

## The Case of the disappearing object: narratives and artefacts in homes and a museum exhibition from Pakistani heritage families in South Yorkshire

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### Abstract

This article describes a small-scale research project focused on a small group of families of Pakistani heritage who were interviewed about their possessions and the stories associated with those objects, in order to create an exhibition of intergenerational home objects. It looks at what happens when home objects are placed in a museum exhibition context. In particular, the article considers the phenomenon by which intergenerational objects that have crossed continents are sometimes lost, and discusses whether this requires special attention in the context of studies of post-colonialist identities and objects. An interesting dissonance appears in the representation of the exhibition when objects are lost and then replaced in exhibitions. An artefact from the museum collection can be substituted for the lost object in an exhibition, but there is still an issue of the 'original' object not being found. This article considers the context of these objects and stories and how these can be related to the literature on British Asian post colonial identities.

**Key words:** objects, narratives, museums, post-colonialism, Pakistan, homes

Interviewer: And you also talked about an old suitcase?

RK: Yes, mum's, I do believe she has still got it, I will ask her, I remember very vividly as a child this brown leather suitcase with all these labels on it, I assume they had labels at that time, they weren't the kind you could take off, and mum saying dad had used it for several years and this is all the places he had gone to – I think she's got it somewhere (Interview 19 Sept 2006)

(see figure 7)

### Introduction

In this interview above Ruksana described an old suitcase her mother remembered as a child that was carried around the world by her father. This suitcase symbolised the journey the family had taken from the Pathan regions of Pakistan to South Yorkshire. Ruksana also mentioned various labels that recorded their father's travels around East Asia, Hong Kong, the US and within the UK. This excerpt is from a series of ethnographic interviews that two researchers, [name of authors], undertook as part of an AHRC funded project from the Diasporas, Migration and Identities research programme, to explore narratives of migration and objects from families of Pakistani heritage in Rotherham, South Yorkshire. The aim of the project was to create an exhibition of these artefacts with the stories the families told that would be held in the local museum gallery. The project was a collaborative one between Ferham School, Rotherham Central Sure Start, the Clifton Park Museum, with researchers from the University of Sheffield (Kate Pahl), Sheffield Hallam University (Andy Pollard) and a designer, Zahir Rafiq. Zahir's contribution was funded by the Arts Council schools initiative, Creative Partnerships. The resulting exhibition was held, with the museum's support, in a local art gallery in Rotherham and

ran for one month. Subsequently Zahir Rafiq developed the project into a website, 'Every Object Tells a Story', and a learning resources pack for family learning teachers was created as a result of the exhibition and research project. <sup>1</sup>.

The purpose of the project was to create an exhibition and a web site that described the objects and stories that the families shared with the research team. Interviews were conducted to discover what kinds of objects were particularly important to the families. It was then intended to use these objects as displays in the exhibition. However, as the exhibition drew nearer, it became clear that some of the objects described in the families' narratives had been lost or had disappeared. Some objects remained in Pakistan, some were represented through art work but not found. As a result, they were replaced by items from the existing museum collections. This article looks more closely at the processes of object ownership and the experience of carrying objects across borders in British Asian communities.

In this article, we describe and consider data collected from one particular family, the K family. This consisted of:

Mr K elder (now passed away)

Mrs K senior, mother

AK: Eldest son, academic

ZK: Middle son, town planner

RK: Daughter, English as a Second Language teacher

JK: Youngest son, Businessman

The K grandchildren, aged between about seven to sixteen years of age, also participated in the project. More families were involved. However for ethical reasons their stories could not be told after the exhibition had ended. Extended, ethnographic interviews took place with the four grown up children from this one family over a period of six months, and, in many cases, were repeated two or three times to produce dense accounts of family stories.

Museums rely on the fixity of the object and their display practices, using glass cabinets and labels, further enhance this practice (Albano 2007). We explore more closely in this article the relationship between objects and identities in the context of diaspora and post-colonial narratives (Ali et al 2006). The experience of losing objects and linguistic identity markers could be said to be endemic to the experience of loss of a sense of secure identity as a result of migrations in a post colonial context (Chukwudi Eze 2008). This article explores object practices, material culture and narratives of migration within a small group of families in Rotherham. We describe the process of moving and then translating objects from homes to the exhibition space, and focus on what happened when objects moved sites and were represented in new spaces. This process is considered in the context of current interpretations of home cultures, particularly those focused on British Asian communities (Eg Werbner 2002; Toila-Kelly 2004; Phillips 2009).

