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YUVATI MUDRA EXPRESSION(S) OF YOUNG WOMEN



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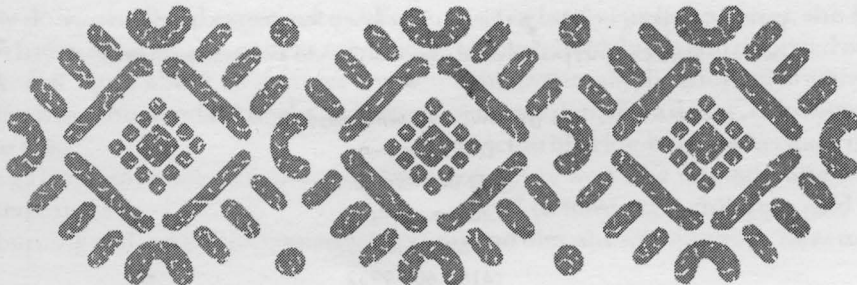
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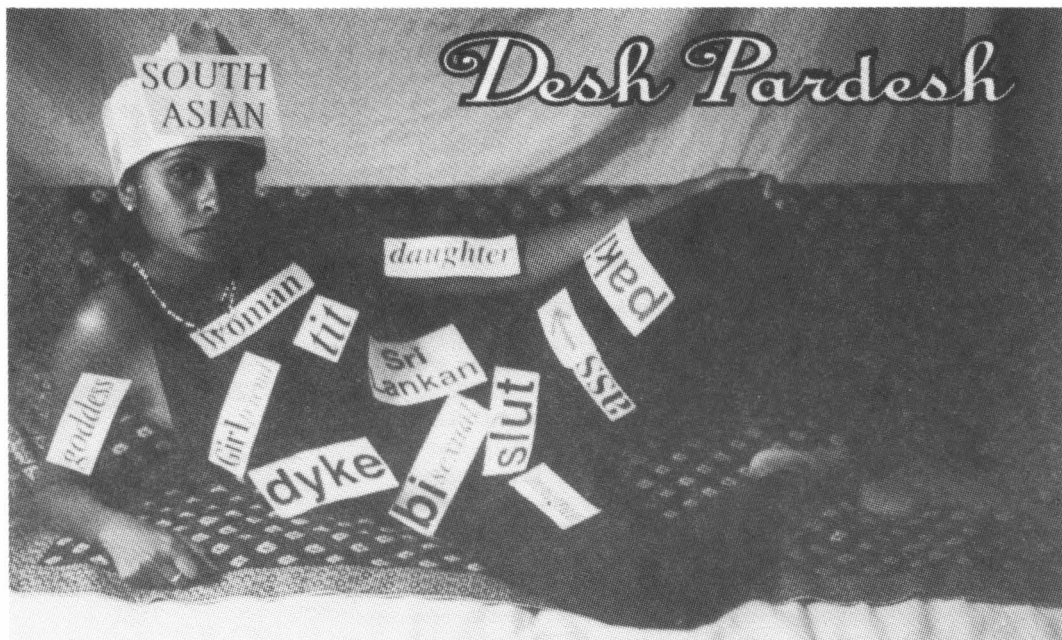
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Exploring the Politics of South Asian Cultures in the West

Photo by Rachel Kalpana James

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So You Think You Know the Truth about Indian Women?

by Manesha Deckha and Rima Banerji

"India? Isn't that the place where they do all those terrible things to women?"

This question was posed to me by my white employer this summer during a temporary housecleaning job I had taken. There I was on the floor, kneeling with my hand in mid-ground and I suddenly felt as if I was back in one of my anthropology or political science courses. I got up slowly, my voice cracking from the rage shooting through my body and met my white employer's eyes, preparing to do what I have done in countless conferences: dispel the myths about Indian women.

Perhaps before I go any further it would be helpful to list those myths that I am constantly told really do apply to the experiences of all women in India. After all, this culture seems to think it knows more about us than we know about ourselves. The standard myths go something like this:

1. Indian girls are not wanted/loved/appreciated/taken care of
2. Bride-burning and sati are the common fates

of all married women.

3. Everybody is into aborting female fetuses.
4. Indian women are submissive servants for their husbands, and they're all heterosexual.
5. Arranged marriages are always oppressive situations and women are forced into them.

According to Western conceptions, the life of a female can be summarized as follows:

A female child is conceived but aborted immediately upon discovery of its sex. If she is born, then she is killed right after birth. If she isn't killed, she is subjected to emotional, physical, and mental abuse, and her male siblings are favoured over her. Then she is married off at a young age. If not, she is confined to household duties and deprived of an education. Eventually she is forced to marry someone who will demand a dowry. Of course she will be a victim of bride-burning because the amount of dowry won't be enough. She will be pressured to have male children. And if her husband dies, she will, naturally, have to kill herself

too. These notions are simplistic and indicative of ignorance to say the least as - the realities and complexities of Indian women's lives are not addressed. The basic message portrayed through these messages is that India is a land of misogyny and has an exclusive monopoly on patriarchy. The intent of this piece is not to imply that India is a haven for females, free of violence against women. Rather, it is to dispel the myths apparently held by many in the West that India has patented woman-hating and somehow has global control when it comes to gruesome atrocities committed against females.

It is not hard to understand why these images pervade popular Western thought. Through distorted and decontextualized images in the media, sensationalism, and ethnocentric biases, which see societies of Colour as "savage". The common perception which emerges of Indian women is one of downtrodden mules who are regularly subjected to the most horrendous of abuses. Of course, this image is often attached to most women from nations of Colour but India glares prominently as a country where the worst brutalities are committed.

With regards to sexism, India is not depicted as it should be: a patriarchal society like most others, which must work to rid itself of

gender discrimination. Instead the assumption is that the "enlightened West" has progressed beyond countries like India, in its treatment of women.

Justifications for colonialism and the neo-imperialist project of "development" are often based on the concept that these countries are backward and need Western "guidance".

Perhaps another list would best illustrate this point. The following is a parallel list of claims about North American women that is advanced by some people in our countries as gross generalizations as the West currently does about us. This list would instill a similar picture of misinformation framed in ignorance.

1. North American girls are all geared toward and encouraged, to enter pink ghetto jobs.
2. North American women are all size 2, with large breasts and no hips.
3. All North Americans believe in the beauty ideal, and are eager to deform their bodies through plastic surgery.
4. North American women are either only interested in keeping their "Tide In and Dirth Out!", pathologically attached to washing machines and microwaves as moms and housewives, or are all callous, cold, career bitches.
5. Love marriages are solely based on sex with no regard for compatibility, so no wonder they end in divorce or separation.
6. North American women are all white, middle class, young, blonde, and heterosexual.

