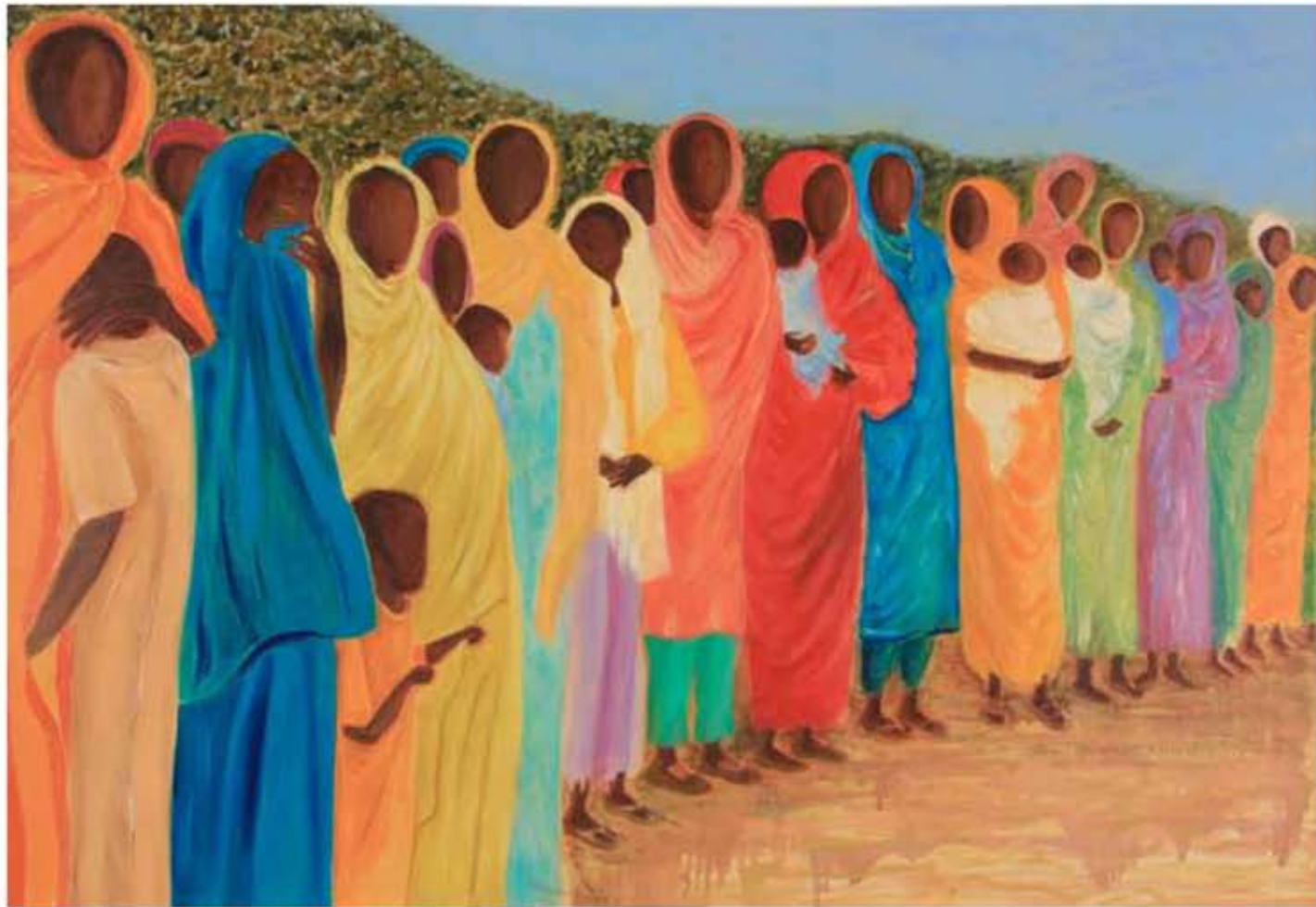


A Hidden Calamity

– the plight of widows



paintings by Reeta Sarkar

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THE LOOMBA FOUNDATION



“For Biji ...my grandmother,
Shrimati Pushpa Wati Loomba
the inspiration for The Loomba Foundation
and for this collection”

Reeta Sarkar

A Hidden Calamity

This evocative collection of paintings by British Indian artist Reeta Sarkar reminds us that global humanitarian issues are about people. The plight of widows is shocking in many countries and is graphically depicted in the faces, and the circumstances, shown in these paintings.