### **The Pakistani community in Rotherham**

Background information on the families and their history was collected from the local archives. Many South Asian families had migrated to South Yorkshire in the 1950s and 1960s when jobs in the regional industries and the steel industry were plentiful. It was found from the 2001 census that the number of Pakistanis in Rotherham amounted to 4,704 or 1.9% of the total population. There is now a pattern of third or even fourth generation families living in the Rotherham area whose grandparents and great grandparents migrated to Rotherham in the 1950s and 1960s to work in the steel industry, and work in the many factories in the Sheffield and Rotherham area. Many Pakistani men came over with the original intention of a temporary stay in order to find work and send money back home. Property in Pakistan was often retained and many family members such as wives and children, continued to live in Pakistan with only the men living in the UK. However, as their lives progressed their wives often came to join them, and during the 1960s a large number of families made their homes in towns such as Rotherham. While the

majority of these families came from the Mirpuri regions of Pakistan, some came from the borders with Afghanistan, the Pathan regions. These families were in a minority, but a significant one, within the communities. Therefore, the construct 'British Asian' can be understood to be one that was also complex; and often regionally and locally fragmented as was the case with the K family, described below.

### The K family

The family interviewed for the project were from the Pathan region, close to the North West frontier. The family spoke Pushto, but in an interview, it was mentioned that the father (now passed way) and his wife, who was still alive, spoke different versions of the Pushto language as they lived in different villages, although in the same area. Colonial policy divided up the area regionally, as one of the family members here describes:

Because although we live in Pakistan we are actually Pathan. We originate from Afghanistan. I suppose when the British divided up the country the north west frontier was given to Pakistan although Afghanistan still claim it's theirs so anybody living there got a Pakistani identity, nationality, you see but we have not inter married with the other Pakistanis and you can tell that we are like a different .....we look different because we've not inter married but some people have and then ....but otherwise in that part of Pakistan we have got our own state and we've all got several schools as well and the majority of Pathans live there in that part. (Interview RK 12<sup>th</sup> September 06)

The family elder, Mr K (now deceased) emigrated in the 1950s and after a period of travelling backwards and forwards, between Pakistan and the UK, and building a house in Pakistan, finally settled in South Yorkshire and brought his wife over. The family described how they were one of the first families in the area,

Oh when we first came there weren't that many people on Ferham Road. ... And now I think if you check Ferham it's predominantly Pakistanis and fewer English families, do you know what I mean? At that time we were the only two or three families here. (Interview AK 24<sup>th</sup> August 06)

Mr K then brought up four children in Rotherham. These children were adults at the time of the project and had their own children who were in their teens. All three generations were involved in the project. Mr K was seen as a powerful figure within the local community. The elder Mr K initially settled in a shared house, which was common at the time,

He came in 1951 and he came to Sheffield and he first settled in Wincobank, he lived for a while in Wincobank with some villagers from the district in Pakistan, there were one or two who were living there so he lived with them. (Interview AK 24<sup>th</sup> August 06)

While setting up a number of small businesses, including a shop and cinema, he began to organise passports, lodging and work for many other men leaving Pakistan. Mr K returned frequently to Pakistan to ensure he also had a stake in the village where he grew up and his children helped him to build a house there. He since passed away, though his wife, children and grandchildren all remained in Rotherham. The family however, moved constantly backwards and forwards throughout their time in Rotherham. The elder Mr K was flown back for his funeral in Pakistan. As Toila-Kelly has identified in her work with South Asian women across a number of continents,

South Asian families attain a fluid citizenry and their experience of identity within different communities is in a state of flux. (2004:277)

This particular research study, of artefacts and narratives, also found that degree of complexity, with identities being represented as often in process, and the complexity was brought to life through a discussion of the role of family possessions. Family members constantly travelled forwards and backwards in the course of their lives, and this constant fluidity accompanied the

project interviews. Objects, such as a mug brought in the context of the burying of her father's body, were mentioned by Ruksana, one of the family members, in an interview:

RK: Mum and my eldest brother went back with my dad's body because they took him back to where he originates from because they wanted him buried next to his dad and mum in the same graveyard, but on the way back, the plane must have stopped off in Russia and my mum and my brother must have got out, and they brought me back this mug because they knew I liked China and that, I thought it was so sweet that at that time they were thinking about me and they bought me a mug back. (interview RK 12<sup>th</sup> August 06)