Clearly these statements severely misrepresent Western women. How offended would you be as a North American woman if you were to read statements like these in bestselling books, or subtly alluded to in scholarly journals as told to you by a liberal non-North American who visited/read about/ had a friend from North America and who possesses the definitive right to judge an entire population and society?



Artwork: Mariam Khan Durrani

Perhaps you would also feel that tremor of rage that we so often feel when such statements are routinely asserted throughout Western culture. Do you think that you are a cultural apologist for opposing the claims above as universal norms, or are you sincerely trying to stop the dissemination of misinformation so that a fair, complete, and accurate picture may finally emerge? Remember that we are not dealing with simple stereotypes; these beliefs influence international policy and shape the ways we are seen. We are denied our identities, robbed of our own diverse voices.

So the next time you hear such declarations about Indian women or any other oppressed peoples, inform yourself so that you may have the tools to better assess these views and speak out against these racist conceptions. Recognize that there are women of Indian origin who do not fit these stereotypes - and you have just read the words of only two of us.

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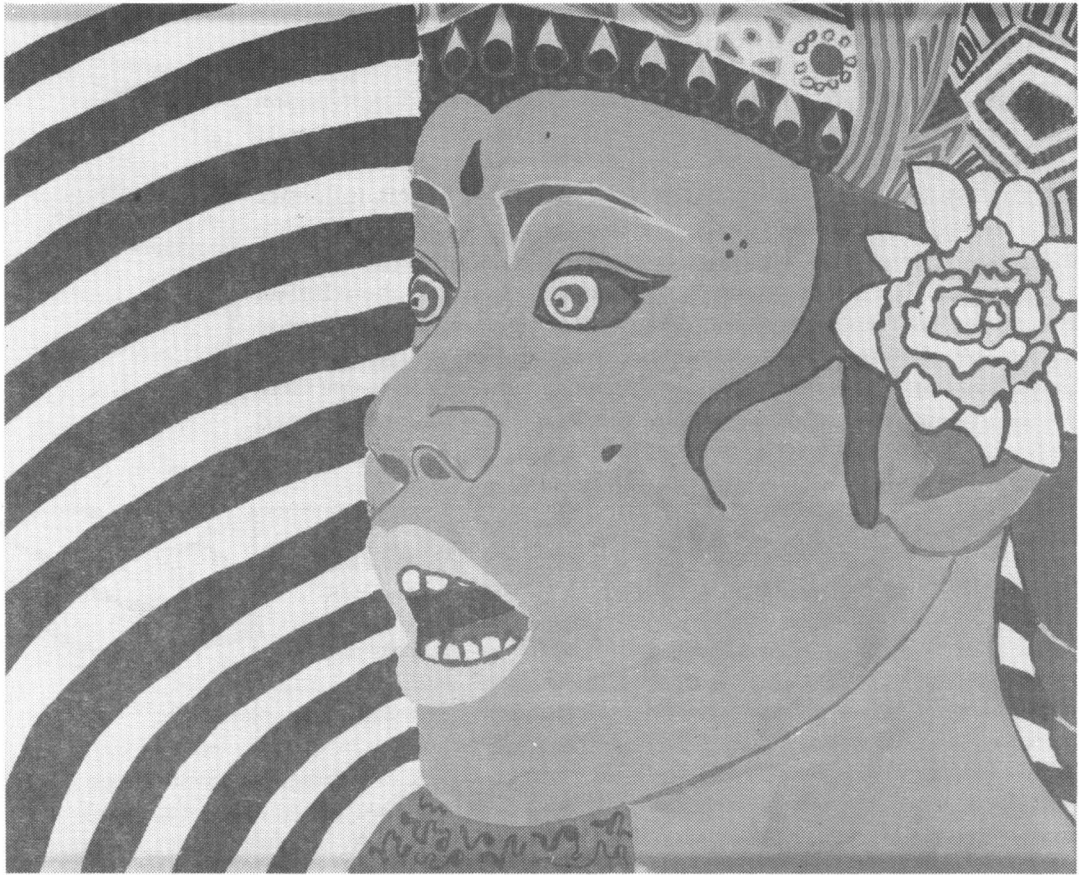
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Artwork: Melanie Liwanag Aguila

The Day The Bubble Burst And Mango Chutney Saved The Earth!

by Dilara Ally

The actor Italian/Russian fades to a slight buzz. Taz enters the stage and begins to set up the puja table. First she takes out a piece of gum, unwraps it and begins chewing and blowing huge bubbles. Then she lights the incense, setting out the green leaves of coconut, fake plaintain trees bearing unripe fruit, mango leaves, rice, sugar, sandalwood paste, some artificial flowers. As she lights each of the eight candles she says the following lines:

Eight forms has Atmani immortal elemental Self,
And these are water, first created thing;
And fire, which speeds the sacrifice begun;
The priest; and time's dividers, moon and sun;
The all-embracing ether, path of sound;
The earth, wherein all seed of life are found;
And air, the breath of life: may she draw near,
Revealed in these, and bless those gathered here.

Suddenly centre stage, there is a huge and magnificent explosion: lights, smoke, sound and the smell of incense. All the eight lights of the candles have been blown out. Out of this cloud, steps a fairly rotund and dark brown beautiful older woman. She is dressed in a sari and bright new reebox.

This explosion shakes the theatre and the lights go on and off. In a state of confusion, some screaming "Get the lights. What happened? We go on in fifteen. etc..." all the actors leave the stage except Shambhu who is left on stage. He finds a spot and then lies down to go to sleep.

Shambhu: Sleep is my best friend.

Intervention of the brown feet

Atmani

Greetings, to all who walk with brown chuppals.

Taz stunned looks around, then she looks at her feet.

Taz

Ahhh - Doc Martins. And you are ...

Atmani

It is I.

Taz

Oh, it's you. We've been waiting. I've heard you are good with special effects. What took you so long?

Atmani

I come from across the seas. From a time past.

Taz

Oh yeah. Well, let's get moving, we haven't got a lot of time.

Atmani

Peace be with you, as you begin your dream into the cosmic beauty of the Self.

Taz

Peace --- not! *(She picks up the flare gun and pulls the trigger) KA-BOOM! (Atmani jumps in fright).* God, I love that sound.

Atmani

My goddessness! No, no, no. Tat tvam asi. Truth is within us.

Taz

Keep it simple, eh. You haven't got a lot of time before Shakuntala opens.

Atmani

Good, then I have come just in time. But I am not interested in the ventriloquism of a Dead Brown Man.

Taz

Yeah, but tech effects are awesome. Noise, you know. Are you set up?

Atmani

This is truly a season of tension and turmoil.

Taz

(with great pleasure) Yup. Okay, without a cue to cue the actors will need time to adjust to all your technical effects. *(Taz blows a huge bubble with her gum).*

Atmani

What is this pink flesh you chew? Paan?

