceremonial objects, and positioning of individuals. They briefly touched upon the garments of the photographed subjects, specifically referring to their headgear and weapons as a means of uncovering their title and social status. My research project used similar methodology to Samat et al (2022); however, while Samat et al. (2022) utilised content analytics in their paper, resulting in a mixed quantitative-qualitative methodology, I have used qualitative methods and a cultural studies framework through the lens of postcolonialism. I combined visual analysis with discourse analysis and archival research methods to look at a set of photographs and understand the self-fashioning practices of the photographed subjects.

Discourse Analysis

The Burden of Representation by John Tagg (1988) discusses how photographs exist not only as indexical accounts of the past but as constructions that are formed within a particular social and political system.

Photographs are closely related to the exercise of power and are placed within discourses. Using the Foucauldian framework of discourse, Tagg (1988) considered photographs as artefacts of representation that aid the dominance of the ruling class. Photographs become representative of the power structures that they are formed within. The role of portraits, as he elucidates, is not only to leave a record of the physical description of the individual but also to inscribe the individual with a particular social identity. Conversely, social classes that have been excluded from mainstream representation can claim their presence within photographic memory. My research built on Tagg (1988) and placed the portraits of Indian migrants within the wider discourse of colonialism as well the multi-ethnic context of British Singapore.

Rose (2023) frames discourses as a productive force placed with a system of knowledge production that produces subjects, style and form of the photograph as well as its production and dissemination. She emphasises that central to a discourse analysis of any visual are the social context and location of the production of the discourse, and the notion of audience that are enmeshed with the discourse surrounding the visual. While looking at the images in the Lee Brothers Archive, it was necessary to understand the manifold discourses that constructed them. I consider these micro- and macro- discursive formations that governed the four sites of meaning making. Colonial rule was a dominant aspect of the social life of the migrants, and representations of colonies were shaped by the dominant ideal of the ruling elites. These representations have been discussed by Edward Said's (2003) seminal work *Orientalism* which is crucial to understanding how meaning making took place within the colonial paradigm (see Chapter 2). The notion of 'orientalism' shaped how colonial subjects saw themselves. It entailed an entire system of power-knowledge production which sustained the rule of the colonial powers. Photographs, having long been considered indexical sources of record and information, were used within this paradigm to support colonial ideals. *Colonialist Photography* by Hight and Sampson (2002) informs my understanding of orientalist photography as a critical discursive formation impacting the photographs from the Lee Brother Studio archive. It deconstructed the photographic representations of colonial subjects, highlighting the myriad

ways in which the colonial lens constructed the colonised populations as the exoticised ‘Other’ and categorised them as social undesirables through photographic representation.

The visual elements of the studio photograph were also subject to discourse surrounding the body and power. The rules and conventions of Victorian studio photography represented and produced a performance of the social class and status of the photographed subject. Factors like props, lighting, and positioning were used to suggest the social status of the subject as it would be captured and fixed within the photograph. Similar to conventions of photography, there were conventions of dress which were shaped by not only Western fashion discourse but local practices as well. The discourse surrounding the dress practices of the migrants was shaped by considerations of nationality, class, caste and religion which in turn impacted the photographic composition of the images.

My analysis examined these myriad discursive formations using the three-step process of looking, connecting, and interpreting proposed by Rose (2023) as part of her visual discourse analysis methodology. Secondary texts were utilised to understand how the various discursive formations impacted the self-fashioning practices of the Indian migrants. Other studio pictures from the same time period, available in the digital collections of the National Archives of Singapore and featuring Chinese and Malay subjects were used to understand how Indian migrants distinguished themselves from other nationalities. I considered the photographs from the Lee Brothers Studio archive within the context of these dominant discursive formations and aimed to understand how the image engaged with these discourses.

Archive Analysis and Informed Speculation

The photographs that were considered in this thesis were found in the Lee Brothers Studio archive in the digital collections of the National Archives of Singapore. In order to examine the photographs, it was important to consider the archive from the postcolonial lens. This framework derives from the work of postcolonial scholars such as Gayatri Chakraborty Spivak (1988) and from archival theorists such as Ann

Laura Stoler (2009) who reject the notion of the homogenous, neutral archive in favour of reading archives as cultural objects having their own social biography that are constructed within dominant paradigms. Investigating archives involves a process of reflection, considering not only what the archive preserves but also what is absent from the archive, what has been obscured, and what meanings have been imparted to the object by the archive.

The Rani of Sirmur: An Essay in Reading the Archives by Spivak (1985) is key to understanding the archival method through the postcolonial lens. It deconstructs the colonial archive's creation of the 'Other' and highlights the creation of subaltern narratives through archival reimagining. In doing so, scholars need not rely solely on the materials present within the archive but also cultural texts and memory texts that can provide an understanding of the lived experiences of marginalised people under colonial rule. Thus, it draws upon a variety of cultural texts to imagine the lives of people in history. Stoler (2009) underlines that an 'against the grain' approach of reading colonial archives involves not only locating structures and institutions of colonial power but also looking for instances of human agency that can serve to displace the historicised fiction of colonial realities. Conducting archival research thus entails reflecting on how the archive preserves, reworks or obscures histories, and considers what has been made absent. It also involves investigating the meanings that the archive imparts to the objects within and what institutions are part of this meaning making process (Tinkler, 2013).

I applied the archival method in this paper primarily by evaluating the discursive formations that have governed the way that the NAS online collection was set up. A national archive is institutionally linked to the state and its ideals. For many decolonized nations, national archives were a significant part of the nation-building process and were indicative of their status as independent nations (Buckley, 2005). Over time, social, political and technological advancements gave way to developments within the archive that must be considered while looking at the photographs. For this reason, it was also necessary for me to research the historical developments of the NAS, its inception and its organizational structure through the

works of Gretchen Liu (2013) and Dresel et al. (2020) as well as my own observations. I looked at how the digitization process at NAS took place, in comparison to what Pitt (2009) describes in relation to other archives, and how the Lee Brothers Archive was transmuted into the digital space.

‘Informed speculation’ is a research method which is part of the ‘against the grain’ approach within the archival turn (Stoler, 2009) where speculative histories of marginalized and minority communities are produced as alternatives of the dominant historical narrative. Tinkler (2013) outlines the ‘informed speculation’ methodology, which places the photograph in the context of circulation and audience engagement considering aspects such as where audiences might have interacted with the photograph and how these interactions were shaped by dominant discursive formations. In the case of the photographs considered in this paper, the information available about the photographed subjects and the photographs themselves, such as when they were taken, was fragmented; thus, it seemed appropriate to employ ‘informed speculation’ to supplement archival enquiry. The figure captions provided were taken from the archive’s website and are the only information given on these images in the archive, an issue that will be discussed in the final chapter. The speculative method is rooted in disciplines such as Afrofuturism, queer studies, feminism and postcolonialism which seek to produce narratives of the ‘invisibles’ in history. These narratives are emancipatory in nature and encourage multiple histories rather than a singular dominant account.

The method I arrived at was a hybrid method which combined archival analysis with informed speculation (Tinkler, 2013; Kim and Mida, 2015). The photographs were accessed through the NAS website, using the search feature which presented various databases that contained the search keyword ‘indian’. After selecting the ‘Photograph’ database and using the advanced search feature, only results from the Lee Brothers Studio Archive were filtered. The main criteria in the selection of the case studies were that the photographs needed to be family portraits wherein the dress of the subjects could be seen.

The process of looking at the objects required not only categorizing what could be seen, including the limited information available accompanying the image on the web page, but speculating what was invisible. The vast majority of images did not have any imprints on the front, such as dates or names, and the back of the photographs were not shown online. The process I followed in the evaluation of the photographs was first to provide a description, establishing the visuals of the image, and the context of all its components. (Tinkler, 2013). From here onwards, the speculative method was used to fill in the gaps of what the information available from the online archive did not convey. I decided to expand my research radius by also consulting potentially relevant secondary materials such as newspapers from the National Library Board's NewspaperSG archive and dress histories that could help with the dating and interpretation of the photographs from the Lee Brothers Studio. Histories of colonial photography were used to trace the development of photography in the Straits. As the photographs were part of an online database, it was important to also consider how they were placed within the digital space and the technological context of their presentation (Tinkler, 2013).

Finally, Roberts (2011) integrates the notions of power and discourse with the formation of narratives and memory within photography. His text is particularly concerned with using photography as a site of narrative-building within social research. I combine this approach with speculative methodology, which reimagines the past as a way of uncovering future narratives. For the Indian migrants, the studio photograph was a means of establishing themselves within their context. It acted as a site of enunciation which placed them within the dominant colonial narrative separate from the lens of the coloniser. By synthesizing the notion of the power-knowledge paradigm within photographic representation presented by Tagg (1988) with speculative emancipatory methodology that challenged the traditional use of archives, this project aimed to contribute to 'against the grain' histories in contemporary postcolonial research.