Notions of nation-hood and identity were also complicated by colonial dividing up, as Toila-Kelly here argues of the women in her study,

As mobile subjects within these territories they are and have been marginalized from inclusion in these various national cultures, resulting in their many hybrid connections with the citizenship of many nations. The community possesses an evolving consciousness of being a 'post-national' of a colony, feeling an unfixed territorial nationalism beyond legal citizenships, and the national borders of India, East Africa and England. This creates diasporic subjectivity spatially and temporally in dynamic flux. (2004:278)

In the study described below, objects signalled this complexity; their 'in-flux' nature being also expressed through the way some objects shifted and were mislaid within family homes, as a result of complex migration histories. Timescales attached to objects were sometimes long (gold handed down over generations) or shorter, (a pair of gold sprayed elephants) and in the interviews both long timescales (grandparents) and short timescales (something that happened in the past year) were alluded to (Lemke 2000).

### **Methodology of the study**

A certain amount of the project activity was in 'doing' as much as researching. Project activities included outreach work, family learning museum curating, website development and art work as well as research. Kate Pahl had a background in outreach work with families before becoming an academic, and during the project she worked in a family learning setting with a group of women of Pakistani heritage. Andy Pollard was a museum curator, as well as working part-time in a University, and had previously worked at the local museum, and used these skills in the project. The team were lucky to have Zahir Rafiq involved who was able, as a visual artist and painter, to represent the project artistically, and in his capacity as web designer, to create the website, and was from a similar background to the families involved. The research team (Kate Pahl, Andy Pollard and Zahir Rafiq) worked collaboratively on the project, and although each team member had responsibility for different activities, the team also worked together to create the exhibition, and have also written together as a group (Pahl, Pollard and Rafiq 2009). The process of developing the project began with a discussion between the curator (Andy Pollard) and the Principal Investigator (Kate Pahl) together with the visual artist, Zahir Rafiq, with the local museum, Clifton Park Museum, in Rotherham. In this discussion, it was agreed that the project would involve the investigation of object practices within a small group of families and would include Zahir Rafiq as advisor to the project. External funding helped secure his involvement, with a contribution from Creative Partnerships for his work. The Clifton Park museum was the host of the exhibition and provided many of the objects to go in the exhibition, when family members were unable to find them.

The project team recruited and interviewed a small number of families, who would also be involved in the process of curating and displaying cultural objects within the context of their community, Ferham in Rotherham. The family were planning to move out of the community and wanted to celebrate the history of their time in Ferham within an exhibition. The family agreed to be in the project to celebrate the long association they had with the area, the local school and the community. The project team, principally Kate, also worked with the family learning officer at Rotherham Central Sure Start, to recruit families and to form a discussion group to inform the

exhibition. A Women's Art Group was created with a group of women of Pakistani heritage to make art work for the project. Children from Ferham School were involved in the making of the website and the art work. Zahir worked with the younger family members from the K family to create a section of the website devoted to their favourite objects. On the advice of Zahir, the project was given the name 'Ferham Families'. It was felt that this title did not 'other' the families who participated by making the name inclusive and area-based. A group of five families were recruited to be fully represented within the exhibition, and over a period of six months, a series of extended ethnographic interviews were undertaken with them in order to find out what objects were important to the family members, and what stories were associated with the objects. These interviews were semi-structured and repeated over several months to check key meanings with the family members. Each of the project team conducted the interviews, sometimes jointly and sometimes singly, mostly in English but with some translation of stories by the elder Mrs K. Zahir Rafiq was important in mediating the interviews and discussing key interpretations and meanings with the team. Both Zahir and Andy Pollard themselves came from the Rotherham area, and lived locally. As the project evolved, the project team themselves explored their own migratory experience and their own biographies were also subject to discussion and interpretation along the way. In the final exhibition, these were displayed alongside the families' stories and objects, together with displays by the Women's Art Group and art by Zahir Rafiq.

The interviews yielded themes, which, when coded and related back to the interviews, became the starting point for the construction of the museum cases. The process of coding the interviews was also collaborative. The project team took the codes back to the families to check interpretations. These thematic interpretations then became linked to objects, which could be grouped by the themes in the exhibition. These themes were gold, textiles, education, travel, weddings and toys.