Taz

Bubble gum. You want some? Banana-Pineapple-Grape? Or Very Berry Strawberry? Here have the Very Berry Strawberry, it has a really explosive centre *(She gives it to Atmani, who taking it unwraps and puts it in her mouth and begins to chew).*

Atmani

Mmmmmm. I never knew pink flesh could taste so good. But I must not detain any longer, I have come to give birth to a revolution.

Taz

They said your sound and lighting effects were good.

Atmani

Like the moon and sun, my story will shine for Shakuntala, its spot of ark.

Taz

So what do you have in mind? Blood gushing from the sleek deer as the King rages through the

forest! Or loud thundering sounds of Indra's chariot dashing through the heavens? Or, how about - demons guts exploding over the earth as the King cuts them down?

Atmani

It is I, Atmani, my brown lovely.

Taz

Isn't that a bit much?

(In order to convince Taz of who she is, Atmani goes over to an area of the white wall and kisses it, as she does so, it turns brown. Then as she walks the length of the stage, the floor behind her once white turns brown, leaving a well defined path of brownness).

Taz

Wow! *(She touches the areas once white, now brown).* How'd you do that!? You know I once worked with Robert Lepage. He had some great lighting tricks, but he sure could learn a thing or two from you.

Atmani

Yes, the glorious virtues of the Great White Way!

(She turns around and blows a kiss to the path she had created behind her, it turns white once again. She blows another kiss in the direction of the brown spot on the white wall and it again becomes white).

Taz

Well, I'll let you get on with your work, that's why you are here after all.

(Pause. Atmani goes over to the props table. Intrigued by the flare fun, she picks it up and loads it. Taz is watching her).

Taz

Hey, do you know what you're doing?

Atmani

I am deeply saddened that you still question my ancient wisdom. *(The flare gun backfires. KA-BOOM! Atmani is thrown).* No matter. Enlightenment is not cheap for either party involved. *(pause)* Let us begin with this lost treasure Shakuntala, once again this lotus flower blooms for the western soul.

Taz

Hey a great play doesn't just bloom it erupts. Tairov, you know the Russian director, he opened his Kamerny Playhouse with Shakuntala. I read that it was a colour volcano of scenic dimensions.

Atmani

Yes, he was quite anxious to be the first one to discover this yet uncharted territory.

Taz

Well, personally, having read Notes of A Director, I know it was because he wanted to forge new modes of creativity, to break with the past, you know. He was humbled by the grandeur, power and tenderness of Kalidasa's poetry.

Atmani

Power. Yes. Penis in hand, ready to plant his seed in the dark continent of Indian theatre.

Taz

He went all the way to Paris and London and spent days at a time in the Indian rooms of the different museums.

Atmani

White Man's Little India.

Taz

No, it's only on the stage, with actors, he can give the audience a taste of India.

Atmani

The how-clean-and-white-can-I-keep-my-hands approach. Quite effective.

Taz

You don't understand. The man was a genius. I think he's the theatrical predecessor to Steven Spielberg.

Atmani

How do you know so much of what these Dead White Men think?

Taz

University.

Atmani

Graduated elimination.

Taz

I like it.

Atmani

I worry about the future of our brown blood. So hungry, they have filled their tummies with too much whitebread unaware of where real nutrition lies.

Taz

I try to stay away from health food, I can't stand tofu. Ugh, it's so ugly. I hope you're not one of those New Age freaks.

Atmani

New Age? No, no I am from the Vedic Age.

(A gunshot).

Taz

I gotta go. Your cues are marked. *(Hands her the script).* Good luck, ahh what did you say your name was again? Artemis?

Atmani is left alone on the platform.

Lights come up on a man who stands holding his rifle out towards the audience. Pause. Pivoting he shifts and points gun in another direction. Pause. Again pivots and points gun in another direction. This is an eternal action. He is making a fake shooting noise, "Maaaaaaa". Behind him on a projection screen is an enlarged version of the profile of this image.

Act One Begins Scene 1

(Atmani turns her attention to the man who is in a tableau).

Atmani

Lord Krishna! This is some kind of Oediprick's fantasy! *(She walks around the frozen man takes her gun out and stuffs it into the end of the rifle. The noise and movement stop).*

Sound of a santoor. Lights come up on our second tableau. It is the ideal Indian beauty. She is clothed in a shiny rich sari, adorned with jewels and flowers, painted in kohl and mehndi and her mouth is taped shut. Behind her is projected an image of a flower, preferably a lotus in bloom. In the corner of the image is a man's face. The woman attempts to capture the coyness of the flower. Atmani walks over to her.

Atmani

She seems a flower whose fragrance none has tasted,

A gem uncut by a worker's tool

A branch no desecrating hands have wasted,

Fresh honey, beautifully cool.

She might as well be hung up to dry.

Atmani claps her hands twice and like Draupadi's sari the woman begins spinning endlessly like a spool of thread, as she does her sari unravels. So begins the narrative.

I am Indra. I am Shiva. I am Agni. I am Varuna and Vishnu, I am Kali. Shakti, Parvati, Uma, Sati, Durga, Usha, Sasavrati, and Bhavani, I am them all. What is one, people call by different names. The earth is my feet, the atmosphere my belly, the sky my head and water my blood. The sun and moon are my eyes, the wind is my breath and fire is my speech. When lightning flashes, I am smiling. I have

given birth to space, air, fire, water and earth only to find that I can hear, touch, see, taste and smell my children working themselves in happy isolation. When a child is born, it is born into delusion. The delusion of separation which comes from hate and desire. Without community there is no freedom only temporary cease-fire between this person and their anguish. Muth karo! It is time to become again.

Lights down.

Dilara Ally is a playwright and associate artistic producer at Cahoots Theatre Projects. She holds a Master's in Drama from the University of Toronto and has worked in the past with Cahoots Theatre Projects, Kala Nidhi Fine Arts Of Canada and the Company of Sirens. At present, she continues to work on her first full length play, The Day The Bubble Burst and Mango Chutney Saved The Earth (excerpts of which premiered at Nightwood's Groundswell Festival at the end of March). In July at the Toronto Fringe Festival, Ms. Ally will be collaborating with Theatre Aside on Don't Forget To Breathe, a play which explores the horrors of the war in Bosnia through the metaphor of a foot-race.



Pictured here is Dilara Ally

Black Candle:

Poems about Women from India, Pakistan & Bangladesh

by Chitra Divakaruni
Calyx Books, P.O. Box B,
Corvallis OR 97330

Reviewed by Mina Kumar

Mina Kumar was born in Madras and lives in New York City. Her work has appeared in The Kayon Review, Turnstile, Christopher Street and Manushi, among other publications.

Having read and enjoyed Chitra Divakaruni's poetry in literary magazines, I approached her slim volume of poems with eagerness.

