MIGRITUDE SCRIPT FOR 2006 PREMIERE

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FIRST HALF

Piece 1: How Ambi Became Paisley

It began as a teardrop in Babylon. Where the sunlight came from Astarte, shameless goddess of the fecund feminine. The boteh. Stylized rendition of the date palm shoot, tree of life, fertility symbol. It danced through Celtic art, until the heavy feet of Roman legionaries tramped over the Alps. Then it fled the rage of Mars and Jupiter, dove underground as Empire rose.

Some historians claim it travelled to Mughal courts from Victorian England, as the foliaged shape of the herbal. Evolved into a cone, then a tadpole. But a legend in Kashmir calls it the footprint of the goddess Parvati, as she ran through the Himalayas at the dawn of time.

Ambi. Form of a mango. Fruit that ripens and rots in the dreams of all South-to-North immigrants. A shape like a peacock feather. Half a heart, sliced on a smooth s-shaped curve. Something that would feel good in the hand, round to the palm like a solid breast, narrow to a sharp point to test the pad of the finger. Image a child could draw, single stroke, free form, and still produce something elegant.

Have you ever sliced a heart on a curve? Which piece would you keep?

There was a craft of weavers. Makers of mosuleen, named after its city of origin, Mosul, in Iraq. A fabric so fine, you could fit a 30 yard length of it into a matchbox. Egyptian pharaohs used it to wrap mummies. Imperial Rome imported it for women of nobility to drape seductively around their bodies. Two Indian cities rose to glory and fame on the waves of mosuleen: Masulipatnam in South India. Dhaka, in Bengal.

There was a force called capitalism. Armed with a switchblade, designed to slice the heart out of craft. Separate - makers from fruits of labor. Snatch the mangoes out of their hands; turn them into a distant dream. In 1813, Dhaka mosuleen sold at 75% profit on the London market, yet was still cheaper than the local British fabric. The British weighed it down with 80% duty. But that wasn’t enough. They needed to force India to buy British cloth. So down the alleyways of Dhaka
stamped the legionaries – British, this time, not Roman. Hunted out the terrified weavers, chopped off their index fingers and thumbs.

How many ways can you clone an empire? Dice a people, digit by digit?

In 1846, Britain annexed the vale of Kashmir, fabled paradise of beauty, and sold it to Maharaj Gulab Singh of Jammu for 1 million pounds.

How do you price a country? How do you value its mountains and lakes, the scent of its trees, the colors of its sunrise? What’s the markup on the shapes of fruit in the dreams of its people?

Article 10 from the Treaty of Amritsar, 1846: Maharaj Gulab Singh acknowledges the supremacy of the British Govt and will in token of such supremacy present annually to the British Govt: One horse. Twelve shawl goats of approved breed (6 male and six female). Three pairs of Cashmere shawls.

Kashmiri shawls. Woven on handlooms, patterned with ambi, rich and soft and intricate as mist over Kashmir’s terrace gardens. First taken to Britain by bandits – also known as ‘merchants’ - of the British East India Company, they wove their way through the dreams of Victorian wives, like the footprint of a goddess no one dared imagine.

Has your skin ever craved a texture you could not name? Have you ever held strange cloth to your cheek, and felt your heart – thud?

There was a village Scotland. Paisley. Tiny town of weavers who became known as radical labor agitators. Weaving offers too much time for dangerous talk. Weavers of Paisley learned how to turn out imitation ambi, on imitation Kashmiri shawls, and got to keep their index fingers and thumbs.

Until Kashmiri became cashmere. Mosuleen became muslin. Ambi became paisley. And even later in history, chai became a beverage invented in California.
How many ways can you splice a history? Price a country? Dice a people? Slice a heart? Entice – what’s been erased - back into story? *Migritude*
**Piece 2: Idi Amin**

In 1972, Idi Amin, military dictator of Uganda, expelled the country’s entire Asian population. I was born and raised in Kenya, country bordering Uganda. Third-generation East African Asian.

*Rath thodi ne vesh ja ja*, the proverb I grew up on. The night is short and our garments change. Meaning: Don’t put down roots. Don’t get too comfortable. By dawn, we may be on the move, forced to reinvent ourselves in order to survive. Invest only in what we can carry: passports, education, jewellery.

*In olden days,* my mother says *they didn’t have banks, so they invested in jewellery. The women of the family carried its savings in their gold ornaments, their valuable saris. It was safest, and you see, it kept them safe. They were respected, because they wore and guarded the family’s wealth.*

I grew up on tales of the last trains coming out of Uganda. Laden with traumatized Asians, stripped of all they possessed. The grownups whispered: *They took even the wedding rings, the earrings off the women. They searched their hair*

The image that haunted my childhood: man on the Nairobi railway platform who held his toddler child and cried. Cried aloud, through a wide open mouth. Soldiers had boarded the train just outside Kampala, dragged his wife off while he watched. Too terrified for the child in his lap, the carriage of mute numb people, to resist. He cried now because there was nothing left to hold back for. Not dignity, manhood or hope.