Figure 1 shows the process of coding the interviews and developing the clusters of themes that became cases in the exhibition:

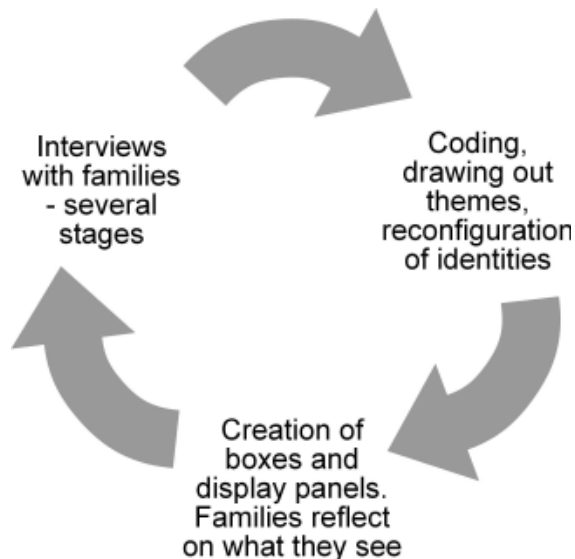


Figure 1: Coding process

Three generations of one family were principally involved in the project, and this article focuses on this one family and on the relationship between the objects and stories across generations and the experience of migration.

### **Displaying material culture: the production of the exhibition**

The purpose of the project was to involve the participants, the families, in the exhibition curating process. Therefore, the informants in the study were closely involved in the construction of the project website and the curatorial process. This meant that the curator (Andy Pollard) had to allow for time to display objects as they came in as and when the families were ready to provide them. The result of this was that many objects came in at the last minute, in the final week of the process of putting the exhibition together, as it was difficult for the families to visualise the look of the exhibition until the glass cabinets were installed and spaces were clearly available. A family Qu'ran was donated on the final day of setting up the exhibition. Luckily, a glass case had been set aside for this purpose. The exhibition was housed in a local arts centre in the centre of the town, where visitors could come in as part of a visit to the local library. The process of collecting the objects was a gradual one as trust was built up between the curator and the families. Family members produced objects during discussions around key themes drawn from interviews, and sometimes in response to new ideas generated by the exhibition curators. The production of the exhibition was seen as an important step forward in community relations. Invitations were sent out for the launch, which was held in the gallery in March 2007, and the launch was well attended by local residents and the local Councillors for the area. Zahir Rafiq described the project as being important to him for this reason:

As an Asian person myself I thought it was a good idea to get positive messages across to the general public in Rotherham, to show that, you know, immigrants contribute to this town and work really hard and to this day, the present day, they still contribute in certain ways, positive images of Asians, in today's political climate, there is a stereotype of how Asian families, they just think about arranged marriages. I'm not saying that doesn't go on but the majority of people are just normal, law abiding, not boring, but to just get that normal view of Asian families, common view of Asian families, common something that the white population can relate to, because at the moment they can't relate to Asian families, at the moment, but there is so much that they can, and I hope that will come out of this project, that's why I wanted to do it, it's a great cause. (Zahir Rafiq interview, 19/07/06)

Zahir held the view that the exhibition would seek to address issues of representation, showing that the Asian families who had settled in South Yorkshire had a huge amount to contribute. This vision was held at a time where there were local racist groups campaigning close to where the community lived. The exhibition could therefore be seen as a kind of civic engagement to create positive representations, much as Bennett (2005) argues, it created a space for the discussion of communities, and a space to display the family history of British Asians and their material cultural practices, who lived in the Ferham area. The exhibition was deliberately named 'Ferham Families' and had an image that was of 'ordinary' families. Zahir's art work including the project leaflet was a street of terraced houses, that gave a 'Coronation Street' type image of the area. The exhibition labels included discussion questions that included points where families of different cultural backgrounds could share and relate to the objects. The family members brought in a number of artefacts, such as toys, special photographs, medals and artistic representations, which could be viewed in many different ways. Some visitors identified with the objects – and saw that their objects were similar; others saw the differences between their home objects and these objects. The exhibition together with the website had the aim of speaking to these different interpretative communities using different media strategies, the web space and the exhibition. Labels invited different interpretations to be made of the object and a visitors book recorded comments and observations.