Divakaruni's gift for imagery had made me take notice of her name, and I looked forward to more of the same.

Indeed, there is more of the same. It is no accident that several of Divakaruni's poems were inspired by films or photographs. Her visual sense is keen and lyrically articulated, from "the green call of frogs [that]/rose from the swamps like vapor" to the "warm earth [that] closes over my fingers/ moist as a mouth". Sometimes, Divakaruni's diction is peculiarly stilted, ("as she swayed, arms raised / in the love dance of Radha"), apparently in an effort to write in an 'Indian English'.

Yet, even as Divakaruni makes linguistic efforts to root the poems in the experience of her characters, there is no question that the gaze in *Black Candle* is a Western gaze. One interesting example of this is in "The Brides Come to Yuba City", a poem about Sikh women coming to meet their husbands for the first time, laden with "kurtas and thin white gauze/ to wrap their uncut hair". Why "uncut hair"? These women certainly wouldn't articulate it that way; from their perspective, it is simply to wrap hair. The "uncut" is in the line for the benefit of the Western reader.

The subtitle, "*poems about women from India, Pakistan and Bangladesh*" reveals the unmistakable ethnographic cast of this collection. The poems themselves have nothing to do with the political boundaries that would make the title relevant. Having set itself up as a poetic anthropology, *Black Candle* pretends to illuminate the lives of South Asian women. The contents of these lives are as follows: death in labour, sati, dowry deaths, spousal battery, female infanticide, abortion, bad arranged marriages etc. If the

persona in the poem is a Muslim, the poem will be about purdah or the husband marrying again. If the woman is from Trinidad, she is having an affair with a white man who hides her from his white friends. If there is sex, the women do not enjoy it. Even in a poem on a Raghbir Singh photograph of a group of men eating ice-cream, Divakaruni writes that they will soon “beat/wives and children as necessary”, as if her imagination could not extend to men who actually like their wives.

Individually, there is nothing wrong with subject matter of these poems, but as a collection, the pathos of each poem is undercut by the relentlessness of *Black Candle*'s jeremiad. Then too, the portrait of the South Asian woman is reduced to a Katherine Mayo stereotype. If South Asian womanhood consisted of nothing but these endlessly suffering Patient Griseldas, then empathy is eventually driven out by scorn. Only two of the poems, one about a group of Sikh women dancing the garba, and the other about a woman on a train enacting her revenge on the male gender, show any other kind of emotion. One, perhaps the weakest, describes a batik of Kali. By the end of *Black Candle*, I began to long for Manto's Mozail or the ripe Punjabi women of Balraj Khanna's novels. The Keralite fishwives in Divakaruni's "Song of the Fisherwife" are pallid echo of Thakazhi Sivasankara Pillai's Karuthamma. Even when one of Divakaruni's protagonists chooses to pursue her sexuality, the moment is dismissed with "my disobedient lips parted under his". The women in *Black Candle* have no character except for their suffering.

As the collection rolls along, what happens is the antithesis of synergy: the value of each poem is diminished by the one before it. I look forward to Divakaruni's next collection in the hope that her talent will be accompanied by judiciousness.



Artwork: Melanie Liwanag Aguila



Still from *Ang Paghangad Ng Kalayaan*.
Waste basin site of Dolefil right beside a village in Polomok, Philippines

A documentary video
entitled "*Ang Paghangad Ng Kalayaan*"

Longing for Freedom

Work in Progress
by Melanie Liwanag Aguila

"...Kailangan nating magkaisa para makamit ang ating layunin, at higit sa lahat para makamit ang kalayaan matagal nang hinahangad. (We have to unite to achieve our goals and most of all to achieve the freedom we have been longing for. For a long, long time."

- Perlita Lopez, garment worker and chair of Kilusan Ng Manggagawang Kababaihan (Womyn Workers' Movement)

Ang Paghangad Ng Kalayaan (Longing For Freedom), is a 45 minute documentary video with interviews and songs from womyn workers in industry, agriculture and services, and womyn labour organizers in the Philippines. *Ang Paghangad Ng Kalayaan* constructs the lives and realities of Pinay workers in the context of poverty (80% of the population are living in poverty and 32.3 million, 49.7%, of the population in the Philippines are womyn), of landlessness (85% of the population who earn their living from the land neither own nor have access to that land), of foreign domination (the Philippines has a debt of 33 billion US dollars to the International Monetary

Fund), and of patriarchy (in Manila, womyn workers make an average of 35% of men's wages).

Ang Paghangad Ng Kalayaan comes from an overseas Pinay who was born in Canada in a petty burgis family and her journey back home to the Philippines. She arrives at a place that she had seen through photographs of her at the age of 2, when she first went back home. In this time in history, the Philippines was under martial law by the dictatorship of Ferdinand Marcos. There are no indications of this in any of the photographs and so there is a need for her to go back and unveil the realities of the historical and current violent abuses of the state, now under the US-backed Ramos administration.

.....It is May 1st. Labour day. After a morning of videotaping educational games and activities with KMK (*Kilusan Ng Manggagawang Kababaihan*) womyn workers and their children in Rizal Park, we prepare ourselves for the march. Our sisters who are textile workers in Thailand and are here for the Kilusang Mayo Uno (the far left union) International Solidarity Affair labour conference, are in the front of our section. The excitement that you get when you're just about to walk on the streets and be as vocal as you want, joined by so many around you in protest, was even more heightened because for the first time this is my home.

But as we marched I knew that a similar protest would be happening at Parliament Hill in Ottawa against the North American Free Trade Agreement and the changes to employment policies.

As we rallied at Liwasang Bonifacio, I was captured by the voice, strength and conviction of a garment worker who spoke to over 70 thousand people, most of whom were womyn, participating in the rally. Translated from tagalog to english.

"The womyn workers are the first to be hit by retrenchment and lay offs. Over 1,000 womyn workers have already been affected. Because of the "brown-outs" womyn workers have to go home past midnight, in fear of attacks. We hope that those controlling the power shortages will not forget that 50% of the womyn experiencing extreme

violence are workers. Is the state ignoring violence against womyn? Have they developed a program to help womyn workers? That is why our sector of womyn workers (*Kilusan Ng Manggagawang Kababaihan*) are uniting to form a movement to end the hardships of Philippine womyn." We continued to march towards Malacanang Palace, President Ramos's place. For a very brief moment, I saw two youths, their heads covered so you can only see the skin on their hands. They painted along the streets, messages of solidarity greetings from *Kabataang Makabayan*, Patriotic Youth - an association of youth and students, a member of the National Democratic Front.

"Ipagtanggol ang uri, ipaglaban ang bayan!
(Defend the working class, fight for the people!)"