In many countries, widows are rejected by their families and community, deprived of possessions and left unable to care for their children. Yet unlike wars and natural disasters, the world is all too often unaware of their plight and they have no-one to turn to. Widows are truly the poorest of the poor, abused, invisible and unheard.

Reeta has chosen three themes – South Asia, Africa and Conflict – to highlight this hidden calamity that directly impacts on half a billion people. Each of these themes highlights an important aspect of the global problem of widowhood.

This collection was first shown at the United Nations in New York from 20 June to 12 July 2011. It formed part of an exhibition – also featuring works by Yoko Ono – to mark the first UN-recognised International Widows Day, an annual day of action to raise awareness and bring justice to the millions who suffer just as those depicted in these paintings.



Reeta Sarkar

The work of London-based Reeta Sarkar captures the condition and vulnerability of her subjects. As an artist, she is motivated by her extensive involvement in campaigns against poverty and discrimination, and informed by her experience as a single mother and Amatsu practitioner.

Educated at Haberdashers' Aske, Harrow College of Art and the London School of Fashion – now part of the University of the Arts London – Reeta combines an eye for detail with empathy for her subjects. Her new collection of 17 paintings focuses on the plight of widows in developing countries, which she describes as a “Hidden Calamity”.

It is the tragedy and desolation of widowhood that shines through in Reeta's canvases – white-clad figures in Vrindhaban and Varanasi, huddling children in Rwanda, a group of genocide widows in Darfur, colourful yet faceless, symbolising the invisibility that so often is the widows' fate.

For more than a decade Reeta has served as a trustee of the Loomba Foundation, a charity set up in memory of her grandmother, Shrimati Pushpa Wati Loomba, to highlight the injustices faced by widows all over the world. She participated in a five-year campaign by the charity that culminated, in December 2010, in the decision by the UN General Assembly to adopt 23 June as International Widows Day, and she was inspired to create this collection of paintings to highlight the human and emotional dimensions of this global tragedy.

“More than 100 million widows around the world are living in poverty,” Reeta notes, “and many are forced to endure degrading and unjust treatment at the hands of relatives as well as strangers. If you consider their dependent children as well, that's close to half a billion people who urgently need the world to take an interest in their plight. This is far more than any of the single calamities – earthquakes, tsunamis, typhoons – that dominate the airwaves; yet nobody really knows about it. It's a hidden calamity that saps the strength of communities and causes deprivation for several generations.”

The strength of Reeta's work is that she brings the reality to life in a way that statistics and even photographs often do not. Every widow is an individual; her children inhabit a world that is not the same as the one that others live in, even in their own community. This collection manages to combine the big picture – the differing but equally pressing conditions of widowhood in South Asia and in Africa, and the devastating impact of conflict – with the human scale; bringing us, the viewers wherever we are, closer to the people who so desperately need us to take an interest in their fate.

In so doing, Reeta Sarkar's Hidden Calamity collection adds a persuasive and haunting voice to the global campaign for widows that receives a massive boost with the United Nations' first officially-designated International Widows Day, taking place on 23 June 2011.



International Widows Day



Loomba Foundation President Cherie Blair, flanked by trustee Lord Dholakia and founder chairman trustee Lord Loomba at the 2005 launch of International Widows Day.

International Widows Day is the UN's annual global day of action to address the poverty and injustice faced by millions of widows and their dependents in many countries. It takes place on 23 June.

International Widows Day was initiated by the Loomba Foundation in 2005 and officially designated by the United Nations General Assembly, on a motion by the Government of Gabon, on 21 December 2010.

The significance of 23 June is that this is the day, in 1954, that the woman who inspired the founding of the Loomba Foundation, Shrimati Pushpa Wati Loomba, became a widow.

When the Loomba Foundation was founded in 1997, its focus initially was on relieving the desperate plight of poor widows and their children in India – and this remains a very important objective. Founder Lord Raj Loomba soon came to realise however that this problem is by no means confined to India alone. "I was shocked to discover that widowhood was a huge problem not only in India, but across Africa," he says. "They were losing husbands through HIV, through genocide, through conflict, and they were becoming destitute. They were not looked after by governments or NGOs and they were shunned by society. It's such a big problem, and yet nothing has been done. Nobody in the world, including the United Nations, had ever addressed the problem of widows."

