

WOMEN AND MIGRATION(S) II



EDITED BY KALIA BROOKS, CHERYL
FINLEY, ELLYN TOSCANO AND
DEBORAH WILLIS



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30. Undisciplined Pleasures, Vigilant Defiance 1.0 and 2.0 A.K.A. WMD

Women of Massive Delight | Our Own
Sister F%o#/-ing Pantheon¹

Sarah Khurshid Khan

To study the erasure of concepts or ideas is a difficult task, especially when it happens gradually and when the erased concepts are replaced by some hegemonic or majoritarian truth.

Manan Ahmed Asif, *The Loss of Hindustan: The Invention of India*

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Thank you, Mona Eltahawy. “My name is Mona Eltahawy, and this is my declaration of faith: f-- the patriarchy.” “In other words, it is imperative to understand how civility, decorum, manners, and the like are used to uphold authority—patriarchy, whiteness, other forms of privilege—and that we are urged to acquiesce as a form of maintaining that authority. Whether we are urged to be civil to racists or polite to patriarchy, the goal is the same: to maintain the power of the racist, to maintain the power of patriarchy.” <https://lithub.com/mona-eltahawy-civility-will-not-overturn-the-patriarchy/>.

The Indian Ocean World

Vast is the Indian Ocean World. The polyethnic peoples and cultures crisscrossed the waters and engaged in dynamic exchanges around language, foodways and much more, long before the hegemony of European colonization. I have an affinity for what I imagine was a cosmopolitan time period.² Perhaps that is why—as a US citizen with what I call ‘sub-condimental’³ ancestry—I find more common ground with Ethiopian foodways than North American, for example. The culinary palette is more similar and comforting to me. In a home where my parents and extended family spoke Urdu, Punjabi, and English, why would I not be familiar with words uttered in Malay or Swahili or Arabic? Raised in a house filled with 1960–70s sub-condimental music, why would not the lilt and longing of Sufi songs and poetry invite my mind and heart to hum? And, as an immigrant and child of immigrants, why would I not find inspiration from Black and brown folk who fight for social justice, everywhere?

The Book of Delights

For all this and more, the sixteenth-century Central Indian illustrated manuscript, *The Book of Delights*,⁴ sparked my recent bodies of prints.⁵ It

2 J. C. Hawley (ed.), *India in Africa, Africa in India: Indian Ocean Cosmopolitanisms* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2008), p. 7.

3 Excerpt from Rushdie, S. *The Moor's Last Sigh* (London: Vintage, 1996). Bold added for emphasis: “I repeat: the pepper, if you please; for if it had not been for peppercorns, then what is ending now in East and West might never have begun. Pepper it was that brought Vasco da Gama’s tall ships across the ocean, from Lisbon’s Tower of Belem to the Malabar Coast: first to Calicut and later, for its lagoony harbour, to Cochin. English and French sailed in the wake of that first-arrived Portugee, so that in the period called Discovery-of-India-but how could we be discovered when we were not covered before?—we were ‘**not so much sub-continent as sub-condiment**’, as my distinguished mother had it.”

4 Norah M. Titley, *The Ni'matnāma Manuscript of the Sultans of Mandu: The Sultan's Book of Delights* (London: Taylor & Francis, 2005).

5 My solo show of twenty-two prints, “Undisciplined Pleasures, Vigilant Defiance 1.0”, was at Twelve Gates Arts in Philadelphia, PA from March to September 2020; Part of a group show, “What We Become When We Are Unbound”, includes twenty-one prints entitled “Undisciplined Pleasures, Vigilant Defiance 2.0: WMD: Women of Massive Delight | Our Own Sister-F-%#!-ing Pantheon” at The Project for Empty Space, Feminist Incubator Residency, Newark, New Jersey from February to April

is on the dismantling and reassembling of *The Book of Delights*, with an emphasis on the array of ethnicities, foodways, and plants represented that I expand. The acts allow a death of one form and the rebirth, not only of seriously playful characters, but also of the self and unimagined possibilities for others too. By recreating the past, I assure futures.⁶