### **Displaying material culture: theoretical framework**

In thinking about material culture in British Asian homes, the team considered firstly the power of objects within homes in calling up certain kinds of stories. Miller (2001, 2008) has explored objects within homes, and the stories that come from asking informants to describe their home

interiors. The power of objects to evoke emotions was the subject of *The Meaning of Things*, a series of interviews with Chicago residents about their objects (Csikszentmihalyi and Rochberg-Halton 1981). Certain objects clearly had more resonance for the families in this study than others. Gold, for example, was considered important, as was china in glass cabinets. Within the context of Pakistan, the cultural meanings of objects as gifts within families have been explored, for example by Werbner (2002) in considering the role of objects as gifts across generations. As the process of doing the interviews progressed, the families sometimes told different stories about the same object much as Hurdley (2006) found in her work on mantelpieces. Certain objects could index certain identities, as Shankar (2006) found in her study of material culture within Asian families in California. For example, over time the project team came to understand that there were many different meanings association with the idea of 'gold' (Pahl and Pollard 2008). Home and home objects have often been acknowledged to have multiple meanings, imbued with,

..different emotions and meaning at different times, depending on the intersection between ideas of self and family, community and other associations with help to shape a sense of connectedness and belonging. (Phillips 2009:23).

The project team found that through discussions of home objects, wider discussions of identity and belonging across generations would emerge. As Toila-Kelly (2004) suggests,

The materials of culture are often situated as materials of negotiation of citizenship, belonging and national identity, in the process of 'centring' and 'positioning', after migration (Toila-Kelly 2004: 290).

In many cases, families had mislaid or lost the objects over the years in the process of a series of movements between Pakistan and Rotherham. These lost objects, such as a suitcase, duvets, a sewing machine, and pair of shoes, were vividly described by the families, and replacements or representations were created or found from the museum collections. The resonances (Bissell 2009) of these objects echoed within the stories told by the families. The project team examined the continuities and the discontinuities between the objects found in the home and the exhibition. Exploring these dissonances has proved fruitful for thinking through the relationship between object collection practices in the home and museum curating practices. This relationship can then be considered in relation specifically to migratory groups. Objects both did, and did not stand for identities, but bridged home and public space through the mediation of glass cabinets and labels. The exhibition became, therefore not only a 'contact zone' in relation to cultural spaces, but also a space where continuities and discontinuities across home and exhibition sites could be explored (Clifford 1997). Exploring these dissonances brings up the complexity of 'othering' (Hallam and Street 2000) through the process of curating. However, the exhibition space can also be generative for the presentation and discussion of narratives and their relationship to notions of identities that were themselves in flux and shifting (Macdonald 2003).

In this article, as we chart the making of a museum exhibition with a small group of families in South Yorkshire, we make this the subject of our discussion. The translation of objects from home to museum exhibition became more complex however, when we analysed after the exhibition had happened, the process of curating the exhibition and collecting the artefacts. It became obvious that the settled determinism of our initial analysis (that the exhibition was a straightforward representation of stories and objects from a group of families from a town in South Yorkshire) was not so clear. Many of the artefacts in the exhibition were not actual artefacts from the homes, but were represented anew for the exhibition purposes. For example, the suitcase Ruksana described above, had to be re-created as an art work, from memory (See figure 7). Many objects which the families considered to be key for their stories, such as a pair of shoes, a duvet, a sewing machine and a suitcase, were not found and their provenance had to be recreated by using objects from the museum collection. In this process, the settled nature of the object also came to be questioned and re-configured. Below we describe some instances of these dissonances within the data we collected.

### Representing lost objects: the process of translation

Informants often made reference to key objects that were either left behind in the process of migration, or lost. These objects were evoked in interviews and the language used to describe these objects was also contested and subject to revision or discussion. Many of the interviewees described their memories of objects, sited in the village house in Pakistan that the family visited more or less on an annual basis. A memory of the homes she visited in Pakistan is here evoked by Ruksana who is describing the family's mantelpieces:

Interviewer: The china in the window where has that come from?

RK : Just being bought, traditionally you always had china on your mantelpiece, traditionally, from Pakistan, now it has somewhat died, like the Victorian times, where you had a little lace

Interviewer: I am interested in the whole thing of the China decorating thing

RK: Traditionally every household had a mantelpiece in the olden days,

Interviewer: At home?