In 2005, the Loomba Foundation launched International Widows Day at the House of Lords in London and over the next five years, the Foundation campaigned for international recognition of this day as a focus for sustained, effective, global action to bring about a radical and lasting transformation in the plight of widows. In 2006 the Loomba Foundation held an international conference on the topic at the Foreign Office in London, addressed by widows from ten countries as well as Cherie Blair, Hillary Clinton, Indian cabinet minister Renuka Chowdhury, Yoko Ono and Commonwealth Secretary-General Don McKinnon. The Foundation organised high-profile events in America and Canada and held meetings at the United Nations, gaining the attention and support of leaders like Rwandan president Dr Paul Kagame and the former UN secretary-general Kofi Annan.

The big problem with the cause was its invisibility. Governments, NGOs, international organisations – all neglected the issue because so very little was known about it. The Loomba Foundation initiated and supported an investigative programme with writers, researchers and institutions including Chatham House; in 2010, Vijay Dutt's *Invisible Forgotten Sufferers* was published with research by Risto Harma: the first comprehensive research study of the plight of widows around the world.*

Backed with that hard information, support for UN recognition grew. President Ali Bongo Ondimba of Gabon

and his wife Sylvia Bongo Ondimba threw their weight behind the campaign and on 21 December 2011, the United Nations General Assembly adopted a resolution from Gabon officially designating 23 June International Widows Day:

“The General Assembly of the United Nations...

1. Calls upon Member States, the United Nations system, and other international and regional organizations, within their respective mandates to afford special recognition to the rights of widows and their children;
2. Appeals to all Member States to designate June 23rd as International Widows Day, to be observed every year beginning in 2011;
3. Invites all Member States, relevant organizations of the United Nations system and other international organizations, as well as civil society, including non-governmental organizations and the private sector to recognize widows' rights and observe International Widows Day to raise awareness of the plight of widows and their children around the world.”

Extract from the UN Resolution.

* *Vijay Dutt, Invisible Forgotten Sufferers – the Plight of Widows Around the World*, with research by Risto F Harma, Loomba Foundation / Konark Publishers, Delhi, 2010. Available from www.theloombafoundation.org.

South Asia

In South Asia, religious and cultural traditions frequently deprive widows of their possessions and the ability to make an independent living. Poor widows cannot pay to educate their children, many of whom are driven to factory labour and prostitution to support their families.

In an effort to break the cycle of deprivation, the Loomba Foundation's 'Educate A Widow's Child' programme funds schooling for the children of poor widows in all of India's 30 States. Through this programme, the Foundation has educated more than 3,500 children, so transforming the lives of their mothers and the prospects of their families.

With an estimated 30 million widows in India, however, the need for action remains desperate and acute.