The cookbook is written in Persian and Urdu, and illustrated in the Sultanate miniature painting tradition.⁷ In the manuscript—also known as the *Ni'matnāma*—African, Arab, Turkic, and Central Asian women dutifully serve and surround the *bon-viveur* patriarch Ghiyath Shah of Malwa. The Sultan commissioned the cookbook in Shadiabad, when he retired to his City of Joy, 1469–1500 CE. Largely intact,⁸ it includes detailed cookware, flora, and pastel-vibrant illustrations that surround the Sultan. Demure and dutiful polyethnic attendants, frozen in half or three-quarter profiles, prepare spice-laden foods, medicinals, attars and aphrodisiacs with skill. At the behest of the Sultan, the women also hunt, fish, and engage in animated culinary, philosophical and religious debates.⁹

2021; Forthcoming, April 2021, is “Undisciplined Pleasures, Vigilant Defiance 1.0 Catalogue, Twelve Gates Arts Publishing with Essays by Anna Arabindan-Kesson, Namita Gupta Wiggers, Krishnendu Ray, David Wolfe, and Sean Parrott-Wolfe”.

- 6 Many years ago, I learned of the work of Shazia Sikander. She continues to inspire. In a 2017 interview with fellow collaborators on her *Disruption as Rupture* multimedia project, she talked of learning from older manuscripts that “they hint at this world that is on the borders, in the corners [...] a microcosm of multiple periods and times.” She continues to talk about “how to pull it [the manuscript] apart, how to make it speak to the world [...] and in the dismantling, when you reassemble, you learn.” The conversation took place at Asia Society’s Lahore Literary Festival in New York and was moderated by Asia Society Director of Global Performing Arts and Cultural Initiatives Rachel Cooper. <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=QKIWpyob5q4>.
- 7 Norah M. Titley, *The Ni'matnāma Manuscript of the Sultans of Mandu: The Sultan's Book of Delights* (London: Taylor & Francis, 2005); Simon Digby, “The Literary Evidence for Painting in the Delhi Sultanate”, *Bulletin of the American Academy of Benares* (Varanasi) 1 (1967), 47–58; Robert Skelton, “The *Ni'mat nama*: A Landmark in Malwa Painting”, *Marg* 12/ 3 (June 1959), 44–50.
- 8 Oriental and Indian Office Collections of the British Library, <https://blogs.bl.uk/asian-and-african/2016/11/nasir-shahs-book-of-delights.html>.
- 9 R. Sharma, “Thinker, tailor, soldier, spy: The extraordinary women of Ghiyas-ud-din Khalji’s harem”, *Scroll*, 22 March 2017, <https://scroll.in/magazine/831419/thinker-tailor-soldier-spy-the-extraordinary-women-of-ghiyas-ud-din-khaljis-harem>.

Rejoice in the Pleasures of Defiance

And yet, the illustrated cookbook demanded a recasting and a new playful, visual and critical fabulation.¹⁰ Art historians study the Sultanate painting style; food historians concentrate on recipes of rich savories, medicinal remedies, perfumes, and hunting practices; and historians concentrate on the Sultan. Slight notice centers on those in the background, who harvested, hunted, prepared, cooked, and served in infinite ways. Originally painted with a range of skin colors, the images portray the women who worked, created, served, and most likely serviced the Shah. Little research explores the ordinary African, Arab, Turkic, and Central Asian women's lives depicted.¹¹ Yet from where, in that vast Central Indian and Indian Ocean World, did the disregarded come? What were their nuanced narratives? Did they consider the work a delight? Did they define the city as joyous? If the polyethnic world of the *zenāna*/harem prospered unfettered, with the Sultan cancelled, what might these un-imagined lives and worlds dream into?

Undisciplined Pleasures, Vigilant Defiance 1.0

I deleted the Sultan in *Undisciplined*¹² *Pleasures, Vigilant*¹³ *Defiance 1.0* to dismantle erasures. In a liberated *zenāna*/harem zone, I visualized

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- 10 I employ a visual critical fabulation to interpret and imagine the world of the Ni'matnāma's *zenāna*/harem. Thanks to the work of Saidiya Hartman, "Venus in Two Acts", *Small Axe* 12/2 (2008), 1–14.
 - 11 Scholarship on South Asian female historical figures based on primary sources exists. For a few recent works in English see: Rukhsana Iftikhar, *Indian Feminism: Class, Gender & Identity in Medieval Ages* (Chennai: Notion Press, 2016); Ira Mukhoty, *Heroines: Powerful Indian Women of Myth and History* (New Delhi: Aleph Book Company, 2017); Ira Mukhoty, *Daughters of the Sun: Empresses, Queens, and Begums of the Mughal Empire* (New Delhi: Aleph Book Company, 2018).
 - 12 Another influence on the work is that of Christina Sharpe, *In the Wake: On Blackness and Being* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2016). She talks about the need to be undisciplined: "We must become undisciplined. The work we do requires new modes and methods of research and teaching; new ways of entering and leaving the archives of slavery, of undoing the "racial calculus and [...]. political arithmetic that were entrenched centuries ago" (Hartman 2008, 6) "and that live into the present." (Ibid., p. 13).
 - 13 Sharpe continues with her reasons to remain vigilant. "It is work: hard emotional, physical, and intellectual work that demands vigilant attendance to the needs of the dying, to ease their way, and also to the needs of the living." Ibid., p. 10.