Research Ethics

This research requires practicing reflexivity and cultural sensitivity in my analysis. I must keep in mind my personal biases as an Indian national and my positionality as a postgraduate student studying in London, with access to material largely written in English. I must be careful of reproducing bias without critical analysis and refrain from making deterministic claims regarding the dress practices of the colonial subjects as I am studying only one aspect of their identity within one kind of representational paradigm. As a researcher I must be sensitive to feedback and opposing perspectives.

Chapter 1: Background

Dress and self-fashioning practices are situated bodily practices governed, in a large part, by the social and cultural contexts of the dressed individuals (Entwistle, 2015). In order to understand the self-fashioning practices of the dressed individuals in the Lee Brothers Studio photographs it is important to understand the historical and cultural processes that facilitated the migration of Indian migrants to Singapore. Rose's (2023) visual analysis framework considers the intersection of the site of production of the image with technological, social and compositional modalities- in the context of this project this would translate to understanding the sociopolitical and technological context of the photographs. In this section, I briefly discuss the history of colonial Singapore and the need for Indian migrant labour. Then, I outline the technological developments that enabled commercial photography in Europe and its subsequent dissemination to the colonies, focusing on India and Singapore. Lastly, I explore the history of the Lee Brothers Studio itself, outlining its position within the photographic tradition of Singapore

Colonisation and Labour Migration

British colonization of Singapore was part of the larger project of expansion under the British East India Company. In 1819, under Sir Thomas Stamford Raffles, Singapore became part of the Straits Settlements, a series of regional acquisitions by the British in Southeast Asia that included Penang, Malacca, Labuan and the Dingdings, and developed into a key entrepot of the British Empire in Asia (Tate, 1979). At this time, the vast majority of migrants were labourers recruited primarily through the system of indentured labour and later, the ‘kangani’ system which was agent-led recruitment that established migrant networks that continued to bring in large number of Indians till the system’s abolition in 1938 (Arasaratnam, 1970).

In 1867, Singapore became an independent Crown colony, necessitating the need for English-educated administrative staff. “The pool of educated inhabitants in Singapore in the late nineteenth century and early twentieth century was clearly insufficient to meet the requirements of the burgeoning economy and administration” (Rai, 2014, p. 96). Indian and Ceylonese migrants were brought in to fulfil the needs of the administration owing to their technical skills, competency in English and lesser incurred costs when compared to British labour from the mainland. Moreover, the Civil Service of both regions employed similar channels of recruitment, making it easier to transfer personnel. Private European businessowners were also quick to procure South Asian ‘white-collared’ workers as clerks and middle-management staff. The salaries offered to these officers and clerks were much higher than what they would get in their homelands, making it an attractive prospect. Tamil and Malayalee clerks were therefore amply present in various government sectors as well as private enterprises. At the same time, Indian traders, such as the Chettiars and Parsis had established themselves in Singapore, though the latter had much less influence than the former (Rai, 2014). Various communities congregated in different localities in Singapore, with Serangoon Road being notably termed as ‘Little India’. These regions were marked by clashes between North and South Indians, different religious and caste groups as well as socioeconomic divisions. The communities that are being considered in this project might have belonged to either the High Street where businessmen had set up outlets or prestigious localities such as Orchard, Tanglin and the East Coast area

where the wealthiest migrants resided (Rai, 2014). It would be easy for all these residents to access the Lee Brothers Studio located on Hill Street in the early 20th century.

The Lee Brothers Studio

The first site of meaning making is the site of production. The Lee Brothers Studio operated from about 1910 to 1940 on Hill Street in Singapore. The technology governing the production of the image has been traced by Desmond (1985) and Falconer (1987) where they discuss the type of camera and techniques used to produce studio photographs in the latter half of the 19th century. The popularization of the camera and its dissemination to the Americas and subsequently to Asia, were integral to the setting up of the studio. Gretchen Liu (1995) has mentioned that the Lee Brothers produced daguerreotypes, which had been invented by Frenchman Louis Daguerre and used iodine and bromine to record images on silvered copper plates (Desmond, 1985). The daguerreotype was first introduced in 1839 and by 1843 it had been brought to Singapore (Liu 1995). In 1858, E.A. Edgerton set up his own commercial studio in Stamford Road Area close to Hill Street where the Lee Brothers Studio would come to be located. Indian and Chinese migrants residing in Singapore were made privy to the photographic process through newspaper articles on various techniques as well as through the experience of being employed by European photographers (Desmond, 1985; Liu, 1995). Others, like Lee Tat Loon, uncle to Lee King Yan and Lee Poh Yan, studied photography and portraiture in Shanghai and kept updated on new techniques through his connections with the British Resident at Singapore.

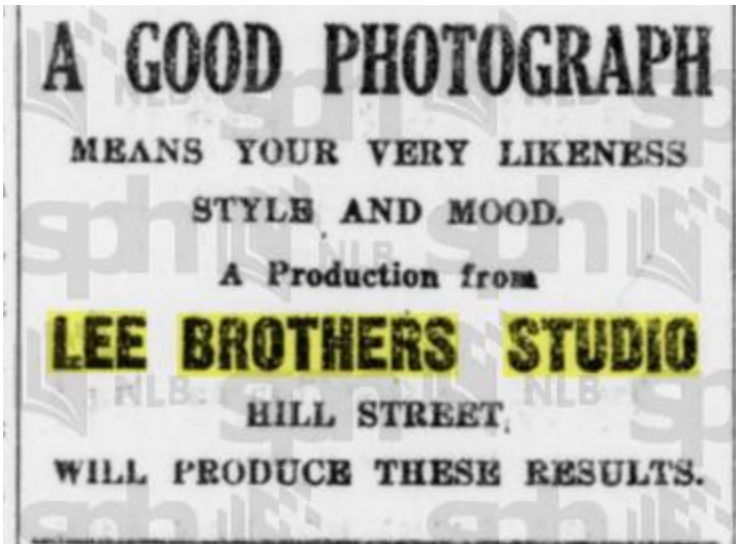


Fig. 1: Advertisement for the Lee Brothers Studio in The Straits Times (1924)

In the oral history recording held by the NAS Lee Hin Ming, the son of Lee Poh Yan, explains that the owners of the Lee Brothers Studio Lee King Yan and Poh Yan hailed from a prosperous Cantonese family from the Kwangtung province in China. Their family had a legacy of photography and owned more than 12 photography studios in Southeast Asia with eight of them being in Singapore (Lee, 1994a). They had relations with British government officials and traders which granted them access to new technologies and technical skills needed to produce high quality works. Moreover, only family members were allowed to handle cameras and plates while the hired staff would perform ancillary activities. This ensured that the knowledge of production remained within the family. The Lee Brothers used a British made camera and, from 1909 onwards, had a separate company selling photography supplies to other studios as well which was owned jointly by all the Lee siblings (Lee, 1994b).

The composition of the photographs produced by the Lee Brothers followed the norms of Victorian photography (Liu, 1995) with painted backdrops, props and seating arrangements imitating elite European family homes. Composition was also closely tied to the technology available at the time. The set-up of studio photographs had to keep in mind the prolonged exposure time required by the camera wherein the

photographed subjects had to maintain their pose. It also had to consider the sensitivity of the camera to light- certain times of the day and certain weather conditions allowed for better quality pictures; thus, the photographed subjects would be positioned according to these factors. Especially since the climactic conditions in Europe differed from tropical Singapore, allowances had to be made by photographers to accommodate the warmer weather.

Gretchen Liu (1995) provides a clear history of the studio, detailing the structure and day-to-day functioning of the studio space. It sheds light on the studio clientele and the role of photography in colonial Singapore. The oral history interviews with Lee Hin Ming, son of Lee Poh Yan, provide additional context of the innerworkings of the Lee family. He describes the clientele as “mostly upper-class and middle-class client” and the studio as one of the most expensive studios in Singapore at the time (Lee, 1994a). In the 1930s, prior to Japanese Occupation, the studio shifted to Saint Gregory Place and in the process about three-fourth of the glass plates were destroyed. Soon after, as the Japanese occupied Singapore, the Studio was shut down (Lee, 1994b).

Understanding the nature of the Lee Brothers Studio allows us to gain an idea of the clientele that might have visited the studio and the nature of the service they provided. It also provides the foundation for the proceeding chapters which discuss the self-fashioning of women and men in the photographs from the Lee Brothers Studio.

Chapter 2: Self-Fashioning Femininity and Women's Dress Practices

In this chapter, I combine Rose's (2023) site of the image and site of audience engagement with compositional and social modalities. The visual analysis follows a three-step process of describing, contextualizing and interpreting, in conjugation with discourse analysis and speculative methods as outlined within the methodological framework.