Lonely widow in Virandhaban

32 x 37

Acrylic on canvas

2011



Widows lining up for food in Vrindhaban

30 x 40

Oil on canvas

2011



Widows chanting

24 x 48

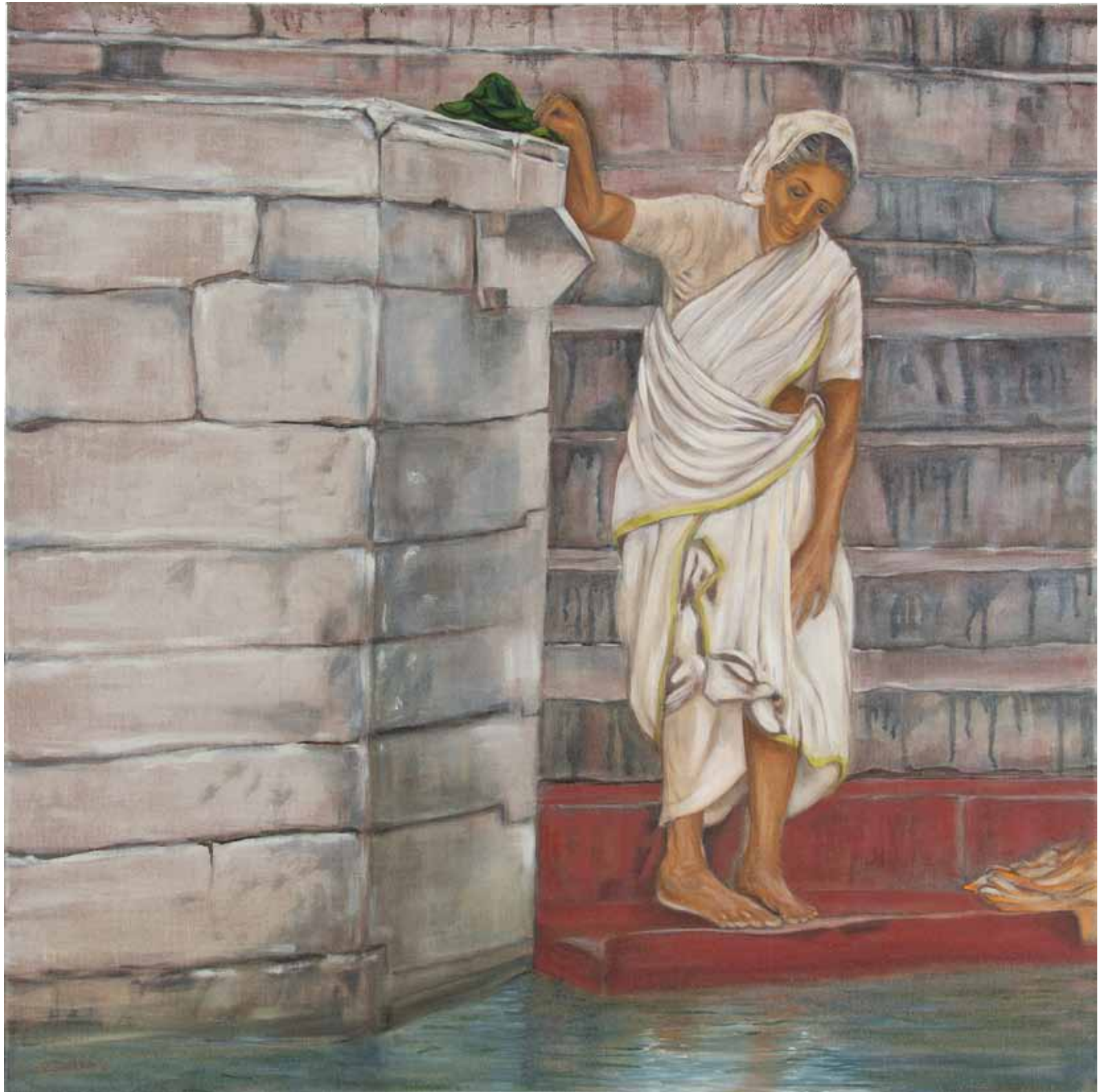
Oil on canvas

2011



A widow bathing in Varanasi

39.5 x 39.5
Oil on canvas
2011



Widows bathing in the Ganges

47 x 47

Oil on canvas

2011

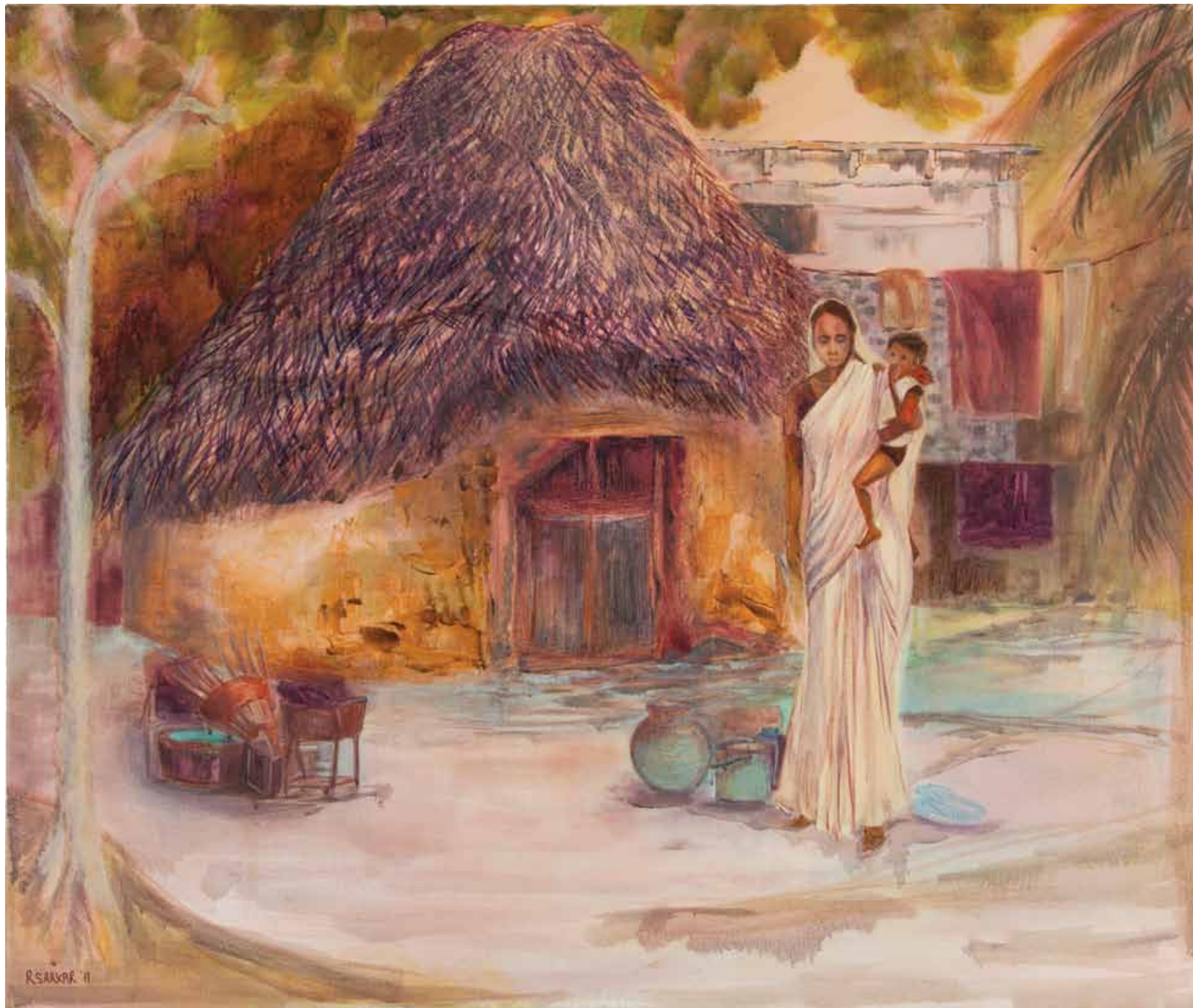


A widow looks after her child

30 x 36

Oil on canvas

2011



A Himalayan temple sanctuary for widows

32 x 37

Acrylic on canvas

2011



Africa

In Africa, unjust “customary laws” persist in many communities, even when national laws and constitutions appear to proffer justice and equality.

Apart from losing their wealth, widows can face degrading rituals and find it impossible to earn a living. The fate of widows magnifies and exacerbates the problems of poverty and of disease, such as malaria and HIV-Aids.