RK: At home, yes, and they always had China on them and they had embroidered clothes and they had one of those lace cloths, like in Victorian times,

Interviewer: A doily?

RK: Yes, we had china on that traditionally, to put them on I don't recall mum having a doily when she came to England (laughs) (Interview Ruksana 19.9.06)

Here, the objects are recalled in the interview and the description, 'lace cloths' is translated by the interviewer as 'doily'. Ruksana, however, said that she didn't recall her mother having a doily when she came to England. At one point, both in the conversation and in the household, on the trip to England, the doily was lost. The word 'doily' supplied by the interviewer, is a replacement for the word 'lace cloths'. Words slipped in discussion, as the interviewer and interviewees represented the objects anew in conversations and both collaborated in supplying words for these objects which originally had different names, in Pushto. In the interview, Ruksana also referred to objects that belonged to a generation just before her,

RK: When you get married you also have duvets and they are generally made of silk or velvet, and they are hand sewn, they were at that time hand sewn, now they are not, the cotton inside is all from the local fields, (Interview Ruksana, 19<sup>th</sup> September 06)

The 'duvets' were frequently mentioned by informants as something that they brought with them to cope with the very cold winters in Rotherham. Ruksana elaborated in an earlier interview:

RK: At that time continental quilts were not available in England but they were where we are, that is what people use over there now so ....brought 2 with her and over here it was mainly blankets.(Interview Ruksana 12<sup>th</sup> September 06)

However, none of these duvets were to be found and the family concluded that they must have remained in Pakistan. They were variously described as 'duvets' 'blankets' and also 'coats', indicating how difficult the actual object was to translate into English from the Pushto term. An important material quality of these 'duvets' was the cotton material from which they were made. The cotton was grown on Ruksana's father's land:

RK: He had a well put on there, that was his first project in this year and a half, much to my mum's dismay (laughs). And when he completed that he decided he wanted to grow cotton so he grew his own cotton and then it came back, ... from



the cotton they made thread, and from the cotton they made these blankets, it wasn't actually wool, it was this very thick kind of fabric that was very warm, it wasn't like cashmere very similar, you see, and we have got several of those still, it had some embroidery on the side, hand done as well, nobody has [got them] actually and I think he made one for all the boys and one for himself, we hardly ever go in winter anyway, (Interview, Ruksana 19<sup>th</sup> Sept 06)

Here Ruksana describes the process by which the cotton was grown – the well that then enabled the crop to flourish which then created the opportunity to make the blankets. In the exhibition, the blankets were represented by a piece of cotton sourced from a local mill and some material likewise sourced locally.



Figure 2 Textile case Photograph C Steve Wright

Textiles were an example of both a set of practices, sewing, making clothes, and a set of objects which, in some cases were not found for the exhibition. Ruksana did provide an image of her wedding dress (to be seen at the bottom of the photograph in Figure 2) as well as examples of her wedding decorations for others and her love of interior design. Ruksana's house was elaborately and beautifully decorated, with white curtains, gold ornaments and mirrors. She said she inherited her passion for decorating from her father and her love of sewing from her mother:

Mum sewed herself. She used to make dresses for me and everything, she'd crochet, embroider and sew, learnt everything at school.... she had a sewing machine. It is a Singer one and it was bought when my brother ....when he was born dad bought mum the sewing machine as a present. We still have it somewhere. (Interview, Ruksana 12<sup>th</sup> September 06)

However, when we asked about the sewing machine, it had been given away some years previously and the machine exhibited in the exhibition (see Figure 2) was borrowed from the museum collections. The family members, however, were happy with the replacement machine saying it was identical to the one they had lost. Objects evoked stories that were told again and again, sometimes in different forms, by different family members (Hurdley 2006). The four grown-up children of Mr K all recalled their father's shoe story.