As we reach Mendiola Bridge, the entrance to the palace, we were stopped by a barricade of three rolls of barbed wire and lines of armed police anti-riot men with combat shields, covering them. I was reminded of the same fear I felt in Toronto on the night of the anti-racism Rodney King rally against the racist backlash towards the Black community in 1991 on Yonge Street when we were face to face with armed anti-riot police units. This, Mendiola Bridge, is the site, I was later told, where 17 peasants were shot and killed by the police seven years ago, in 1987 during a peasant march for genuine agrarian reform at the time of the much wanted "democratic" Aquino administration.



A worker planting pineapples at Dolefil in Polomolok, Philippines.

Stills from *Ang Paghangad Ng Kalayaan (Longing For Freedom)*

These photos are taken at Dolefil, a foreign multinational company occupying 16.5 thousand hectares of Polomolok in South Cotabato, Mindanao. Approximately 90% of workers in the packaging and processing plant are womyn. (The men hold higher positions of managing, supervising and technical staff). Womyn make up approximately 30% of the workers in the fields picking and planting the pineapples.

Womyn workers develop rheumatism, simultaneous abortions, miscarriages, arthritis, kidney trouble, tuberculosis, migraines and damage to hearing as a result of exploitative working conditions. Womyn workers are also subject to sexual harassment and rape.

Dole is the #1 consumer of illegal chemicals that are hazardous to workers and people living in the area. These chemicals are produced and exported to the Philippines from the United States, Japan and Canada. A womyn worker's daily wage at Dolefil range from anywhere to approximately \$7/for an 8-hour day.

Workers and people living in the area are not allowed to eat the pineapples. Two years ago a Lumad woman (one of the indigenous nations) took a pineapple. The police took her life. They shot and killed her. There was an uprising where the Lumad and workers joined together in protest and up until now there is no police presence in the fields of Dolefil, Polomolok. There is a village beside the Dolefil packaging and processing plant. You can smell the stench of waste from the waste basin throughout this village and the chemicals and toxins from Dolefil destroys villagers' health, land and any crops they may grow. These pineapples, like many cash crop products from "third world countries", are grown and packaged by the blood, sweat, and land of the womyn workers and indigenous nations to be exported for "firstworld" consumption in capitalist countries like Canada.

For more information on *Ang Paghangad Ng Kalayaan*, you can contact:

Kilusang Ng Manggagawang Kababaihan - Toronto
11 Madison Avenue ● Toronto, ON M5R 2S2
phone (416)924-0851 ● fax (416)924-5356



A womyn worker at Dolefil in Polomolok, Philippines.

Growing Up In

R.R.#2 Kakabeka Falls

by Shereen Denetto

"Once upon a time, in a two-storey brick house, there lived two children, 'reen-Sher' and 'han-Mo'...' began our mother's (very) original bed-time stories. We would be soft, giggly bookends, cuddling up on either side of her. Before she had finished uttering this line, we would be shrieking with laughter, knowing that these two fearless, troublesome children whose adventures were about to unfold, were in fact ourselves, Shereen and Mohan.

We actually did live in a two-storey brick house, an old Scottish homestead, thirty minutes outside of thunder Bay in Northern Ontario. We were the only "East Indians" (my parents learned quickly to use this term after getting too many queries about tribal allegiances) living in the countryside that I knew of. We were the only brown kids in school. My brother remembers a Black child attending the school for a short time (but then my brother also remembers being bathed as an infant). I think we were too much of an oddity to be considered a threat and therefore faced little overt racism. In fact, we were allowed to be "kind of cute". But the insidious effects of being surrounded by white children and white teachers in a white

supremacist culture will always be with us.

I do not recall being taught anything about India or Indian immigrants in school. Ever. I did however, learn a great deal about (white) Australia one year, because my Grade 4 teacher had travelled there over the summer. We made struffed koala bears during art, learned Australian Christmas songs for music, hopped about like kangaroos during gym. Too bad she hadn't gone to India (or perhaps it was a blessing).

My partner has two giant black Bouvier dogs, each covered with copious amounts of black hair. I tease him, saying that he loves me because I so closely resemble his dogs - big nose, lots of black hair and very stubborn.

He's a white man. He, as were all my white hetero male friends (the numbers dwindle as I get older and wiser), was screened for and passed the "Brown Woman Test". It's based on a disgusting phenomenon a group of brown women and I, discovered years ago in university. We found that there was a group of white hetero men who had a "thing" for brown women. We only discovered this when we got together as a group. We learned that each of

us knew/had been come on to by Jeff, and oh really, Bob too, and Brian as well!!!!?. Soon we had a list. We would nod our heads knowingly as Jason walked around with yet another woman of colour on his arm. We would warn one another about such men.

Sure our erotic impulses are shaped by all sorts of suspect forces, I often wonder if there is such a thing as “natural, healthy sexuality,” but this was too much!

My first job after university was in a largely white, pro-feminist shelter for abused women and their children. Read: a shelter run by white women for white women. I was one of the first “culturally and racially diverse” staff hired. Read: I was the boss’s pet brown woman who was expected not to make waves and to attend all Board functions in bright ethnic clothing. Unfortunately, I was unable to fulfil even these minimal requirements for a “token minority person”.

I was offended by little in the beginning and by everything at the end. My boss would continually refer to me as, “calm, sweet and graceful”!! ME?? Me, the woman who had created a new language out of swearing, who had spent hours with co-workers cackling and plotting new and more painful ways of torturing the men (only in our minds!) who tortured the women we worked with, me, who on my first night shift, had to tell the police (towering over me) that I would not divulge information because they did not have the proper documentation ... me, GENTLE AND SWEET??

Okay, so I get a bit stressed-out by this woman. In reality I can be quite gentle and sweet (as per my name), but I was never that unidimensional, stale image that she imposed on my living, breathing self.

As a teenager, I was not-white but not-

brown. It was a strange state of being to not know who I was. It’s funny because I don’t think anyone else had a problem labelling me: Indian, girl, pudgy, shy, non-entity. My few friends were white and they were my sisters. A few of us are still close as family, and I know I am lucky to have this, but I wonder what, if anything, would have been different about my life if I had had friends who were South Asian. Maybe I would not have been aghast when I realized my genitals did not look anything like a “moist pink rose”. Maybe I would not have been haunted by images of blond-white-woman-who-dresses-wee-and-is-totally-together (etched against the blackness of my closed eyelids she strides, confident, sexy, sun glittering in her hair) when I found out my first parnter had screwed around with someone in my absence. Maybe.

“The Blackies are coming! They’re coming up the drive!”