Sons of a genocide widow, Rwanda

29 x 36.25
Oil on canvas
2011



A widow caring for her child

30 x 40

Oil on canvas

2011



Widows' children in Nairobi

30 x 40

Oil on canvas

2011

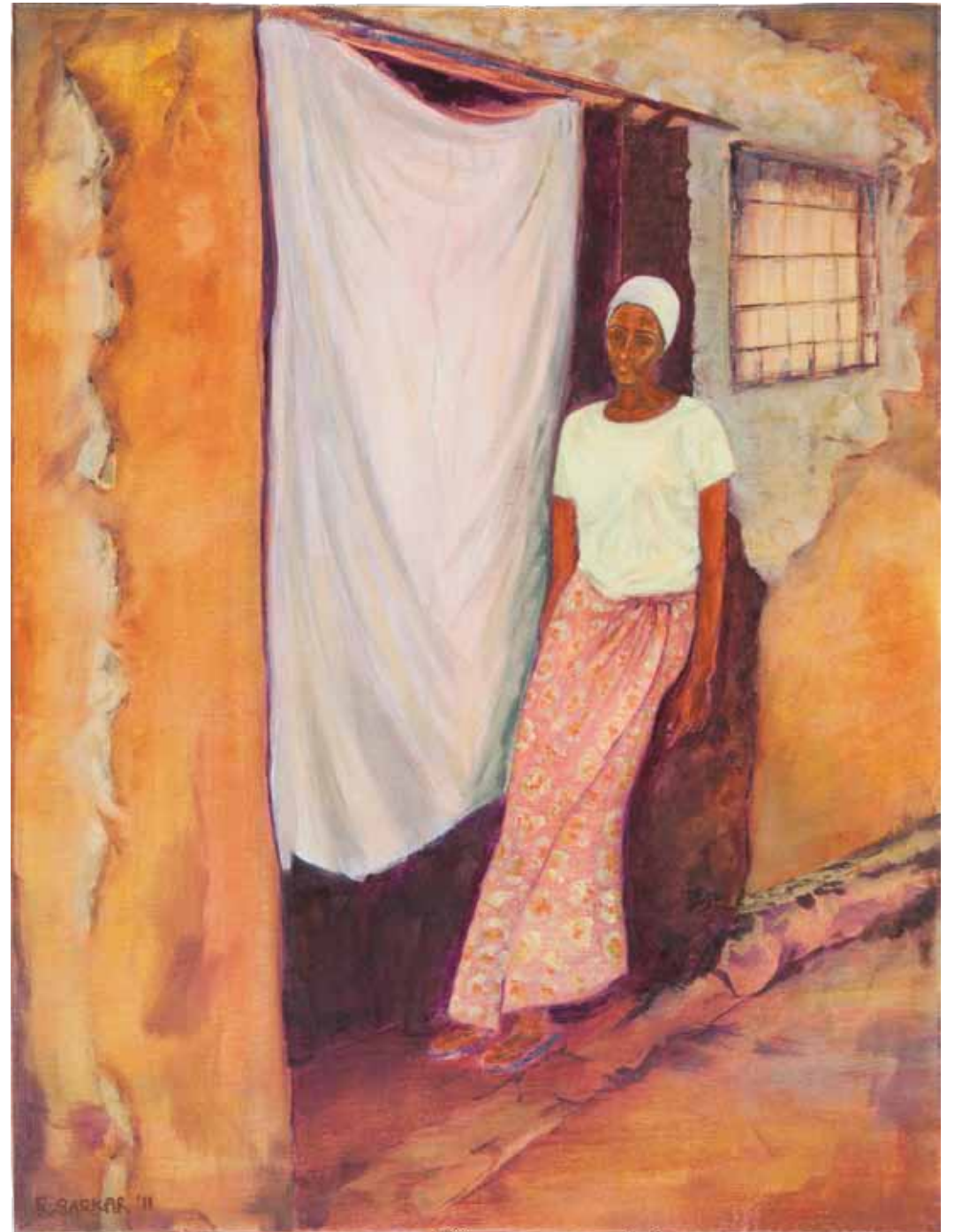


Young widow by her bakery in Nairobi, supported by the Loomba Foundation

18 x 24

Oil on canvas

2011



Children of widows, Kenya

15.75 x 47.25

Oil on canvas

2011



Conflict

Conflict has fuelled the crisis by directly creating huge numbers of widows in countries such as Rwanda, Iraq and Afghanistan.

The widows who are left behind to care for their families have an essential role to play in the healing and reconstruction of their societies, but they are prevented from doing so by being destitute, disenfranchised and disempowered.