Fig. 2: Indian Christian Family Portrait (1910-25) ('Add accession no.')

Description

In figure 2, one man and four women of varying ages fan around an older man. Three of the women are wearing saris while the child wears a white dress. The two men in formal high neck coats, buttoned all the way up, and trousers. The background of the portrait is a painted backdrop where the curtain of the left corner is half draped to reveal a glass window looking out into wilderness with a carved pillar fitted with a decorative lamp scone right next to it. Towards the right is a painting with an aerial forest view. The two women and the eldest man are sitting on wooden chairs with cushioned seats, light and intricately carved for the women and dark and solid for the man. All the photographed subjects are predominantly wearing white, standing out in contrast against the darker shade of the background. The older members are sitting, with the three youngest arranged standing around the man in the centre. The composition of the photograph situates it as a family portrait with the man in the centre being the patriarch. Family portraits could be taken to celebrate a particular milestone such as a wedding or the birth of a child but were also taken to commemorate the family itself. In this instance, there seems to be no special occasion

indicated within the dress of the subjects or the photographic setup. It is possible that the photograph was taken simply to have a record of the family members at this moment in time.

The two women at the corners are wearing saris where the decorative edge of the sari has been pinned onto the left shoulder with a clip or a brooch. The fabric in the front has been pleated and tucked into the waistband, held in place by a belt. The blouse is white in colour, having a high collar, sleeves that puff at the shoulder and draw close at the wrists where the cuffs are decorated with lace gathered to fit into the sleeves. Both of the women are wearing darker-coloured saris that contrast against the white blouse. The woman on the left is wearing a densely printed sari with a thin border embroidered with small mirrors that reflect light. The sari worn by the lady on the right has a border with a running gold stripe. Both have two necklaces layered around the neck and accessories in their hair. The one on the left is wearing bangles while the one on the right has a pair of earrings. Shoes are visible only for the lady on the left, which reveal them to be pointed, close-toed and leather. The women are posed in the same manner with one arm resting on the arm of the chair and the other sat carefully in their lap. They are also both placed slightly more towards the front than the others and are angled in such a way that they enclose the other subjects between themselves.

The woman wearing the sari and standing next to the patriarch appears to be younger in age than the other two. Her sari is draped in a similar style; however, it is much less elaborate- a plain white sari with a single-coloured border stripe. The blouse is made of the same material and has shorter sleeves that puff slightly at the shoulders. A belt cinches the waist. The sari does not reach all the way to the floor. Jewellery includes bangles, a ring, a necklace, a clip on the shoulder, earrings and a hair ornament.

Context

The saris of all three women are draped in the ‘nivi’ style popularized by Jyanandanandini Tagore in the latter half of the 19th century. The style combined elements of various existing forms of draping in order

to fulfil the need to create an acceptable style that could become the national standard (Banerjee and Miller, 2018). The 'nivi' style required a blouse and a petticoat to be worn with the sari. One end of the garment would be tucked into a petticoat while the other end would be wrapped around the lower body and brought over the left shoulder. The excess fabric at the centre front would be pleated and tucked into the petticoat as well. The other end of the sari, the decorative end or the 'pallu', would be gathered in pleats and draped over the left shoulder. The hanging edge was sometimes brought back around to the front and tucked into the belt to allow for ease of movement, like the third woman has done (Lynton and Singh, 1995, p. 15).

The standing woman is wearing the form of style which would gain popularity in later years and continues to be prominently worn by women today. Her sari and blouse appear to be made from the same cloth having only a decorative stripe at the border. This is different from the other women's blouses which appear to be inspired by 1890s English shirts with silk saris draped over them. The lace details on the cuffs and collars for these blouses follow Edwardian trends and were possibly buttoned or hooked onto the sleeves and neck. While it does not appear that any of the women photographed are wearing a corset, it is possible that they might be wearing a chemise underneath the blouse. Moreover, their belts could be modified 'kamarbands' which were worn with many iterations of the sari. Here, they have been modified to resemble western belts with a single decorative buckle.



Fig. 3: Illustration depicting the draping process for the Nivi style from Lynton and Singh (1995)

The style adopted by the women in Figure 2 is closely associated with the transition in nationalist politics from the late 19th century to the early 20th century in India. The so-called Moderates sought to modernize the nation in conjugation with the British rulers, aiming to utilize education as the means of liberation of the people. They were heavily inspired by the European Renaissance and Enlightenment movements and sought to bring about a similar paradigm shift within India. Colonial Bengal was the epicenter of this movement, owing to its historical importance under colonization. In Bengal, there emerged the ‘babu’ class, wealthy elites who had been educated under the British system and believed that Western education would help Indians break away from the clutches of caste and other traditional vices rooted in Indian society. These individuals were often termed as ‘bhadralok’ who became associates of the British and internalized the Orientalist narrative (Banerjee, 1989).

The actions of the ‘bhadralok’ were often aimed at modernizing Indian society while retaining important elements of native cultures. The Tagore family was prominent within this class and often acted as role models owing to their social status. The ‘nivi’ style of sari is most notably credited to Jyanandanandinidevi Tagore, the sister-in-law of Nobel poet-laureate Rabindranath Tagore who, on a trip to Bombay, is said to have devised the ‘nivi’ style after witnessing the way Parsi women in Bombay draped their saris (Banerjee and Miller, 2018). The style was simple and could incorporate elements of Western dress easily. It also allowed ease of movement without compromising on modesty. The ‘nivi’ style would come to replace many regional methods of draping the sari as it became the modern standard (Banerjee and Miller, 2018). For the women in figure 2 the ‘nivi’ style would indicate their modernity while retaining their traditional roots. The third woman’s sari more closely resembles the style popularized by the Khadi movement under MK Gandhi in after his return to India in the late 1910s. The label of the picture indicates that it might have been taken between 1910 and 1925 which would put it at the appropriate time for the transition from the Moderate era to the Gandhian era.

Interpretation

Multiple discourses intersect within the photograph. The first one that I draw attention to are the norms of Victorian studio portraiture. The painted backdrop derives from the Victorian tradition highlighted by Asa Briggs (1989) and Audrey Linkman (1993) wherein practices from portraiture painting transferred to the photographic studio portrait. Landscapes, columns, pillars, curtains and carved furniture were all enmeshed within the creation of the portrait (Linkman, 1993). In Fig. 2, we can see the idealized drawing room that suggests an idealized family image. The curtain on the left can reflect the performed theatricality of the photograph though it is most likely a means to provide a transition element on one end of the picture. The view out of the window as well as the painted picture of a forest land reflects colonial ideal of containment of the ‘savage’ colonized lands (Hight and Sampson, 2002). The inclusion of both these

elements suggests that the photographed subjects might have been appreciative of the British or at least agreed with their policies.

The caption of the image suggests that this was an Indian Christian family. Many of the early Indian Christian communities, particularly in southern India, had been originally lower caste groups converted by Portuguese and English missionaries, gaining higher status through Western education (Wiebe, 1970). They had thus benefitted from colonial intervention, which might explain their adoption of colonial norms within the portrait. All the elements mentioned indicate their status and assertion of power within the colonial paradigm. By aligning themselves with the ruling powers, the photographed subjects could assert their agency within the colonial paradigm.

The adoption of Victorian portraiture traditions within immigrant studios such as the Lee Brothers Studio also served to counter the Oriental narrative of the colonial subject as 'savage' and in need of 'civilising'. As both Campt (2017) and Kutesko (2019) highlight in their respective studies on colonialist imagery, the anthropological gaze of the colonial lens created fixed ethnographic categories of colonial women as 'primitive'- the act of self-fashioning creates dissonance within this categorisation and removes the colonial woman from her position as a subject of the colonial gaze into an articulate self, enunciating her agency and lived experience of dress. It also serves to counter the claim within fashion studies that posits non-western dress as 'unchanging' fixing them in antiquity. 'Fashion' is closely associated with the West and encompasses constant change and individuality while non-Western dress is more akin to 'costume', implying archaic and the collective (Lewis, 2025, p. 253). The self-fashioning of the women in figure 2 blurs these distinctions- the mixing of Western dress with 'native' costume and, moreover, the adoption of new trends in Indian dress deconstructs the claims of Orientalism, giving way to the possibility of acknowledging the dress practices of colonized women within the purview of fashion.