The story goes that he put the money in his shoes, he had little shoes built where he could hide the gold because people would steal from you when you slept on the boat, or the train, you know, it was great difficulty, and carrying cash on you, I mean it's difficult now but in them days, he brought whatever he had back, he came all the way back to Pakistan, India, and looked after his family there. (JK interview August 06)

We found that the story of the shoes would become a focal point for family stories, often told by different family members, and re-appearing and retaining significance in other narratives. The grandfather's fortune was said to be made from shoe-shining, and then the fortune was hidden in the shoes,

...shining shoes on the sidewalk in the middle of New York and he ended up making a fortune just doing that. (Interview Ruksana 12<sup>th</sup> September 06)

Shoes and the acquisition of a fortune were linked together and two objects, gold and shoes, are linked in a symbolic ensemble of meaning. Indeed, many of these objects symbolised a number of things, both the object itself (the shoes) and the gold hidden inside the shoes, and also the making of a fortune. In that sense, many of the objects in the stories told to us could be constructed as 'boundary objects' that catalyze self-creation (Turkle 2007:9). The objects propelled the narrative further into the story, taking the story across the ocean, in this case, from America back to Pakistan. The shoes however were lost. The passing away of family members meant that objects associated with them somehow also disappeared, unless handed down,

....you know when people pass away and stuff and you're always trying to in your mind you're always trying to link up with them and er I just remember when he passed away I used to open the cellar door and he had his er, the shoes were lying at the top of the stairs and every time I went down I had his shoes, (Interview JK 16<sup>th</sup> August 06).

Several family members recollected the shoes sitting on the cellar steps, but they were never found. A replica pair of shoes was used in the final exhibition.



Figure 3 Shoe case (Photo C Steve Wright)

### The case of the disappearing object

In many of the stories, key objects such as shoes, sewing machines, cotton and duvets, had clearly acquired a mythical status among family members, though such objects had been lost. The stories the informants told us about the objects in their home linked to identity narratives that were themselves shifting in relation to family values and identities. Gold, for example, while symbolising jewellery traditionally handed down to girls during marriage, was also linked to decorative practices. Ruksana sprayed some elephants gold to match her gold mantelpiece and ornaments,

I always have gold spray in the house and I decided to spray the elephants because they were just cream and they didn't match my candlesticks and I decided to spray them gold, (laughs)

At the same time, a value the family frequently referred to was the importance of the 'high quality' artefact and lifestyle. Ruksana's brother described his uncles' and his father's attitude to luxury goods,

...they knew all about cloth and they had a tie and gold pen, and they ate in that restaurant, you know the beauties and wonders of this world, before they left and departed (Interview, JK Dec 06)

The array of objects in the exhibition that was finally displayed in March 2007 was another form of representation of these passions. The gold, shoe, textile and travelling objects cases all exemplified the family's passion for luxury goods. Informants told us that such luxury objects would also sometimes be photographed by families in Rotherham and sent back home to Pakistan as a record of how well families were doing in the countries to which they had migrated to find work,



*Fig 4 Gold Case photograph Steve Wright*

[they] used to take pictures of their possessions, radio, with his camera and tell people back home how well he's doing. (Interview JK Dec 06)

Display practices in Pakistan centred on the mantelpiece and sometimes photographs would be placed alongside treasured objects,

I remember that because the thing about the room was that they had these like mantelpieces and they had crockery or they have silverware or things displayed on them and sometimes they'd have a cabinet, sorry, the thing is they all had built in the wall with a glass front with things displayed. (interview JK Dec 06)

Here, interior design is intended in part for public display, like the photographs of the objects. Here, the focus on gold, on luxury, on display and on decoration act as tracers of complex feelings around identity and belonging.

To conclude this section, the objects the family described had often shifted in use in the context of migration, such as the cotton duvets, and had either translated or not translated into Western notions of similar objects. Some objects, such as the 'duvets', remained untranslatable. By looking at the meaning of the objects in both sites, the issue of what the objects meant across the sites became a significant one for the study.

### **Objects, identities and intergenerational gifting**

The process of putting together the museum exhibition helped all of us, families and research team members, to realise how important handed down objects were to the families as well as new and rediscovered objects. Gold both symbolised inheritance as well as an aesthetic. Ruksana, for example, realised that her interest in gold, and gold spray had origins in the focus on gold in women's dowries. However, she also attested that her interest was aesthetic and



*Figure 5 China tea set (Photograph Andy Pollard)*

At the end of the project, in the final interviews with the project team, the family members considered this process of handing down objects and what their parents had given them. One of the family members, a poet, as well as a businessman, described what he had inherited vividly, not in terms of objects, but in images, in a quotation that was later displayed in the exhibition itself,