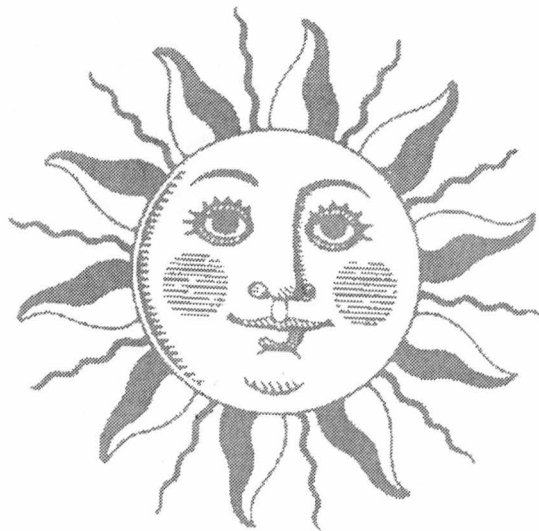
In the country, when we were growing up, neighbours did not always call first, they just drove up to visit. Although a very nice custom, it could pose problems as we would often be caught “curry-handed”. We would quickly go to the sink, wash off our hands and greet our visitors with big smiles, cutlery in hand, “We were just finishing up lunch. Come on in!”

The lettering on the door to our new porch proudly announced, “Crawford, Reedhead and Co. Chartered Accountants” in flaking, gold paint.

Dad loved to haunt places like the Salvation Army, and would faithfully look up notices of building demolitions and garage sales in order to obtain, “very useful, top quality, very cheap” objects. When we had to build a new front porch, he scored a wonderful find, a door that fit perfectly

with just a touch of sanding, good, solid wood, the kind of door that had lasted fifty years and would last fifty more. We never gave it a second thought. Now, I look back, and laugh. We lived with that door for years and years. I have never seen the entrance of anyone's house (not even an accountant's) graced with such an eccentric greeting.

Shereen Denetto was born in Canada, raised by her two brave parents in rural Northern Ontario. She has one sibling who claims he can cook better dahl than she. Currently she lives in Ottawa, soon moving to Toronto, in order to pursue a career in the margins as a social activist and a community developer.

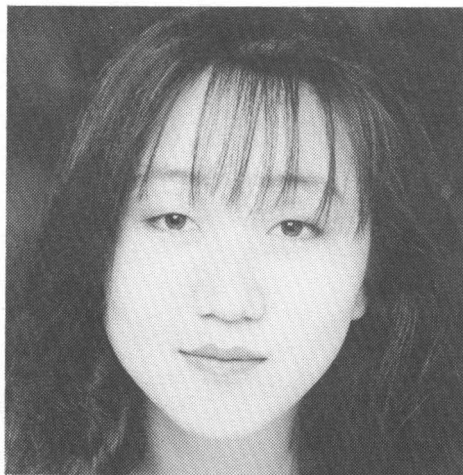


M.J. Kang

For a long time, being Korean-Canadian never bothered me. As a child, an Asian person was either an evil dragon, a prostitute, or a refugee. No one I knew was Asian because they didn't fit into any of the three categories. Asia was a mystical place where only bad kids lived; sent there to be beaten by evil dragons, turned into prostitutes and then returned to North America as refugees: my rationale for portrayals in the media and taunts I heard from strangers. Growing up, I knew I was Korean, just not Asian.

In its initial draft, "Noran Bang: The Yellow Room", my first play dealing with a Korean situation, contained some old generalizations such as Asians having difficulty with pronouncing r's. The use of Korean words was also limited because I felt each time a character spoke Korean, another line of dialogue would be needed. During Cahoot's workshop series "lift Off '93" to which *Noran Bang* was a part of, both Marion de Vries, my dramaturge and Jean Yoon, the assistant dramaturge, helped decondition my fear of being Asian.

This year, I made a voyage to Korea, the first time since my immigration to Canada at the age of two. I went there expecting nothing, but in the back of my head, believed it'll be an incredible experience



that could change my life. Like many I've talked to, the first thing I noticed was the sea of black hair and pale faces. Being Asian wasn't unique or mysterious, more of a, "Yeah, so what? Welcome to the club."

During my identity search, I've learned about responsibility. It is okay to show people in less than positive situations as long as it's truthful. If it's done just for the sake of a story or fear, stereotypes tend to be reinforced.

In Canada, I love being part of a country with such diversity. I know I'll never get bored riding the subways. I also know, I belong to a special society where the idea of sharing and honouring different communities, is starting to emerge.

Understand forgive but never accept

by G.K.

Her gentle eyes were like a soft breeze
Sweeping through a garden of flowers,
yet smothering none.
Glowing and fair skin
perfectly shaped lips
cascading, hair, natural grey highlights.
Her hands transformed the ordinary to extraordinary
Her style of dress was both gentle and striking.

Her house and heart were open to all
who needed anything - especially love
She was a friend to all - young and old
Her famous Indian tea brewed with loving touch
was welcomed with delight by all
who happened to pop in each Sunday afternoon.

She was the wife of a simple sincere man
the mother of three young girls
who never went unnoticed by anybody
because she took delicate care
to make them look their finest
“Mummy Ji” would be the first word on her daughters’ lips
when they stumbled through the door
Her arms and “chunni” were pure comfort
after a difficult day in the harsh world.

Yet there was another side to this woman that only few knew
Those few were her three daughters, especially the oldest one - me!
She not only knew how to make her house a haven,

but also how to make it a scorching hell.
Sometimes, her demands and expectations left me totally bewildered.
Sometimes, if I did not understand her "ishara" I was doomed.
Sometimes, I had to exist as if walking on egg shells.
Sometimes, her words were like venom
which consumed my heart, soul, and mind.
Sometimes, those same beautiful hands which wiped away my tears
ever so gently,
would strike me hard and with so much force
that they left me like a whimpering animal.
Sometimes, I was engulfed with so much anger, hate, and confusion
that I would curse her to hell into my pillow,
over and over and over again.
And after each beating,
I would shed a sea of tears during sleepless nights.

This poem describes the reality and life that I once lived. The memories of these experiences still haunt and torture me today, and I still shed many tears. Now you may ask yourself, how could a woman who was so caring and loving inflict so much cruelty on her daughter. Believe me she did, and I suffered it. In the next couple of pages, I am going to share with you a very painful and difficult chapter of my life.

It has taken me almost 14 years to come to the frightening revelation that my beloved and deceased mother physically, emotionally, and psychologically abused me during my childhood and adolescent years. Since then I have constantly asked myself, "Why did my mother inflict so much cruelty upon me?" This single question has taken me on a very painful and disturbing journey to find an answer or answers. And that is what I wish to share with you straight from my heart.

The physical abuse was bad. It was terrible. It was painful. And at times life threatening. Every time my mother abused me, she left me like a whimpering animal. After each beating I would stumble and limp upstairs, lock myself

in my room, and curse, cry, and bitch into my pillow. At times I felt so bad that I would hit myself for allowing me to get hurt over and over again. I mean, didn't I just get it the first time, the second, the third? Why was I so damn stupid? Why didn't I just learn? At times I thought it was just a really bad nightmare that would not end. But when I felt the bruises, aches, and almost broken bones, I knew it was real. When my mother beat me, I so desperately wished that a big black hole would just swallow me so I could escape. Yet none of this happened. I would only escape her claws when she was through with me.