Fig. 4: Studio Portrait of an Indian Family (1920s)

Description

Figure 4 shows two couples against a painted backdrop. The men are standing while the women sit on ornate wooden chairs having upholstery with intricate floral designs. Both the women are posed similarly with one arm resting against the side of the armchair and the other resting on their lap. The two men are standing behind the chairs and have their fronts angled towards the camera. The backdrop is a simple dark-coloured wall that transitions into an open view of the outside. There are two pillars framing what could be an iron-wrought gate or boundary. A small plant is nestled between the pillars. The attire of the two men will be discussed in further sections, but both the women are wearing saris in the ‘seedha-pallu’ style. The lady on the left has a plain white V-neck blouse in a silken material with elbow length sleeves. Her

sari appears to be made from a fine silk that reflects light and pinned at the shoulder. The sari's border is filled with floral patterns along the hem that spans over the 'pallu' edge as well. The woman on the right is wearing a dark blouse with tiered sleeves with wide decorated cuffs and a close neck. Her sari has a thin border with repeating floral motifs and a delicate lace hem. Both women are wearing multiple necklaces and bangles. Their hair is parted in the middle and gathered loosely at the back, tucked under the pallu. Both are also wearing leather shoes with a small heel and bows decorating the top.

Context

Wedding portraits were a key element within the Victorian studio tradition. A portrait to celebrate the wedding of a couple could be taken much before the actual occasion or after the formal ceremony had taken place (Linkman, 1993). While this photograph does not have any overt elements signifying it as a wedding photograph, through the composition it can be inferred that the photograph was taken to commemorate the two couples pictured in it. Such photographs could either be stored as memories of the young couples, or in the context of the photographed subjects' status as migrants to Singapore, could also have been sent back home as postcards. Thus, the event of taking a formal photograph could be targeted towards a specific aim and audience. This is important to keep in mind while considering the self-fashioning practices of the women photographed here.

The style of sari that they are wearing, known colloquially as the 'seedha-palla' has prominently been recorded in the Gujrati and Parsi communities residing in Western and Southwestern India (Lynton and Singh, 1995). The style does not feature the pleats in the front like the 'nivi' drape, rather the sari cloth is wrapped around the body and the decorative end brought up over the head and pinned at the shoulder, so the edge hangs in front of the torso. In these pictures, the sari is being worn with a blouse, and we can assume that a petticoat would have been worn as well. The lace at the bottom could be attached to the sari itself or even the petticoat. The Parsi community is often associated with wealth and early adoption of

British practices (Kawtra, 2010, p. 123). By wearing the sari, which have traces of the Parsi 'gara' embroidery visible in the borders, the two women are establishing themselves within the paradigm of prestige and status associated with the community. At the same time, they are living symbols of their husband's status. The photograph has the purpose of establishing their husbands as successful and prolific family men. The self-fashioning practices are therefore embroiled within the sociocultural considerations of migrant communities that aim to preserve the community in a way that highlights their status and belonging within the migrated lands (Pereira-Ares, 2018).

Interpretation

From the lens of postcolonialism, these photographs act as sites of enunciation where the identity imposed upon the colonial subject by the colonial power-knowledge paradigm is distorted. By enacting strategies of 'hybridity' and 'mimicry', the subject displaces the meaning fixed upon her by the colonial gaze. The photographed women partially mimic their colonial counterparts by taking elements of western dress and adapting them to suit their needs; by doing so, I argue, they disrupt the binary division between the coloniser and the colonised, creating an ambivalent Third Space (Bhabha, 2004, p. 85). The enunciation of identity through self-fashioning also situates the photographed subjects within the larger paradigm of migration to British Singapore. It showcases that for Indian migrants to Singapore; their cultural heritage was an important part of their identity that they felt the need to assert in formal settings and photographs. Women, in particular, were shaped by the gendered narrative that equated femininity with tradition to the extent that women were expected to uphold the native cultural practices in migrant landscapes (Hendrickson, 1996). Their self-fashioning was a reflection of not only individual status but familial and community identity. By wearing saris, these women communicated their position as Indian migrants, but the style and accessories reflected their status within colonial society as wives or daughters of wealthy Indian merchants or civil officers. It differentiated them from Chinese and Nonya women who constituted

a significant portion of migrant population in Singapore but had a different relationship with the British, as well as Malay women who were embroiled within a separate nationalist paradigm.

Discussion

Joanne Entwistle describes the dressed body as a ‘product of culture, the outcome of social forces pressing upon the body’ (2015, p. 20). Dress is thus situated within a fixed time and space- in the case of this research, it is situated in the early 20th century Singapore, but it is also situated within the studio space. The women whose self-fashioning has been considered in this section were shaped by their cultural backgrounds as well as their social realities. A number of gazes dictated their performance of femininity and affected their dress practices. The colonial gaze has been discussed by Camp (2017) and Kutesko (2019) in detail, particularly for the female colonial subject who exists at the intersection of the White and male gazes. The colonised woman is fixed by the White anthropological gaze which seeks to classify her into racial and geographical categories, at the same time perpetuating the stereotype of the ‘savage’ native. They also seek to propound the women as sexually deviant in contrast to the ‘well-bred’ White woman like the ‘Nautch girls’ of India who fascinated the British photographer Samuel Bourne (Ryan, 1997). Their femininity is closely associated with high libido and attempts to seduce European men.

The Western fascination with the ‘native’ female body was also expressed in colonial photography where the figure of the beautiful, compliant woman posed and pictured in exotic surroundings with a view to erotic allure served overlapping categories of art, ethnography and pornography. (Ryan, 1997, p. 145)

At the same time, within the native communities, there were existing norms of womanhood and femininity that the women were expected to perform. The intersection of both paradigms constricted women’s sphere of activity and relegated them to a subordinate social position. In the above photographs, we can see how the women balance ‘modern’ Western dress practices with their traditional dress in their performance of

femininity. By adopting modern (Western) dress, they could contrast the image of the savage, naked colonial woman, however, looking too modern (Western) would alienate them from their own communities and social circles. It is also presumed that these photographs were meant for the family, as souvenirs or mementos, therefore, the performance within them would have to keep in mind the possible audience. The postcolonial gaze considers how the women have enacted 'mimicry' and 'hybridity' within their self-fashioning. Their performance of femininity combines multiple paradigms, creating a hybridised 'self' that is reflective of their experience of migration under colonial rule (Molloy, 2020). Their partial mimicry of English dress situated them within a Third Space whereby selecting elements of Western dress and combining them with the sari allowed the women to enact sartorial agency even as they were constrained by social norms (Tarlo, 1996, p. 46). The Third Space created in this instance set the stage for sartorial transformations in the latter half of the 20th century as decolonization and nationalist movements constructed different norms of feminine presentation (Chaudhuri, 2008; Banerjee and Miller, 2008) that required adoption of foreign dress with native attire in a strategic manner.

This chapter discussed how women utilised self-fashioning practices in studio photographs in relation to the wider historical context of the early 20th century Singapore. In the next chapter, I explore how men fashioned themselves in the same context and how the colonial lens affected their dress practices.

Chapter 3: Fashioning the Masculine Self

In this chapter, I look at the self-fashioning practices employed by men within photographs from the Lee Brothers Studio. Male dress in the 19th and 20th centuries was centered around a specific notion of masculinity constructed at the intersection of colonialist and capitalist discursive formations as well as patriarchal power systems.



Fig. 5: 'Studio Portrait of an Indian Family' (1910-25)

Description

Fig. 4 shows a family portrait where multiple generations of a family have been photographed together in a living room setting. In the far right, a window has a decorative pane and an arrangement of flowers that extends down to the floor. A curtain separates the window setting from the wall. A decorative pillar stands at the centre left. Three of the eight figured are sitting on wooden furniture, with the two women occupying an upholstered settee and the man in a carved wooden armchair. Two boys are sitting on the floor on thick

cushions, while the other children are being held by other family members. The two seemingly oldest men are standing at the back with one of them holding a young girl. The two women are seated on the settee with the woman in the centre holding a baby in her lap.

Context and Interpretation

The Victorian family photograph served to capture the family unit during moments of celebration or familial importance (Linkman, 1993; Briggs, 1989). Apart from recording existing family members, such photographs helped establish the hereditary lineage of individuals. Having multiple generations within the same photograph projected the image of a cohesive family unit. In this instance, we can see that the colours of the photograph, even in grayscale, are quite harmonious, lacking any harshness or sharp contrasts. The backdrop also compliments the colours of the clothes presenting an overall well-coordinated image.

The composition of the photograph is characteristic of Victorian photographic practices. The backdrop of the photograph places the family in a somber and intimate setting while the window and flowers on the right indicate refinement and respectability (Briggs, 1989, p. 52). The positioning of the individual subjects creates a pentagon-like shape comprising of an isosceles triangle atop a trapezium. The woman holding the baby is at the centre of the pentagon, while the men indicate the upper point of the triangle and the two kids sitting forming the shorter parallel edge of the trapezium. The distinct shape thus created adds to the unified and formalised nature of the family photograph and highlights the hierarchy of the individuals who are performing a particular role within the photographic narrative. The compositional and social modalities thus intersect at the site of the image in constructing a specific narrative of the family unit. A similar compositional technique has been used in Fig. 6 where the family is arranged in a trapezoid formation, with the youngest children being held by older family members sitting in the **centre**.