Her jewellery did not protect her.

Secret documents, declassified in 2001, show that Britain, Israel, and the US, instigated and backed Idi Amin’s military coup to overthrow Uganda’s democratic government. What followed were 8 years of terror that devastated Uganda, left hundreds of thousands dead. British Foreign Office documents describe Idi Amin as: *A man we can do business with.*
Piece 3: The Jewellery – Mother’s Voice

In 72, when Amin threw the Asians out of Uganda, when Shailja was still walking pa-pa-pugli (quarter steps), Naree and I made the trip to England, in the winter, with all my valuable jewellery, my own trousseau, to deposit it safely in Midland Bank, for the daughters.

We carried the jewellery right inside our coats, through the customs and immigration. Thank god they didn’t stop us at the airports. At Nairobi airport, they would have just taken it. At Heathrow, they would have made us pay duty. It was so cold, you can’t imagine. We took the bus and tubes everywhere, carrying the jewellery. Their father put some in his inside pocket. I put the rest in my bag, and I carried my bag in front of me, like this, so no one could take it. We never let go for one second, until we were in the vault down inside the bank. We put it all into the safe deposit box, and wrote it all down. We checked it twice. Put the key in the envelope, the one they keep there, and they sealed it and made us sign over the seal, both of us, so no one else could open it. Then, we felt as if a weight had lifted and we could both breathe. Then their father said: “Aaah. Now let’s go and have a hot cup of tea.”

We went to a restaurant, Naree and me and my brother Vinod, and we had tea. They served it to us cold. You know the way the English put cold milk in their tea. But for once we didn’t mind. We laughed and laughed – we were so relieved. You can’t imagine how scared we were, when the trains came from Uganda, with the Asians on them crying, asking for milk for their children. They were literally thrown out with nothing.

I wrote down the details of each set. Heavy gold set, necklace, earrings, 4 bangles, ring inset with diamonds. Green set, necklace, earrings, bracelet, nathni (nose ring). In Gujarati, so the dhorias (whites) and karias (blacks) couldn’t read it. I wrote the list twice. I put one list in the safe deposit box, and kept the other one with me. I kept the list in my handbag everywhere I went in the UK, and I never put my handbag down for a second. I tried to train my daughters that way: you never let your bag out of your sight.

Mummy, don’t be so paranoid. We’re in someone’s home, no one’s going to steal your bag.
Ha! What do they know? People can be nasty and evil. My daughters have never known real hardship; they think everything can be replaced. They don’t know how to take care of things.

Every time I went to the UK – it was always my fate to make winter journeys, even though I hated traveling in the winter – I went to check on the safe deposit box. In 77, when my father was ill. I had all three children with me – can you imagine, making that journey with 3 little girls? Shruti was 9 – she stayed at home, at my parents’ house, with Sneha, who was only 3. I took Shailja everywhere with me. Each time, I took my list, in my handbag, and I checked every single item. Even if it’s a bank, you have to keep an eye on them. And I added new pieces – my mother’s pieces that came to me when she died. My sisters tried to take them all. But my brother knew my mother wanted me to have specific pieces and he kept them for me.

When we sent Shruti to the UK, I told her, first and foremost, make sure your uncle has paid the yearly fee for the safe deposit box.
**Piece 4: Mau Mau / History Lesson**

Less than 20 years before I was born, there was a genocide in my country. I knew nothing about it until 12 months ago.

This is the history I learned in school. Standard 3 – 5, Hospital Hill Primary School, Nairobi.

The first man and first woman were Gikuyu and Mumbi. They gave birth to the 9 clans of the Kikuyu. The Mugwe was the leader who parted the waters, long before Moses, and led his people to freedom. The leaders who predicted the coming of the white man and the railways – a long snake, spitting fire. Waiyaki wa Hinga, who went unarmed, to a supposedly friendly meeting with the British officer, Purkiss. He got shot! We scribbled Purkiss Pig-Face into the margins of our text book. He trusted him!!.

We sang about the Maji Maji uprising in Tanzania to the tune of Boney M’s rivers of Babylon.