The physical abuse was always accompanied with emotional abuse. My mother called me very disgusting, belittling, demeaning, and dehumanizing words. It was the constant degrading that was more powerful, and as a result, I acted that way. And I kept on getting in trouble. I fell into the trap of the self-fulfilling prophecy. Because my mother, who gave me life and was my mentor, degraded me enough, I began to live up to the image of me that was held up by her. The abuse damaged my self-esteem and self-confidence. I became very shy, withdrawn,

and depressed. Personally for me, it was not the slaps, the punches, and other physical abuse that hurt the most, but rather, it was ongoing humiliation, name calling, and the general degradation that hurt the most and left the real scars.

To get a grip on what happened to me in my childhood and adolescent years now, I have read numerous theories on child abuse; disclosed my abuse to some very caring people; analyzed the circumstances under which the abuse occurred; and have come to an understanding of the effects and consequences of the abuse on me. But the most enlightening and at the same time very painful path that has shed some light on my troubled past, has been analyzing my mother's history and socialization from her birth to death.

Both in India and Canada, my mother was oppressed throughout her whole life by her father, step-mother, grandmother, in-laws, and husband. Her life was always at one point or another controlled by someone else other than herself. She had no power over her desires, needs, and wants. And she lived a very stressful life.

Psychologically, all this maltreatment affected my mother, it affected how she perceived mother-in-laws and their roles in the South Asian family; how she perceived children and death (she lost her second daughter due to malnutrition); and how she perceived fathers and husbands and their roles. It also affected how she perceived her roles as a daughter, wife, daughter-in-law, and mother. And finally most importantly, the maltreatment affected her perception of her own life and value as a human being.

Similar to many cultures, in the South Asian culture, a woman gets her complete identity

from her family. She is not seen as an individual with a unique identity, needs, desires, and worth. But rather, as somebody else's daughter, wife, mother, daughter-in-law. When my mother came to Canada, her first and foremost responsibility was to look after the girls. Meaning she was completely responsible for our care, nourishment, behaviour, education, and socialization. Since my mother was responsible for education, and socialization. Since my mother was responsible for bringing us up, how we turned out would be a direct reflection on mom. Things like, I let an aunt buy me



a shirt when I should have known better, slept in on weekends, did not clean my room when told, did not wear what she told me to wear, did not eat what was prepared, let my sisters get hurt while playing, would get me in trouble. My mother submerged her identity in me, and she abused me because my improper behaviour would reflect onto her. In my mother's eyes she abused me because to her, I was destroying property, being impolite to an aunt, acting lazy, not keeping myself clean, neglecting myself in dress, not providing security for my sisters, and was spoiled. My father and other people would see the way I behaved and it would come back to my mother and her poor ability to parent me. My "irresponsible" behaviour would threaten the image of my mother as being a perfect mother. Perhaps she thought that the only way to discipline me, when I threatened her identity, was through physical, emotional, and psychological abuse. Maybe it made sense to my mother to physically punish me when I threatened her identity because one of her sex roles was so clearly defined as to function as an ideal/successful mother.

Someone has stated that "in a sexist society, men batter their children because they have power. Women batter their children because they have little power, except the power they can exercise over their children". At the time that my mother abused me, she did not have any reproductive rights, she was going through economic dependency, her own perceived lack of her ability to produce a son, demanding children, and poor marital relationship. She had a very subservient role in the family. yet when it came to her children, she was in a position of power. She used brutal, physical punishment and belittling emotional abuse as methods to control me. By using these methods, perhaps, she felt or believed that her ability to commit acts of violence against me was the only form of control or power she possessed to control and dominate me. Her abuse towards me was clearly and precisely the abuse of power. She committed the abuse to compensate for her perceived lack of loss of powerlessness!

In the final analysis, I have begun to comprehend the abuse, and most importantly I have begun to forgive my mother and her ill treatment towards me. The abuse has effected me in many profound ways. But I have started to recover and know for sure that I am a worthwhile human being who has a lot to offer. I know that my mother should have never hurt me the many ways that she did, therefore, I am willing to understand, forgive, but never accept the abuse. Most importantly, I want to start to heal my heart and soul which have been severely scarred by the abuse.

At this stage of my life, I have developed a healthy sense of self-esteem and self-confidence. I see myself as an individual with a unique and compassionate personality that is slowly emerging before me. I am currently doing masters in Social Work, and hoping to put my life experiences and education to good use, by working with South Asian women and youth.



Epilogue

by Amina Ally

I have come,
to stand by my mother,
for I am my mother's daughter.

my mother calls to me,
listen to how she weeps.
watch her,
she plants a bone in her freshly dug grave,
there she kneels by Eternity
blessing dirt with solitary tears.

my eyes shed visions that flow like
water over cliffs/that travel
through the mountain regions of
the past and beyond the valleys
of the present/my visions of
remembrance infuse streams of life
into an abandoned grave

she carves an epitaph in the slate-like skin of her
brown body,
it reads, "for my daughters,
 Inshallah*,
 may they forgive my sins"

my skin is a brown canvas
mapping out intricately carved
wrinkles, gold-plated stretch-marks
and jewelled scabs/fossilized
frescos lay buried in the
landscape of my body

memories lie waiting,
gifts made with nimble fingers,
scattered bones
and invisible words
between the cover of an unpublished book.

daughters harvest the bones of
mother bodies/kneading earth-
coloured clay until the marrow of
our mothers bursts forth with
telling
gracefully,
the silhouette sinks into the ground.
she lay motionless,
"who will wish me goodnight?",
says her one eye,
waiting wide open.

Hush now, mother.
I have come.

[*Inshallah: (trans.) Allah, be willing.]

The Quest

You wait at the edge of the water
 Feeding the soul with the deafening cries of the river.
Watching the sun go down,
 behind bare trees and purple stained mountains
After a display of passion's colour.
 And your waiting soul,
 remains in solitude; in a yearning quest for answers.
Never quite touching the soft death of sunlight
 Never holding the running water, still
 in your palms.
Never quenching the thirst,
 in your greedy soul.

Karma

Hiding stolen moments in my heart
I thought I had touched the wings of the dimming ecstasy
that never reverie bring.
Until I rummaged through old clothes
and found myself fit
into the old forgotten forms.
From which I had silently hid.