Fig. 6: Victorian Family Portrait of The Meinertzhagen Family (mid-1890s)

In Fig. 5, the man standing on the right is wearing a three-piece morning suit in a light colour with a dark tie. He has an attached collar at the neck and cuffs at the sleeves. The man standing on the right and the one sitting are both similarly in darker morning jackets with shorter lapels, a light tie and a high standing collar. The morning suit or the morning jacket came to be widely adopted towards the end of the 19th century and the beginning of the twentieth. It replaced the frock coat as the choice for casual and informal settings and was worn in various configurations in Britain and the United States. The morning suit became the everyday garment for middle- and upper-class men and signaled the shifting epicentre of fashion from the aristocratic class to the burgeoning wealthy middle class. It came to represent the self-made industrialist or working professional who had an active life and was morally upright. The aristocratic classes readily adopted the morning suit as a way of retaining their social importance and following the dominant trends (Kuchta, 2002). By legitimizing the new style, they could partake in it without giving up their status or diluting their power. Both sects were thus able to maintain their institutions and exercise

power in their respective spheres. The morning suit came to indicate the masculine ideal within the new dominant regime under capitalism (Kuchta, 2002; Breward, 2016)

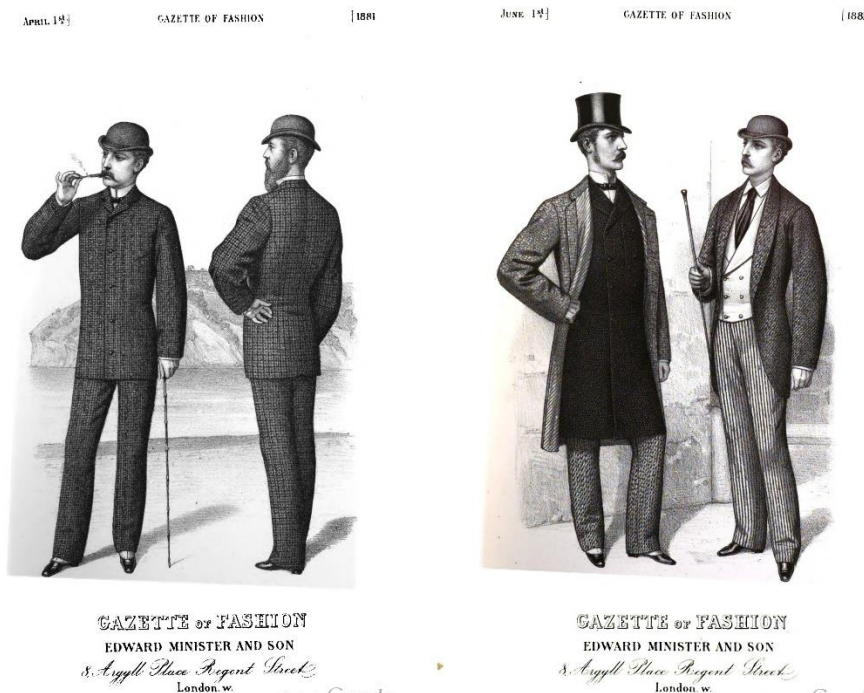


Fig. 7: Illustrations depicting various styles of Morning Suit in the Gazette of Fashion. (1881)

The men pictured in Fig. 5 represent the notion of masculinity that was associated with the morning or leisure suit. They are presumably middle- or upper class as that was the general clientele of the Lee Brothers Studio (Lee, 1994a). It is possible that they are businessmen who migrated to Singapore. The posture of the man on the right and his position within the shape formed through the composition suggests that he might have been the patriarch of the family. The style of his suit is different from the other two, though it still follows the prevailing trends, and adds to his authoritative position. He also has on a ring that has been deliberately faced to the camera. The man standing on the left is in a much more relaxed and natural position, aided by the child he is carrying. His morning jacket has been buttoned in the front and accessorised with a pocket watch chain. The addition of the child helps cement the image of a familial legacy and the ideal of the patriarch. The last man, who is occupying the armchair appears to be younger

than the other two and is less relaxed. All three men are maintaining very deliberate eye-contact with the camera, and consequently, the viewer of the image. The tension of being photographed is visible within the individuals- though they are wealthy within their own communities, their status can only be expressed through Western or colonial norms of self-fashioning (Codell, 2012). The camera, and by extension, the photographic studio, emerges here as the site of enunciation where the tensions arising from the interaction of migrant communities with colonial systems are expressed and negotiated, creating- as this thesis argues- a Third Space at the intersection of the two paradigms.

Other Forms of Masculine Dress

Some variations in men's fashion can be seen in Fig. 4 (see Chapter 2) in the dress of the two men standing behind the women. The man on the left is wearing a version of the morning suit. His coat is slightly longer, and he has a double-breasted waistcoat with a white shirt, tie and a wide wing-tipped collar. In terms of ornamentation, he is wearing a tie pin and a pocket square and a ring which is again facing the camera. The dress and presentation of this man is in line with the younger creed of civil servants and merchants who fashioned themselves after the Victorian ideal of a gentleman. The all black of his outfit stands out not only against the gray background but also singles him out among the other individuals who are all dressed in white. Black as a colour of masculinity has been prominent across various cultures at different points in time. The association between black and formal menswear has also been traced to the Great Masculine Renunciation by J.C. Flügel (1930) where the bright colours of court attire were replaced by somber blacks, beiges and browns in accordance with the norms of Enlightenment rationality and sobriety (Breward, 2022). The man in Fig. 4 seems to have fashioned himself after these traditions to perform the desirable masculinity expected of the middle-class working man within colonial discourse.

The man on the right in Fig. 4 is wearing a white suit jacket with a low collar and the front buttoned up fully up to the neck. He has matching white pants and no other accessories. This kind of suit jacket was

prominent in India as formal attire for men. Known commonly as the 'bandhgala' (closed neck), these kinds of jackets were derived from traditional court attire of the Mughals as well as the sports uniform of Rajput polo players (Sandhu, 2015). The suit was generally hip length with a low mandarin collar. Some variations buttoned at the side, in the same way as the 'jama' while others followed the 'achkan' and buttoned in the front. The bandhgala came to be accepted as an alternative to the three-piece western suit owing to its courtly origins and similarity to the suit jacket.

The bandhgala can be seen as the culmination of various discursive dialogues that were present in India and other British colonies in the 18th and 19th centuries. The advent of western colonial rule necessitated changes within the existing social patterns and practices of the colonised regions- a primary feature of this transformation being the formation of class of native elites who were ensconced in Western ideology and lifestyle (Banerjee, 1989). In Bengal, the heart of British colonial rule, this class came to be known as the 'babu' class. The system of British rule in India and other Asian colonies encouraged the setting up of a Western education system that could create English-educated natives. These educated subjects were not only a cheaper and more practical alternative to transferring educated labour from Britain to the colonies but also acted as a bridge between the colonisers and their subjects.

As Tarlo (1996) discusses, the dress practices of this new class came to be under scrutiny by both the British and other colonised subjects. The 'babus' sought to adopt Western dress but the British, fearing that doing so would affect their elevated position, encouraged the babus to look inspiration within their own culture. Many 'babus' opted to mix and match the suit with the 'dhoti' or other traditional Indian garments as a way to maintaining their own cultural identity but still following the Western norms (Tarlo, 1996, p. 45). Others opted to delineate their personal and professional lives by changing into traditional clothes while at home but wearing Western garments in public. The bandhgala could be seen as a compromise between these two extremes as it was similar enough to the morning suit to appease Western sensibilities but had origins in Indian male attire (Sandhu, 2015).

Both of the men in Fig. 4 are wearing semi-formal attire. The highest formal dress at the time for men would be the tuxedo or the white tie evening dress suit, worn only for special occasions or high society events. The morning suit, also known as the leisure suit, as well as the bandhgala would be considered daytime attire that can be worn in both casual and formal instances in everyday life. They were also considered appropriate for sportswear and had replaced the Victorian frock coat by the turn of the 20th century (Blackman, 2009). By wearing the suit, both men are performing their status within colonial society. They are establishing themselves as middle- or upper-class professionals, rooted in Western norms. The wearing of casual Western attire rather than formal Indian dress aligns the men with ‘modern’ British sensibilities rather than outdated Indian court attire (Shannon, 2006).