*By the rivers of Rufiji / To Mahenge plateau / Hey hey we’ll win / when we drive out the Germans / Maji Maji / Sprinkle maize, millet and water / protect us from German guns / we’re fighting for independence / for our daughters and sons / Maji Maji*

Maji Maji. Where Africans went into battle, armed with spears, bows and arrows, against the German military. Believed that a magic brew of maize, millet and water would provide a bullet proof barrier. They got slaughtered.

We sang about Shaka the Zulu king to the tune of My Favourite Things.

*Shaka the Zulu he was a great leader / fought with his impis with shields of two meters / short stabbing spears his men used to fight / that’s how his army gained all of their might….*

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This is the history we didn’t learn:

From 1952 to 1960, the people of Kenya mounted a fierce guerilla struggle, the Mau Mau uprising, to reclaim their land and freedom from the British. The British forcibly detained, tortured and murdered almost 300,000 Kenyan men, women and children. 1.5 million Kenyans were detained for over 8 years, in concentration camps. Barbed wire villages where forced labor, starvation, torture, murder, were routine.

This is the history we read in school. President Jomo Kenyatta’s speech, 10 months after Kenya’s independence:

“Let this be the day on which all of us commit ourselves to erase from our minds all the hatreds and the difficulties of those years which now belong to history. Let us agree that we shall never refer to the past. Let us instead unite in all our utterances and activities; in concern for the reconstruction of our country and the vitality of Kenya’s future.”

This is the history we didn’t read. These are the oral testimonies of women survivors:

_The white officers had no shame. They would rape women in full view of everyone. Swing women by the hair. Put women in sacks, douse in paraffin, set alight._

_They burned us with cigarette butts. Forced us to walk on hot coals._

_They put cayenne pepper and water in our vaginas. Petrol and water in our vaginas. It was forced in with a bottle pushed by a boot._

_You were forced to work even if your children were sick. If you had a sick baby, you strapped it to your back, while you worked. The home guards would beat you if you stopped to attend to it. You would finally bring the child around and find it was dead. You would start screaming in shock and anguish. The home guards would order the others to come and help you bury it._

_Every morning when the barracks were opened, the homeguards would ask: How many children have died? They would be tied in bundles of six babies. Each of us was ordered to take a bundle and bury it with the rest of the bodies in the graves._
In April 1956, Britain’s Sunday Post ran an interview with Katherine Warren-Gash, the officer in charge of Kamiti women’s camp. She said: “Confession and ‘rehabilitation’ of women in the camp is proving better than a course of beauty treatment! The women arrive sullen, sour, unpleasant, downright ugly. But after confession and rehabilitation, many of them become really pretty.”

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We learned in school that we attained independence ‘peacefully’. Without bloodshed. We were the model the rest of Africa should look to; a happy multiracial nation, where whites, asians and africans lived in harmony.

In Kenya’s war of independence, fewer than 100 whites were killed, and close to 300,000 Africans.

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There were 60,000 white settlers in Kenya at independence in 1963. The new Kenyan govt was required to take loans of 12.5 million pounds from it’s ex-colonial master, the British govt, to buy back stolen land from settlers who wished to leave.
**Piece 5: Swore I’d Never Wear Clothes I Couldn’t Run or Fight In**

*The Hindu epic, the Mahabharata¹ says: That is a well-governed state where a woman adorned with all dress and ornaments, and unaccompanied by men, can move freely and fearlessly in its roads and lanes.*

Looking pretty, my mother said. Looking pretty is the least you can do. Looking pretty is the least you can do, Shailja, to make up – for not being a boy.

You’re not safe as a girl, my mother said. If you had a brother to protect you, you could go out at night. If you had a brother, we’d let you do it.

*How would I run if a man attacked me, and I was wearing a sari? How would I fight?*

*Don’t stride, Shailja – your stride is so unfeminine! How can you ever walk in a sari if you stride like that?*

As a child, I knew of women strangled in their saris. Women doused in paraffin and burned in their saris. Saris made you vulnerable. A walking target. Saris made you weak.

And no one told me of women who went into battle in their saris. Worked the fields in their saris. Laboured on construction sites in their saris.

All I heard was: You have to be careful in a sari. You’re exposing the body. Don’t let the pallav slip under the breast – that’s obscene. Don’t let the petticoat show the panties – that’s obscene. Allure without being sexual. Be beautiful without being aware of it. Attract without meeting anyone’s eyes. Do not act as if you own your body. It’s draped, displayed, for the edification of others. Watch the women in Bollywood movies. Combine coy virginity with hip-swinging sex appeal.

As a child, I swore I would never wear clothes I couldn’t run or fight in. My legs would never be hobbled.

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¹ Santi Parva, epilogue to Mahabharata. Cited by Carol Lee Flinders, *At The Root of This Longing*, Book Two, Ch. 1, Note 4, pg. 350