Gravesite in Kabul

23.5 x 35.5

Acrylic on canvas

2011

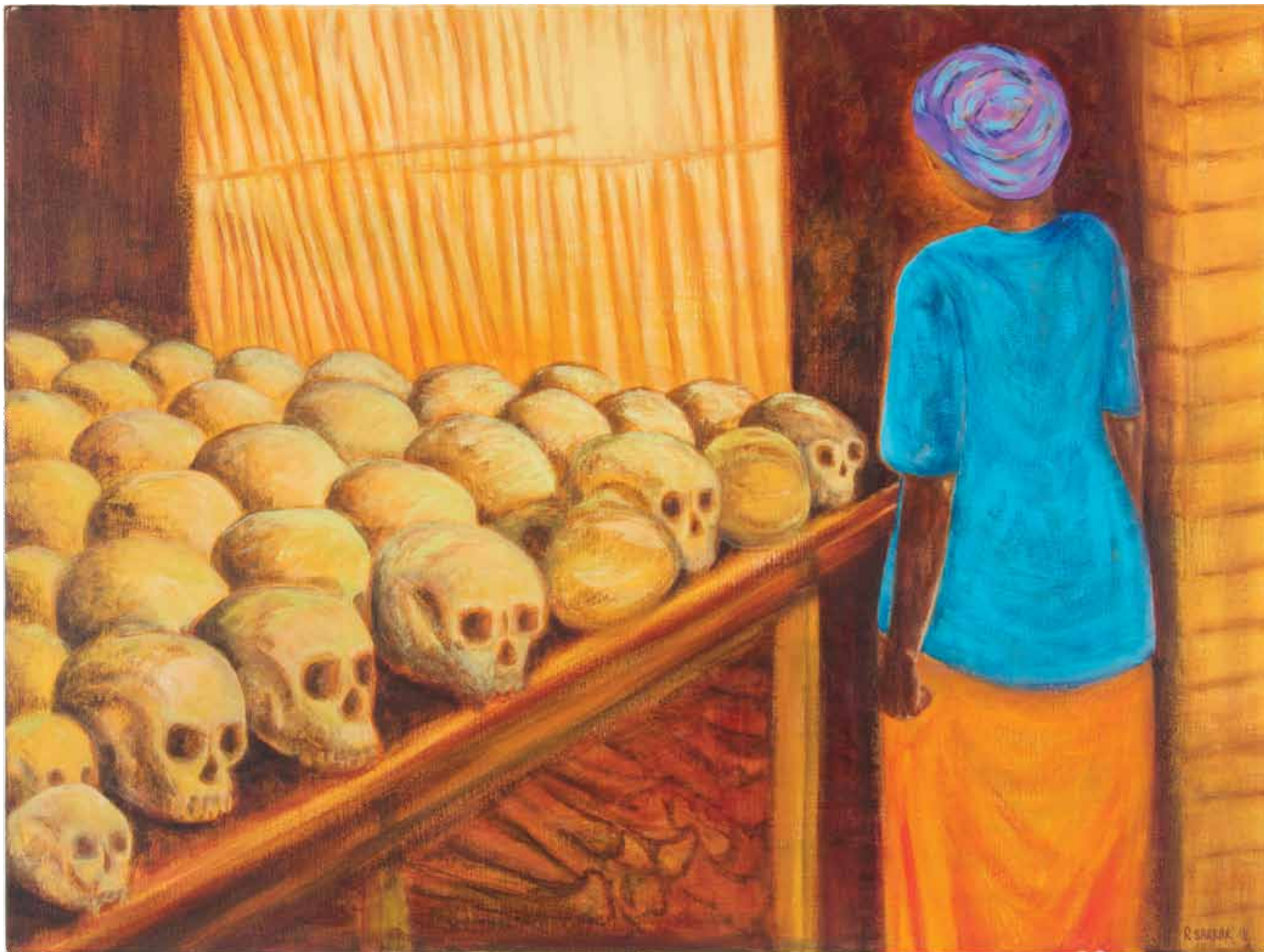


Murambi-Kigali Memorial Centre, Rwanda

30.25 x 40.25

Acrylic on canvas

2011



Genocide victims in Darfur

35.5 x 51.5
Oil on canvas
2011



Widows in Afghanistan

30 x 36

Oil on canvas

2011



The 'Island of Tears' Widows' Memorial, Belarus

39.75 x 27.75

Oil on canvas

2011



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All painting measurements in inches, height before width

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The Loomba Foundation was established in the UK on 26 June 1997. It was created by Lord and Lady Loomba by charitable trust deed, and has sister charities in India and the USA.

The inspiration came from Lord Loomba's late mother – and Reeta Sarkar's grandmother – Shrimati Pushpa Wati Loomba, who became a widow at the age of 37 in the Punjab in India. Although she had never received any formal schooling herself, she succeeded in educating her seven children single-handed.

The Loomba Foundation was launched in London in March 1998, in the presence of the then Prime Minister, The Rt. Hon. Tony Blair MP and his wife Cherie Blair. The Foundation also received the support of the Prime Minister of India, The Honourable Atal Behari Vajpayee, who inaugurated the Foundation in New Delhi on 31 March 1999 by lighting a lamp at his residence, in the presence of the British High Commissioner, Sir Rob Young and the renowned BBC correspondent Sir Mark Tully OBE. The Foundation was honoured that Cherie Blair, who became the first Patron of the Foundation in 1998, agreed to become the President of the Foundation, inaugurating Loomba House in London in September 2004, in the presence of the Indian High Commissioner, HE Shri Kamlesh Sharma.

Sir Richard Branson, Chairman of Virgin Atlantic, supported the Foundation by making an Appeal on BBC Radio 4 in support of the Foundation in 2000. He has also raised over £500,000 for the Foundation through three 'Change for Children' Appeals on Virgin flights worldwide. He became Patron-in-Chief of the Foundation in 2004 and has supported the Foundation's work further by attending its fundraising events in India in 2004 and in South Africa in 2006.

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