and crafted rose-, orange-blossom, and spice-infused realms derived from the larger Indian Ocean World (see Figure 1). In a variable series of prints¹⁴ and portraits,¹⁵ fifteen former attendants transform and meet across time and space. They participate in undisciplined pleasures. With three quarters of the print framed, the east-facing side remains open, so that they may depart and return freely at any time. All the while, the pleasure-seekers are enfolded within the warmth and comfort of simmering ovens (Figure 2). Their desires ignite and sustain through quotidian intimate gestures, ingestion of local indigenous foods, and preparations of traditional medicines. Mainly blue and white Jingdezhen vessels cradle the potions, remedies, and meals arranged in a courtly, aroma-infused, environment. An additional three historical female figures from the Indian Ocean's East African, Arab, and South Asian worlds—Queen Bilqis, Razia Sultan, and Freedom Fighter Abebach emerge (Figure 3). Bilqis hails from the ancient Ethiopia and Yemen areas, claimed by both Razia, a Sultanate period ruler who, though maligned and undermined by her elite Turkic community, was beloved by her local Delhi public, and freedom fighter Abebach, who rallied her Ethiopian sisters to fight fascism in the 1930s. Each woman is associated with two patterns and two colors inspired by *The Book of Delights*, Indian Ocean World cultures, and a range of painting traditions. And, when called to arms, the women brandish an assortment of weapons,¹⁶ alight on their steeds, and defy any and all forms of injustice (Figures 4 and 5).

14 Five printed editions on traditional handmade Wasli paper ~33(h) x 24(w) with deckled edges intact with the etching ink infused with multiple essential spice oils and extracts.

15 The Portraits of Pleasure editions comprising 1–6 (8.5x11”) and 7–9 (11x14”) include five prints and are printed on Khan's handmade paper made of any combination of cotton, abaca, hemp and flax. Some of the handmade papers are infused with ground spices, and/or essential oils, which are all represented in *The Book of Delights*; Editions 10–12 include three prints and are printed on Wasli paper (15 x 21 in) with deckled edges intact.

16 Weapons identified from other miniature paintings across different periods include Jehangir's bows and arrows, used to eliminate his accomplished Siddi rival Malik Ambar, and Malik Ambar's son, Fath Khan's swords and knives, stylized waves from Noah's Ark from Ottoman miniatures, a metal military headdress from the Deccan period, and a German Luger from the 1930s.

Figs 1–5. Printed on traditional handmade Wasli paper ~33(h) x 24(w) with deckled edges intact. We printed on an etching press and infused the etching ink with multiple essential oils and extracts.



Fig. 1 *In the Wake of the Indian Ocean World before European Colonization*. Sailboats, filled with all manners of people from the East African coast, Arabian Peninsula, Indus Valley, and the western coasts of South Asia, traversed the Indian Ocean long before European colonization and the introduction of chattel slavery. Skilled African seafarers, in their wooden dhows with lateen sails, steered the coasts and open oceans buoyed by the powerful seasonal Monsoon winds. Arabs, such as al-Idrisi the map maker, long plotted and charted the world; and Ibn Majid, from a family of navigators, developed sophisticated astrolabes to traverse the seas. The Indian Ocean World offered a rich cosmopolitanism, with older and different hegemonies and hierarchies.



Fig. 2 *Undisciplined Pleasures: Vigilant Caring, Conversing, Listening, Flirting, Loving I (Rose)*. Women reclaim the harem from the Sultan. Much is forbidden (*harām*) the *zenāna*/harem. No longer, in the recouped City of Joy. Delicacies simmer on ovens and frame the women-identified couples. Alchemy rules in the midst of pots abundant with all things food and medicine. The duos dedicate themselves to the elegant principles of undisciplined pleasures. They reaffirm what it means to care, converse, listen, and flirt without fear and with infinite love. The couples Uzza and Marjane, Nuha and Manat, Fatima and Gudot transform and are transformed, so love overrules.