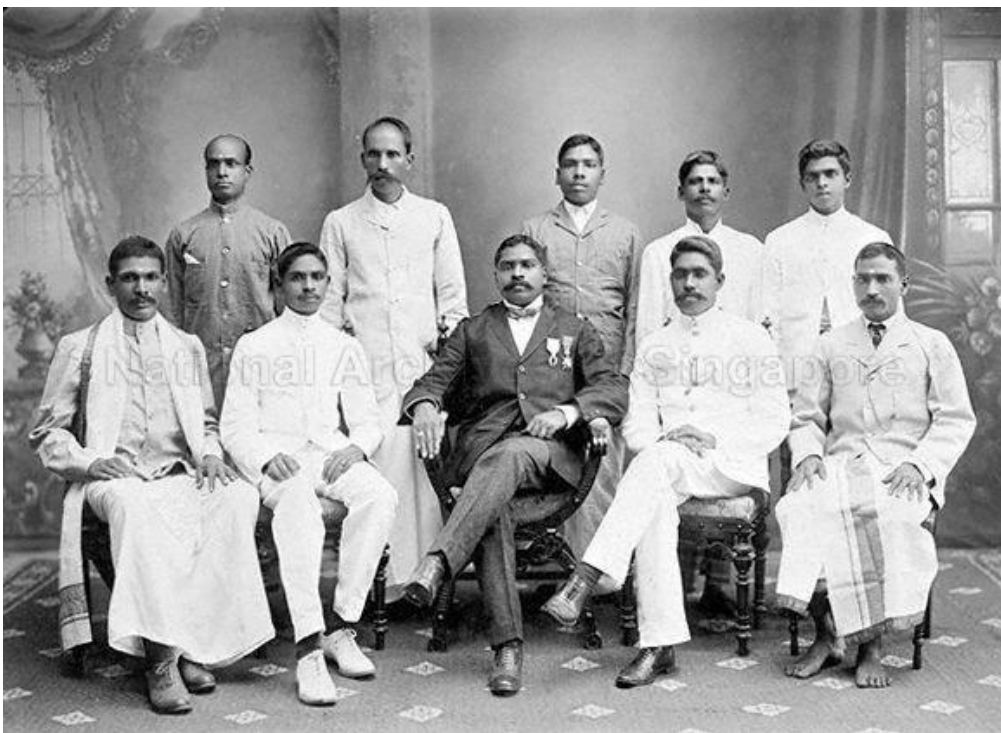


Fig. 8: Group Portrait of Indian Men (1910-25)

Description

Fig. 8 is different only shows men and not a family. showcases the wide range of masculine dress that would have been worn by Indian migrants in Singapore in the early 20th century. Within the same picture, we can witness varying social identities being performed by different men. Most of the men standing at the back are dressed in some version of either a simple morning suit or the 'bandhgala'. The compositional focus of the picture is the man sitting in the centre, wearing a dark morning suit jacket with dark leather shoes. The jacket has a faint stripe pattern, and he has paired it with slightly lighter- coloured trousers, a white shirt and a bow tie. He is wearing a ring, which is turned to face the camera and has two medals pinned to his chest. The two men flanking the man at the centre are dressed similarly in all white suits. The two men sitting on each end, however, are dressed differently. The one on the right end is dressed in a typical morning suit on the top with the jacket, shirt, collar and tie ensemble with a dangling pocket watch chain. From the waist down, however he is wearing a gold bordered 'lungi', a draped skirt-like garment worn by men in southern India. He is also barefoot. The man on the left end is dressed in a shirt with an attached collar on top and a long scarf with embroidered borders draped around his neck. On the bottom, he is wearing an unadorned 'lungi' and leather shoes.

Context and Interpretation

The garments of the men in the back are of significantly lesser quality than the ones worn by the others. This could symbolise a lower position within the hierarchy of the group, as they are made to stand, or a lower socioeconomic background. At the beginning of the 20th century, ready-to-wear garments had become widely available in stores, even in colonies such as Singapore (*Pinang Gazette and Straits Chronicle*, 1925). These stores mass produced everyday garments such as suits and trousers and catered to the growing strata within the middle class who required formal clothing but could not afford to have garments tailored. Elements of the suit, such as the high collars could be bought at the stores and attached to any shirt (Blackman, 2009). The men standing at the back in the picture could have made use of such facilities to dress themselves for a visit to the studio. It could also be part of the uniform that they would

be required to wear for work. Their self-fashioning practices reflects the masses of clerical staff employed in British administrative offices as well as businesses of both Indian and Chinese merchants (Rai, 2014).

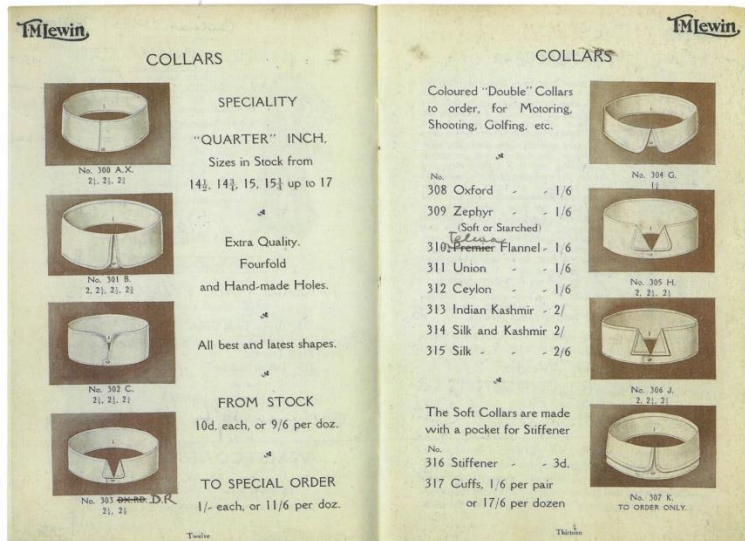


Fig. 9: Advertisement showcasing collar styles in Blackman (2009)

The man in the centre presents a different image. The quality and fit of his attire indicate that they were most likely custom made for the individual with high quality fabric. Coupled with his central position within the group, it is quite likely that this man is the key figure within this group. His chair is the only one with armrests and allows him to pose in a comfortable yet dominant stance. My interpretation is that he could be a high-ranking individual within the hierarchy of what appears to be a group of colleagues. This could be a photograph of all the employees within the company, taken to commemorate a special occasion. Perhaps, the photograph was taken to celebrate the awarding of the medals themselves. It could also be commemorating a milestone achieved by the company or as a way to establish a corporate legacy. In all instances, the man at the centre has been fashioned to be in an elevated position in comparison to the other individuals as the focal point of the photograph.

The hybrid style of the two men seated on either ends closely resembles the mix-and-match 'babu' style expounded by Sumanta Banerjee (1989) where Bengali men chose to incorporate parts of Western attire

with their traditional garments in an attempt to 'modernise' Indian masculine dress. Their self-fashioning could be reflective of their personal ideology towards Western garments or could be indicative of their community beliefs. Both men have a 'tilak', presumably an imprint of sandalwood paste, on their forehead, which could imply that they belong to the priestly class. The man on the right is not wearing shoes which could indicate status or be a mark of respect towards the traditional garment he is wearing. The shawl worn by the man on the left is also a possible symbol of priesthood. They might be wearing symbols of their culture, such as the 'tilak' and the 'lungi' in an attempt to preserve their caste and community identity within the group photograph. It could also imply their position within the group hierarchy as members of the clergy who might have been included in order to mark an auspicious event or moment in company history.

Discussion

In all the pictures considered in this project, we can see instances where colonised subjects utilised 'mimicry' and 'hybridity' to establish themselves within the social landscape of colonial Singapore. It must be understood that the men photographed here would belong to either the class of business owners or civil service officers who had migrated to Singapore. Their dress practices would seek to reflect their status or project an elevated social identity. Most of the men are wearing a western suit, indicating a degree of acceptance of western cultural influence and western ideology. Their 'mimicry' of Western fashion demonstrates an awareness of the discursive formations governing their social identities as well as an inclination towards appropriating the colonial power structures to distinguish themselves (Tarlo, 1996, p. 54).