Everything, you know, up everything in the stars the sky, the atmosphere, the air, imagination, everything interesting right above, you get from my dad and then if you look down, everything in the soil, the grit, dirt, sweat, you know plant - something [like] foundational hard work, you get all that from my mum, do you know what I mean, and we are in the middle here hovering really, in the strange world. (interview JK Dec 06)

Returning to the exhibition, some of this conflict, this fusion, both from parents and from the diaspora experience, was realised through a juxtaposition of objects. For example, the children provided toys alongside their own copy of the Qu'ran.

bound up with her new identity as interior decorator. Old and new identities fused in the two meanings of the concept of gold. Gold in that sense operated as a 'boundary object' (Turkle 2007), bringing together a number of key elements in Ruksana's self-representation. Objects, like stories, had multiple provenances. Some objects had a provenance that resided in both Pakistan and Rotherham, and had stories attached to them in both places. They might have been brought over as objects from Pakistan, but sometimes these objects did not originate in Pakistan; for example, Ruksana had a china tea set her mother was given as a dowry when she got married in Pakistan, this tea set now resided in her house, but its origin was English. It was shipped to Pakistan from England in the 1950's and then was brought over to England and given to Ruksana when she got married. It now resided in Ruksana's home in Rotherham, but she thought it too valuable to be placed in the museum exhibition, so it was photographed and displayed as a photograph.



Figure 6 toys (Photograph Steve Wright)

### Museums, social identities and objects

Museum exhibitions have a great deal to offer the development of social inclusion. They offer opportunities to represent diaspora identities anew and explore display practices traditionally only viewed at home, such as the arrangements on a mantelpiece and the way homes are arranged and decorated. A focus on material objects provides visual methods of exploring identity narratives. The production or transformation of objects can be re-configured in relation to cultural projects such as social inclusion. However, it is important to account for lost objects that are not found, but remain stored in memories in the process of doing this important work. Objects were described within the interviews, but were often not found and replacements were the objects on display in the exhibition. A focus on the lived experience of the families, as experienced in the practices that surrounded the objects and the narratives that recalled them, led to a realisation that objects in many ways were secondary to narrative and practices. Memory is therefore, as Ricoeur describes, recursive, and spiral shaped, doubling back in relation to stories, and artefacts (Ricoeur 1980). This produced a kind of collage, of narratives and objects,

Social memory in the South Asian diaspora is constitutive of a collage of stories, embedded in environments and landscapes, thus forming a 'territory' of cultural history and identity (Toila-Kelly 2004: 284).

This 'collage of stories' was represented by Zahir in this image that he made of the suitcase described by Ruksana at the beginning of this article.

The museum exhibition was itself an artefact of identity, representing the complex process of gathering artefacts and the key themes that had built up in the research process. In that sense, the exhibition was a trace of the research process. The core values of the family gradually emerged. On the last day before the museum opened, the family decided to loan a copy of their family Qu'ran, as an artefact that perhaps meant more to them above all the others. In that way, they constructed their value system in artifactual terms. The process of placing



Figure 7 Suitcase (Image C Andy Pollard)

objects in glass cabinets was as ever incomplete, and contested. The 'fuzzy logic' of creating a contemporary exhibition of post colonial identities needs to be acknowledged (MacDonald 2003:11). It is within that analysis that the research team wanted to locate their work, in the realm of the fragmented and incomplete. By focusing on the idea of 'lost objects', this then more fully describes the experience of migration, of the experience of seeing objects disappear and then reappear in new contexts, with new uses and new contextual frameworks for their interpretation. Museum curating can then become a process of considering the case of the disappearing object, and making those objects, the ones that got away, the focus of study and of contextual framing. In considering the data once more, it was clear that the objects travelled across borders, (like the mug) were described in different ways and had different uses in different languages, and had different meanings in the different countries the families visited. This meant that museums need to account for more of a 'process' model of collecting, that allows more provisional meanings to objects. If museums are more 'ideas based' rather than focused on objects, this then creates a more provisional, complex view of stories and objects (Witcombe 2003). As Witcombe argues, this then recognizes the ideological basis of museum work, and sees the encounters between museums and communities as contested. Objects, too, tell different stories in different times. By focusing on lost objects and the many meanings of objects, this complexity comes to the fore and creates a more open interpretative landscape that is constructed across homes, communities and museums.

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## Notes

<sup>1</sup> See the website created from the exhibition here: [www.everyobjecttellsastory.org.uk](http://www.everyobjecttellsastory.org.uk)

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