Undisciplined Pleasures: Vigilant Caring, Conversing, Listening, Flirting, Loving II (Orange Blossom). The City of Joy endures as a dwelling of contentment. Duos Zulekha and Amrita, Hatshepsut and Maaza, Tsigereda and Lat strengthen their bonds in deep play. Frankincense and myrrh waft through their reclaimed City of Joy, time stretches, and pleasures persist.



Fig. 3 *Undisciplined Pleasures: Queen Bilqis of Ethiopia and Yemen* (Frankincense). Within the harem, Queen Bilqis, descended from East Africans and Arabs, receives a medicated massage. Tashu, the medicinal healer, is versed in their East African traditions and the local curative traditions of Unani, Siddha, and Ayurveda. Laden with therapeutic extracts from the natural world, the paste soothes. Restorative emollients seep into tired feet. In deep rest and play, Bilqis reignites her powers.

Undisciplined Pleasures: Razia Sultan of the Delhi Sultanate (Black Pepper, cinnamon, clove). Razia Sultan and her adept cook, Khadija, relish in locally foraged foods. Laced with the salutary properties of black pepper, clove, and cinnamon, each dish enlivens their palates. Enconced in Jingdezhen's blue and white porcelain, the sweet, savory, bitter, pungent, salty and sour offerings dazzle their gustatory sensibilities and heighten the senses, body and soul.

Undisciplined Pleasures: Ethiopian Freedom Fighter Abebach (Myrrh). Fighter Abebach receives advice from her skilled hunting and forest guide, Fere Alem, who visits from the African island of Janjira, located near the coast of Bombay. Fere Alem, versed in the ways of people and plants, reminds Abebach that the cooks and healers—already exploited by chefs and scientists who appropriate and profit from their deep knowledge—are threatened with the loss of large swathes of biocultural diversity. The nobility rip off the commons that locals managed for millennia. Attentive to experts who base data on vernacular knowledge systems and other scientific systems, Abebach listens and learns.



Fig. 4 *Vigilant Defiance: To Arms Queen Bilqis* (Frankincense). Queen Bilqis hears that the Ethiopian maid-servant stabbed a Deccani Sultan to death in self-defense. Despite numerous documented atrocities, the highbrow privileged male powers gaslight those who accuse this particular sultan of homicidal, maniacal ways. Bilqis leaves the security and confines of the women-run and operated *zenāna*/harem in her City of Joy. She mounts her horse, equipped with her superior spear, to join in the maid-servant's defense to fight against the elitist nobility, for she knows the machinations of misogynist men. Sisters join her...

Vigilant Defiance: To Arms Razia Sultan (Black Pepper, cinnamon, clove). Alerted to the fact that her Abyssinian brethren, who rule in the western regions of Bengal, continue to endure injustices, Razia Sultan, descended from enslaved Turks herself, alights on her steed. She exercises her power openly. Sword in hand and spear tucked under her arm, Razia will transport the former rulers to the safety of the Malwa, Gujrat and Deccan regions, where a cosmopolitan world awaits them. Sisters join her...

Vigilant Defiance: To Arms Freedom Fighter Abebach (Myrrh). Ethiopian freedom fighter Abebach, armed with her German Luger pistol, perches upon her swift Persian stallion. She heeds the call of the midwives and herbalists, at the edges of their forests, to help them fight against trespassers on their sacred domains, and the cruel enemies of climate science reason. Her adversaries are the ignorant who deny the effects of climate derangement on her seed-saving forest dwellers' lands. Sisters join her...



Fig. 5 *To Arms*: #Borderless #Unframed #IndianOceanWorld #ByAnyMeansNecessary #ForUsByUsAboutUs #Female_Identifier #MoreWillJoin (Rose, black pepper, cinnamon, clove, frankincense, myrrh, orange blossom). Raging into beauty Bilqis, Razia, and Abebach revel in undisciplined pleasures and defy injustices. United across time and space, bathed in a golden light, the threesome soar on their stallions, unlinking themselves with grit and glee beyond the patterns of patriarchy. More will join...