The self-fashioning practices of men in the given photographs must also be considered within the purview of prevailing gender and sexuality norms. Craik (1993) had commented on how the advent of the Industrial Revolution saw new norms of masculinity emerge- "In industrialising Europe, men became consumed by

employment which could secure status and power. In a conscious move, men disassociated themselves with the idleness and extravagance of aristocratic codes of dress and behaviour.” (p. 173). Spanning the 18th and 19th centuries, aristocratic style waned in popularity and aesthetics derived from country life gained more prominence. In earlier times, sumptuary laws had governed access to cloth and materials, but the advent of the Industrial Revolution made it easier to mass produce garments and increased their availability to those beyond the court (Kuchta, 2002). The widening consumer base led to changes within trending norms. Flashy and elaborate clothing, favoured by the aristocracy, was contrasted with the somber and simplistic dress of the rising bourgeoisie. Shifting power structures within European society after the French Revolution associated ‘serious’ attire with economic success and independence. In early 19th century Britain, the dandy became an icon of masculine fashion, highlighting tailoring as a key element of menswear. The focus of men's fashion shifted to the quality of the material of the garment and its tailoring rather than outward ornamentation. The business suit was deemed to be the choice dress for men, owing to its seemingly democratic nature which appealed to the middle-class. Masculine dress reflected the nature of masculinity in the Victorian era, deriving from the ideals of the self-made man who worked for a living, as opposed to aristocratic idleness, and took part in sports and physical activity (Kuchta, 2002; Shannon, 2006).

The shifting perspectives of masculinity must also be considered in conjunction with European colonisation of Asia, Africa and South America. For the colonisers, dress became an important demarcation between the ‘civilised’ Occident and the ‘savage’ Orient. Orientalist attitudes towards native clothing created the desire to differentiate European clothing from the ‘fancy costumes’ of the natives (Fotheringham, 2022). In more practical terms, most of the colonised territories were located in warm climate regions where the fanfare of European court attire was impractical and burdensome. In these circumstances, simple clothing was required that could withstand heat and still present a dominant figure. Most of the early colonisers were traders and merchants who came to later dictate sartorial discursive

formations. As this mercantile class grew in power and affluence, the dominant ideologies within British society also changed to reflect this.

The revised British dress practices were placed in contrast to traditional dress within the colonies where the latter was deemed to be ‘primitive’ or ‘effeminate’ in contrast to the former which was ‘modern’ and ‘respectable’. Emma Tarlo (1996) describes the construction of this narrative in *Clothing Matters* as -

The terms ‘effeminate’ and ‘childlike’ were frequently used by the British to describe the clothes of the Indian elite, particularly the elaborate and colourful combinations worn by the maharajahs (for an example see Steevens 1899: 121-3). Such designations were part of a more general process by which the politically dominant group tried to define the Indian male as powerless and subordinate in his own country. (Tarlo, 1996, p. 34)

The dress practices of ordinary Indian men were similarly rejected as they showcased the naked body, reveling its ‘blackness’ to the public eye. As Fotheringham (2022) expounds, the racist connotations of Indian dress as ‘uncivilized’ and ‘feminine’ were used as means of control and disenfranchisement within the orientalist paradigm. The adoption of European dress was therefore a means by which colonised populations could combat the orientalist gaze and enunciate themselves. Similar to how Kirkland (2023) describes the self-fashioning practices of young West Indian men arriving in Britain, the British male dress was a way for the colonial subject who had emerged within the power-knowledge system of British education to assert himself as a British subject. The association with ruling class went beyond surface level imitation- by wearing British garments, these subjects associated themselves with the empire and not their home country, they asserted their level of education and sociocultural status; just as the suit provided sociopolitical legitimacy to the emerging bourgeoisie, it did the same for the colonial subject. The suit was a means by which the men in the photographs of the Lee Brothers Studio enunciated their self within their social context. At the same time, they were also rooted in emerging nationalist discourses and native discursive formations that led to hybrid dress practices.

Self-fashioning, for the migrant men pictured here, would be a way to establish their position within the colonial hierarchy. Even within grayscale, it is evident that most men were following a neutral colour scheme comprising of blacks, whites and greys, in the wake of the 'Great Masculine Renunciation'. The additional condition of Orientalism pushed these men to present themselves in opposition to the stereotype of the exotically dressed native. By fashioning themselves as educated and wealthy, these individuals were enunciating their experiences beyond what colonial representation had deemed them to be (Bhabha, 2004, p. 51). For the colonial office, they were simply skilled labour and necessary migration required to maintain the economy of the Straits settlements, but through the studio photograph the colonial subjects were placing themselves within a network of domestic and professional linkages beyond what the colonisers deemed necessary. They were enunciating their existence as workers, as patriarchs and husbands and as individuals who were equipped to assimilate into the colonial legacy. This enunciation was reflected in their self-fashioning practices- most men being photographed followed the norms set by the dominant discourses of the time. They fashioned themselves into these roles in order to capture themselves playing these roles in the studio space. The studio space thus signified not only a site of enunciation for the colonised subject but also a site where the colonial subject was actively becoming himself through his mannerisms and dress practices. Instead of being fixed as the 'other', the colonised subject took active participation in constructing the 'self' within these portraits (Kirkland, 2023, p. 162).

Thus, the self-fashioning practices of men and women differed significantly within the same context even as they both sought to alter colonialist representations of themselves. The images, context and discourses explored in this, and the previous chapter allow us to understand two of the four sites of meaning-making within visual analysis. In the final chapter, I will highlight the remaining two sites through an exploration of the archive as a site of circulation as well as audience engagement.

Chapter 4: Archive and Postcolonial Memory

The archive that has been considered in this project is the website of the National Archives of Singapore which acts as the site of audience engagement as well as the site of circulation (Rose, 2023). The original negatives were donated to the National Archives by Lee Poh Yan's eldest son, Lee Hin Ming in 1994 (*The Straits Times*, 1994, p. 8). In total, over 2,500 objects were donated, being extras or uncollected orders. Many of the negatives have been published by the National Library Board in a collection titled *From the Family Album: Portraits from the Lee Brothers Studio, Singapore 1910-1925* in 1995 which acts as another site of circulation for the photographs. In this chapter, I discuss the NAS' digital collections and the institution's role as an archive within the postcolonial framework. Understanding the archive is integral to understanding the images, particularly their role in contemporary times and relevance to postcolonial scholarship. I draw from Penny Tinkler's (2013) formative work *Using Photographs in Social and Historical Research* in uncovering the relation between the photographs and the archive as well as the works of Foucault and Derrida on the archive and power structures as discussed in Manoff (2004).

The idea that the archive is a neutral, objective repository has been contested by several scholars of postmodern and postcolonial history (Stoler, 2009; Tinkler, 2013; Bastian, 2006, Blouin, Jr., 2004; Spivak, 1985; Foucault, 1972; Derrida, 1995). Rather, the archive is considered to be a construct, "shaped by social, political, and technological forces" (Manoff, 2004, p. 12). The archive is not removed from the power-knowledge structure, rather it continuously reproduces the discourses that it is embedded within. The idea of the archive as synonymous with indexical record-keeping imparts it with the authority of authentic representation, bypassing inquiry into the cultural and political norms shaping the archive (Blouin Jr, 2004) and leading to "fabrication of representations of historical reality" (Spivak, 1985, p. 271). The imperial archive of the colonial era had the purpose of creating the empire through records and objects, constructing a hegemonic knowledge structure that allowed it to exert control over its territories. The postcolonial archive, in response, reinterprets and reworks the existing information to place individual

subjects at the centre of research in order to expose the distortions and manipulations of the historical record and generate alternative historical discourses. This is characteristic of the ‘against the grain’ approach propounded by Stoler (2009) which questions the hegemonic ‘common sense’ of the colonial archive and brings forth avenues of subaltern and postcolonial intervention.

The NAS was established through the National Archives and Records Centre Act passed in 1967, two years after Singapore became an independent nation, with the purpose of preserving public records and establish the nation’s heritage (Pitt, 2009). This was part of the decolonisation project that sought to establish the authority of the newly formed state and substantiate its legitimacy by constructing a historical legacy. The archive was crucial to the development of the ‘imagined community’ of a newly born nation-state and fostered a united cultural heritage (Bastian, 2006; Bailkin, 2015). In 1993, the NAS as well as the National Museum were brought under the management of the National Heritage Board (NHB). In 2012, it was separated from the NHB and became an institution under the National Library Board (NLB) (National Archives Singapore, 2025). Curiously, the NHB is maintained under the Ministry of Culture, Community and Youth, while the NLB is an agency under the Ministry of Communication and Information which falls directly under the purview of the Prime Minister’s Office. This structural organisation provides an interesting insight into the political hierarchy and alignments within government structures.

In the context of this project, the purpose and structure of the NAS is relevant to the analysis of the photographs. While the negatives might have been donated by Lee Hin Ming as a way of preserving his familial legacy, their placement within the NAS attaches them to the process of nation-making in a postcolonial setting. The decision to preserve and conserve the Studio’s history is line with the organisation’s mission “to actively acquire records that will serve as ... [a] corporate memory of the Government and the social memory of [the] people...[and allow] current and future generations of Singaporeans to understand our different cultures, explore our common heritage and appreciate who we

are and how we became a nation.” (National Archives Singapore, 2025). The Lee Brothers Studio Archive would represent not only the technological and economic prosperity of Singapore but also integrate historical representations of its multicultural population. It would corroborate the state’s nation-making agenda and serve as a reminder of Singapore’s unique history.

