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On Motherhood, Love & Loss – In Conversation with Artists Shivy & Tori



Words & interview by Naomi Joshi

I had the pleasure of being in conversation with two female, South Asian artists who collaborated on the project titled 'Mother', centred around motherhood -

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Shivy Galtere, a London-born painter based in LA, and Tori Mumtaz, a photographer based in NYC.

Shivy lost her mother in 2018 and has recently become a new mother herself. These photographs pay homage to the physical and emotional ties that bond her to her mother and child. The series is divided into two looks. In the first one, the creators used white fabric to symbolise the purity of new life and Shivy's new status as a mother, but also to adhere to the South Asian tradition of wearing white in grief, to free the deceased from the material world. It is symbolic of duality; light and dark, death and rebirth. As a new mother, Shivy has now become a knot herself, on the rope of her ancestry. In the second one, the brown dupatta was Shivy's mothers and is a reflection of her loss. She wears this as she holds positions and space for grief through yoga movement (child's pose), as well as poses of prayer (kneeling).

Both Shivy and Tori are Punjabi women, but come from different religious backgrounds. The prayer pose particularly pays homage to both their Sikh and Islamic lineage and their own mothers. In all the imagery, Shivy's nude body acts as a blank canvas, allowing the fabric to tell the story. The changes her body has seen postpartum were integral to not shy away from, especially as a woman who explores the themes of body positivity in her work.

Take a plunge into the lives of these two immensely talented and intentional artists, as they share their intimate thoughts and experiences.

I want to talk about motherhood and whether or not you believe that it's inherently linked to loss and forms of grief. I don't only mean the grief of losing your own mother whilst raising your child, but also this idea of all the things you have to sacrifice when you become a mother.

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SG: "I feel this so much. I still find not having my mum around very difficult. Anyone that has lost someone will tell you that grief never goes away. It's something that you carry. You just learn to live with it. What I've found was that after becoming a mother myself, I had a new wave of grief which emerged from nowhere, grieving my mother all over again. When you give birth, there is so much that goes on in your body - spiritually, emotionally, mentally, physically speaking. And the one person I really just missed and needed was my own mother. I had so many great women around me, willing to support me, but it just didn't make up for not having my mum around. There was something just missing in my heart, it was such a visceral experience. She is the missing piece of the jigsaw puzzle, within my motherhood journey. I love my me-time. Since I've had my son, I don't have that - your time is for your children. There's a loss of your old self, so there is a grieving process involved with that. You're a mother for the rest of your life. And I don't think we talk about that enough - it's both a sad thing and also the most beautiful thing"

TM: "One of my biggest fears around motherhood has always been the loss of my identity or personhood. It's been interesting to explore that sense of pre-emptive grief. When you have a child, it's a reminder of your own mortality. They will outlive you, if everything goes to plan. You're acknowledging the fact that you're not going to live as long as them, that you won't be with them for their entire lives. So I feel that it's a very brave choice to have children. You need a lot of optimism. I wanted to explore that bravery and that strength of facing your own legacy, your own mortality, through choosing to be a mother and also choosing to maintain your identity as an individual and as an artist in the way that Shivy is doing".

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Tell me about the two different looks you shot.

SG: "Initially, I had discussed wanting to use a white fabric over my body to tell a story with the symbolic references of colour and using my body as the canvas. Tori had the idea to knot the white fabric".

TM: "When you become a mother you sort of become a knot in this string of history. You become part of something greater than yourself, which is something that I've been thinking about a lot as someone who has always been unsure of whether or not I want to become a mother. You become part of a legacy that includes your grandmothers and great-grandmothers and so on".

SG: For the second look, I brought my mum's chunni with me, which is the brown fabric, and my natural instinct was to cover my hair. There was this sense of 'this is what my mom did' which we wanted to imitate".

TM: " When Shivy put the scarf over her head, it reminded me of my mother too - that's where the prayer pose came from. I often see my mother doing her prayers with her scarf over her head by our living room sofa. Our final shot is the grief pose, taken from one of Shivy's paintings. The different film stocks I used were selected to complement the vision. The white represents new life, specifically new birth, and taking on the mantle of motherhood. With the red, I wanted something darker. It was meant to have a bit of a haunting look, which is why I underexposed the images. They're a bit dark and very grainy. They are also meant to invoke

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archival photographs - if you've ever looked at materials from the Partition, our grandparents' generation always had these very dusty images. Red is such a visceral, emotional colour and it's also very ubiquitous within our culture - like how you wear red on your wedding day. I wanted to capture the anger, the grief, the unfairness of losing your mother".



Studies of grief, 30" x 48", 2021 by Shivy

Talk to me about hair - I noticed this most in the photo of Shivy holding her braid - and whether or not this played a role in the creative process behind this series.

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TM: "Hair is a motif that I've revisited throughout my work a lot. Intuitively, it's really closely tied with traditional gendered expressions of femininity. There are different ways that you can style your hair that are culturally relevant - like wearing a hijab, which has a more religious or philosophical affiliation. Across cultures, doing your hair is a very tactile form of care between mothers and their daughters. Whether it's braiding your daughter's hair, or oiling her hair, it's an experience that so many of us can relate to. My mother would braid my hair, she'd rub oil into it. My mother also covers her hair because of her religious beliefs; I don't, so we express our femininity in slightly different ways. Whatever you do with your hair, you're kind of always making a statement about who you are".

SG: "Similarly, my mum would always oil and braid my hair. It was a ritual that was quite healing - a daughter being cared for by her mother. My mother's touch is different to anyone else's. Even recently, losing so much of my hair postpartum as a result of pregnancy, somebody gave me advice from an Ayurvedic perspective; "you should have your hair oiled, get your mother to massage your scalp". All I could think is, 'I can't do that'. So it became another way I felt the loss of my mother. I think that's why hair is an essential theme in this series".

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What do you hope people will take away from this series when engaging with it?

TM: "As Muslim women, the topics we explore here are not ones that we're usually able to openly and freely discuss. We can't talk about our bodies, our nakedness, our childbearing, our mothering. So many people speak for us, but we need to be able to speak for ourselves. I would like for my fellow Muslim and South Asian women to be able to see themselves in this work, and to process these complex emotions with us".

SG: "I think to me, this is the most intimate project I've worked on, so I hope that vulnerability and honesty comes across. But as an artist, I've done my job with what I want to convey and now, part of the joy is how people interpret it. I love

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understanding and witnessing how art takes someone to a whole new place that's personal to them and what new meanings they may draw from it".

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