Undisciplined Pleasures, Vigilant Defiance 2.0 WMD: Women of Massive Delight | My/Our Own Sister F%#/-ing Pantheon

In *Undisciplined Pleasures, Vigilant Defiance 2.0*, the polyethnic world of the *zenāna*/harem continues to prosper, unfettered, as part of a group show entitled “What We Become When We are Unbound” (Figure 6). Thawed from their frozen stances, the eighteen, now, fully frontal femmes armed with WMD¹⁷—rolling pins, knives, swords, a German Luger, rulers, spoons, spears, wine glasses, fire and blow torches—arise, patterned and bejeweled. Conjured from the waves in the ocean, the primordial expanse and the galactic star formations, they emerge unbound with the right to narrate their own stories. They array into an untethered ancient talismanic formation and in some instances

17 In Series 2.0 their weapons of choice expand. WMD may mean Women of Massive Delight or Weapons of Mass Destruction or Women of Massive Destruction. Go ahead, play with the WMD possibilities, and send me your ideas.

surrounded with a geometric pattern and/or a recurring map of the world from the twelfth century.¹⁸ Able, limber, and free from service to the Sultan, they materialize from the fertile firmament. Adorned with words, patterns and shapes that confer magical blessings, they rejoice in radically boundless ways. Invoked into the past, their bright futures are guaranteed to sparkle.



Fig. 6 Twenty-one prints, *Undisciplined Pleasures, Vigilant Defiance 2.0* exhibited in an elliptical pattern for group show “What We Become When We Are Unbound.”
Uzza/ العزى, Marjane/ مرجان, Manat/ مناة, Nuha/ نهى, Fatima/ فاطمة, Guditi/ ጉዲት,

Amrita/ अमृता, Zulekha/ زليخا, Hatshepsut/ حتشبسوت, Maza/ مزه, Lat/ اللات, Tsigerada/ ጽጌራዳ, Tashu/ ተሻ, Khadija/ خديجة, Fere Alem/ ቍሪ ዓለም, Bilqis/ بلقيس, Razia/ رضية, Abebach/ አበበች, Queen Bilqis, Razia Sultan, Freedom Fighter Abebach.



Languages of the Indian Ocean World and The Power to Name

All femmes materialize with a mere smattering of some of the many Indian Ocean World names like Uzza, Marjane, Tashu, Fatima, Tsigerada, Guditi, and Bilqis. Their names, uttered and written in pre-European colonization languages such as Urdu, Persian, Arabic, Malay, Hindi, Sinhala, Amharic, and Swahili, behold a depth and power. All

¹⁸ A hexagram, a talisman, also known as Solomon’s seal in Jewish and Islamic traditions. Al-Idrisi was a noted Arab map maker. He created a map of the world in 1152. This map reoccurs in my works.

the names and spice aromas emanate and originate from the lands associated with the Indian Ocean Worlds. The indigenous reclaim their reality. Via magic and play, pre-colonial languages return, in sound and form, to their rightful owners. The scents of the earth after the monsoon rains—rose, frankincense, black pepper, cinnamon, clove, orange blossom and myrrh—reignite the senses. Memory fills the future. An erased archive materializes, and the past is recouped.¹⁹ Cradled and cared for in the expanse, representing a myriad of nuanced histories, they appear from the annals of the omitted to occupy immense space, yesterday and tomorrow,²⁰ to chart their own stories. They shine and shimmer, whether you understand them or not.

19 Manan Ahmed Asif, *The Loss of Hindustan: The Invention of India* (Cambridge, MA and London: Harvard University Press, 2020). "Colonization refuses the colonized access to their own past. By imposing a colonial language, it retards the capacity of indigenous languages to represent reality. It claims that the language of the colonized lack 'technical' or 'scientific' vocabulary. It removes the archives, renders history as lack, blurs faces and names. Thus, the colonized face a diminished capacity to represent their past in categories other than those given to them in a European language, or provided to them in an imperial archive. This rupture, brought about by the colonial episteme, erases the fuller memory or awareness of the precolonial. Now, a 'translated' term for an indigenous concept is deemed sufficient to stand in for it by an academy more inclined to maintain citational coherence than the truth of history. The discipline of history, itself a colonizing tool, is resistant to the demands of the colonized." (p. 4).

20 کال kal, in Urdu and Hindi, means 'yesterday and tomorrow'. Notions of time, though linear, adhere to different rules. See Fatima Ashgar's poem, "Kal", <https://poets.org/poem/kal>:

"Allah, you gave us a language
where yesterday & tomorrow
are the same word. Kal. ..."