The creation of such an institution is a form of postcolonial ‘mimicry’ (Bhabha, 2004) wherein the colonial obsession with record-keeping serves to instead foster decolonisation efforts within newly emerged independent states. They are tasked with preserving subaltern memory in an effort to supersede the hegemony of the colonial power-knowledge system and generate a feeling of ‘belonging’ within its citizens. They contribute to ‘collective memory’ of the nation and therefore seek to reappropriate the colonial narrative in their favour (Bailkin, 2015). Within the NAS, the Oral History Centre (OHC) is a key mechanism which preserves oral history recordings of various subaltern groups as a way of memorialising collective memory.

The NAS as a site of audience engagement and circulation must be considered both in the online as well as offline spheres. The National Archives building is located at 1 Canning Rise in Singapore, in close proximity to the civic district as well as several historical sites. Apart from housing records the NAS building also comprises of Reading Rooms, exhibition spaces and the conservation labs (NLB Singapore, 2022). These would be the primary sites where audiences would interact with the photographs physically. This audience would comprise researchers as well as people living in Singapore who are interested in photography or social history of Singapore. For such individuals, the photographs from the Lee Brothers Studio archive would be remnants of the past or objects that hold historical value. The photographs would serve as inscribed memory of a historical event.

Beginning from the 1990s, NAS began the process of digitising their records. In 2014, the Smart Nation initiative was launched to develop digital capacities within all governmental holdings as a key aspect

Singapore's future planning (Dresel et al, 2020). Under this, all paper records as well as audiovisual data was converted into microforms and uploaded onto the NAS Archives Online website in easily accessible formats. In doing so, a secondary digital archive was created. In terms of online engagement, it must be kept in mind that the NAS' online presence is not limited to its own website- it features heavily on the NLB website as well the NLB YouTube Channel. It also has its own Instagram page with about 6.9K followers. The audience that might encounter the photographs through these online networks are most likely citizens of Singapore who are interested in their national history and culture or individuals from other museum organisations. The website would cater to a larger global network of scholars and practitioners as it provides an overview of the records and their availability.

In the process of creating the digital archive, information regarding each object had to fit the designated fields within a relatively basic webpage layout, therefore there was not much room for adding details about the object- photographs, in this case - or any other observations regarding the physical condition of the object. This resulted in the omitting of context and information that is integral to archival analysis (Pecorari, 2019, pp. 21-22). The webpage for each photograph only offers a short caption included with the images here, indexical and record keeping information and a tentative time period. This severely restricts the degree of archival analysis that could be carried out for the photographs. In order to augment this lack of information, speculative methodology was utilised in this project.

Penny Tinkler (2013) provides the methodology to implement informed speculation in this project. In the previous two chapters, inferences were made regarding the clothing of the photographed subjects based on the available contextual information as well as observable details. These inferences were then corroborated against secondary sources. A key aspect of informed speculation for online sources is the presentation and contextualisation of the source within the online space- this incited a discussion of the digital archive and the National Archives Online website. Kim and Mida (2015) utilise this method to speculate the interplay of gender, class and social identity within extant garments. In my project, the

speculative method allows me to draw connections between scattered scholarship within multiple fields to provide a postcolonial overview of the dress practices of Indian migrant women in early 20th century Singapore.

Conclusion

My research was aimed at understanding the self-fashioning practices of Indian migrants to Singapore in the early 20th century and exploring the photographic studio as a site of enunciation of postcolonial identity. Utilising Rose's (2023) framework of visual analysis, the project aimed to investigate how various modalities affected the photographic practices of the Lee Brothers Studio and how the photographed individuals fashioned themselves within these images. In order to supplement the visual analysis framework, archival research methods and informed speculation were applied in combination with discourse analysis. I considered the images from a postcolonial lens of enquiry, highlighting the notions of 'hybridity' and 'mimicry' within the photographs and discussing the role of the colonialist lens in shaping the discourse around representation in early 20th century photography in Singapore.

Key literature informing my research drew from the fields of fashion studies, postcolonial studies and migration studies. The third chapter discusses the site of production (Rose, 2023) and the historical and technological factors that shaped the photographs. Understanding the history of Indian migration to Singapore and the context in which the Lee Brothers Studio operated allow for a more holistic understanding of the photographs. It also provides the foundation for the proceeding chapters which discussed the self-fashioning of women and men in the photographs. In terms of women's self-fashioning, I highlighted how the women were responding to not only the orientalist narrative but also the Nationalist paradigm that was gaining traction. By performing a hybridised 'self' that partially mimicked English dress but was still within the realm of societal expectations, Indian women could enact a degree of sartorial agency in the 'Third Space' thus created (Bhabha, 2004). Men, as discussed in the following chapter, responded to the prevailing discourses differently, choosing to adopt Western dress practices and attitudes. Within the studio photographs, these individuals were enunciating their experiences beyond what colonial representation had deemed them to be and were placing themselves within a network of domestic and professional linkages. They were enunciating their existence as workers, as patriarchs and husbands and

as individuals who were equipped to assimilate into the colonial legacy. The next chapter discussed the NAS from a postcolonial lens, how it not only represents the multicultural history of Singapore but also corroborates the state's nation-making agenda. Alongside archival methods, the speculative methodology was used to draw connections between scattered scholarship within multiple fields to provide a postcolonial overview of the dress practices of Indian migrants in early 20th century Singapore.

My research demonstrates that the self-fashioning practices of middle- and upper-class Indian migrants to Singapore within the photographs taken at the Lee Brothers Studio can be considered as a site of postcolonial 'enunciation'. The dress practices of the migrants are situated within the notions of 'mimicry' and 'hybridity' as expounded by Bhabha (2004), wherein they appropriate the dress of the colonial rulers as a means of asserting their agency within the colonial paradigm. The varied dress of the photographed individuals reflects their social aspirations and identification with prevailing discourses. The studio becomes a site of enunciation itself as colonial subjects perform Victorian norms of studio photography as a way of displacing the Orientalist lens that represented them as 'savage'. In the photographs, we can see how the subjects aim to present themselves in alignment with Western 'modern' sensibilities. At the same time, they want to retain traces of their native culture and regions. These individuals present a hybrid 'self' that draws upon two contrasting ideals. Through the act of partial mimicry, they reappropriate Western dress to perform an aspirational 'self'. It must be kept in mind that the photographs discussed in this project majorly feature middle- or upper-class individuals. Their self-fashioning reflects not only their current class but is also indicative of their aspirational social status. Moreover, they do not necessarily reflect what these individuals would be wearing in their daily lives- rather their self-fashioning within these photographs would showcase the 'self' that they wished to fix within photographic memory.

By producing an alternative emancipatory history of the colonised subject, this research contributes to postcolonial scholarship within fashion studies and integrates dress practices within the narratives of nation-building and migration. It highlights the crucial role that photography plays in the construction of

historical realities and how archival objects can contain multiple truths despite their seemingly indexical nature. Finally, it seeks to generate discussion about the historical processes that shaped dress practices in South and Southeast Asia in the early 20th century, balancing the colonial past with the postcolonial present.

A significant limitation of the analysis presented in this project is that all the research was conducted online. I could not travel to Singapore owing to time and financial constraints and thus did not get to interact with the photographs in person, an important step within archival object analysis. I emailed the NAS to find out more information about the photographs, and while the team did their best to help, most of the resources they mentioned could only be accessed in person. The photographs that I did access were not the best quality and therefore it is likely that some details have been missed. Moreover, the NAS website designates a wide range of dates to the photographs, spanning across decades in some cases, this makes it difficult to accurately classify the time period which is important for dating the dress practices of the subjects. There is also very little information available on who the photographed subjects were, their names and position within society can only be inferred.

It must be considered that the photographs available in the archive are mostly negatives that were not collected from the studio or had multiple copies and are therefore representative of a very small subset of studio portraits of Indian migrants that might have been taken at the Lee Brothers Studio. This project considers only one studio in Singapore as the focal point of research. Other studios operating within the same paradigm might have produced different results. Additionally, there was a lack of historical sources within fashion studies that dealt with this time period in Singapore and mentioned Indian migrants. Most academic as well as published sources that I detail were aimed at either the Chinese, Malay or British populations. Therefore, I had to rely on dress histories based in India and Britain to speculate the dress practices of the migrants.

In the future, it might be interesting to explore how daily self-fashioning practices of this class of Indian migrants might differ from those of working-class migrants or other migrant groups in Singapore. It would also be interesting to compare the self-fashioning practices of migrants over a longer period of time or trace changes through a single family or kinship group. Similar studies can be undertaken for other migrant groups within the colonial paradigm.

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