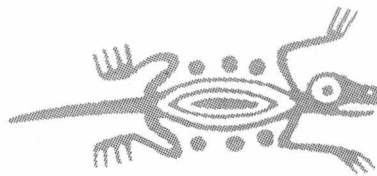
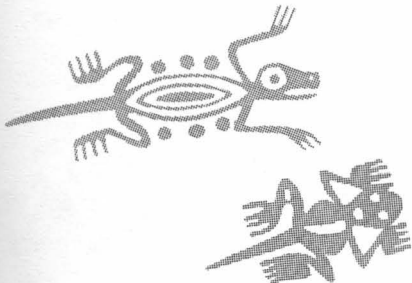
The Flight

Your wings create a pattern in the sky
as I trace your little movements
My feet are planted in the earth and as
I try
to uproot it, the ground slowly closes
on me.
I watch you hungrily
as you defiantly circle the sun.
My eyes lift to you and I run
into the shadows of your wings.
I think myself free, no bondage, no
links
And find myself with your wings.

Tshering, an editor and a journalist, is studying literature in Delhi. A Tibetan woman, Tshering is 24 and has been writing for a few years now.

Untitled

Oh, Mother Earth of bountiful powers
Who gave us birth
We have lost you
your protection
your wisdom
your love
We are lost children
orphans running aimlessly
without guidance
and vulnerable to all danger
In the jungle of life,
we are left alone to fight
against drugs, alcohol,
physical and sexual abuse,
pollution
... and your DESTRUCTION
Oh Mother!
Help us find you again
So we may find comfort in
your arms and together we shall
rise above the pain of our past
of our lost years apart

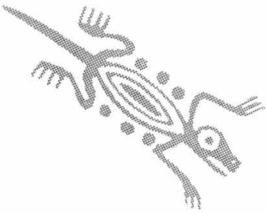


AUTOMATIC PILOT

Thoughts in my mind are vague and foggy
I don't know what I am thinking
yet, my body is moving
I am doing what I'm doing
Everything is sequential order
There is, yes, a master plan
But I am ignorant, unconscious
I am in a dream
Not knowing what will happen next
Many faces flash across my mind
many feelings tug at my heart
Words not yet spoken
Too scared to be heard
Touches yearning to touch
yet too far away to reach
Everything at a distance
Everyone Isolated from me
Alone in my breakdown

Untitled

Where was I?
On those vaguely familiar steps
On those lonely, isolated roads
far from anyone
Its like my whole life
from beginning to now
is weighing on my shoulders
All the devils within me
are out to play
Camouflaged
as skeletons running out of my chest

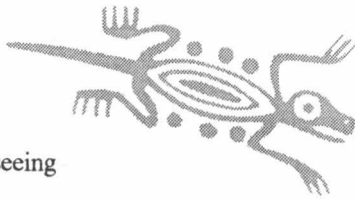


Control, Fear, Resistance, Release

Born to run
From one distance to another stop... to catch my
breath
Gifts are far from reality
Teasing pleasing but
disappearing
reappearing
A faint memory
Charged with insanity
Caught in a corner
Time my only friend
Waiting, Anticipating
non-participating
Neutral stance
Let myself DANCE

Untitled

Yes , I have never seen a falling star
But I have still made many wishes
my life was brutal and hard
Yet I still managed to smile
So here I am, with scars of the past,
And big, bright, curious eyes
to see the falling star I've dreamt of seeing
And here I am, smiling and bursting
with love, for my dreams are coming true
i pray my gratitude will be enough
My honor is strong, my body is worthy
I am blessed by the universe
I am an egg once again



Untitled

I can't read
or write
I can't feel
any peace of mind
I've only spoken
the same old
god awful speech

Oh, lord,
what have I done wrong
now

Go back to retrace my steps
but the job will never be done
as I use these blinded eyes
left without a perspective
Go back to see where I have lied
and where I've so handsomely
played the chicken
scared like shit
of doing something wrong
but, looks like that has
already been done

Playing the chicken
not facing
the lack of strength in me
Oh just sitting here in
self pity

Somebody give me a hug
and stroke my hair
and all will be o.k.
Although I'll still be on

the same track
starting from scratch
all over again
trying to find my innocence
no, no, I am not guilty
of these charges

in a hallway of fears
challenging the trust, love
I have earned
and through so called sympathy for me
I may give in
to not learning a lesson again

for it was I,
Mariam
who made the mistake
No one else
so get on up
strong
and find the sollution
Got to find my peace of mind.



Artwork: Mkd

Now I am at a place
wanderment challenges me
Rebellion pipes down
Action up and strong

Untitled

Why do you force
your supposed power
over me
through lies
you are aware
that I know
you are false
there is proof
against you
in your face
yet you pretend
you are blind
why are you
fighting me
fighting you
my sister
my brother
I will fight you
fight for the
best of you.



Artwork: Mkd



Artwork: Rachel Kalpana James

Where have I fallen

I

This wall, whose fortress I have erected
with my bare arms,
A vast, deep, impenetrable expanse of
aloneness
Even your tongue cannot enter my territory
any longer.
Your hands, search for the moist depths
of my innermost
will fail to cross those waters,
fluid palins of wetness
Stranger- I wanted to follow you to the limits
Of rain, of moons, of stars,
This is deeper than the centre of blackhole spirals
where a vacuum numbs all sensations.

II

It is that feeling of paralysis I captured
when you mouthed I was a rite of a passage
Fixed and static, like dimensions of stone or matter,
no reminiscence of togetherness.
I run into landscapes away from your cruel words,
words empty of desire and love.
Full, instead, of grave torture.



III

As you sleep lost in unknown territory,
shoulders heaving quiet and lips parted,
Your form is granite shuddering cold
only a soft murmur of breath audible.
I am so close to this skin, this heavy
bosom I long to bury myself in,
away from snow and ice glances of pain.
A richness and depth of longing I had
has now vanished.
Vanished.

IV

I cannot bring myself to touch you
It is only a soft shadow, a bitter reminder
touch is illusion and I don't want it
I only wish you gone,
Disappearing from the space you inhabit
In my heart's deepest core
I do not want to dream your flesh
Or taste, only in memory, connections of bone and rain,
Swirling patterns into the earth.
As we walk, speechless, not knowing
what to say
what to feel
Knowing this, is a strained conversation
(even in the language of our legs arms breasts
woven together splendid)
Fearing the widening of a gulf palcing
you in the sun and me in the pit of volcanic earth.

V

You do not know what you perform in a haze,
Turning (oh slightly) away from me, so I can only
see the remnants of your back
Unremembering your face that received
my eyes in constant searching.
You still turn away.

This gesture speaks to me loud and final,
Crisp notes of the final sheet of music
That has ended, abrupt, alone.
Impacting violent but clear, fresh, cold.

You only face the walls
they are sight-bare, white
walls, naked, we, untouched, virginal again.
Fear of losing you has made this previous
sentiment die.

VI

Venerable past: My mornings are lonely as
I sit on the low bed, closer to the floor,
lower and lower I feel.
I carry out those simple, careful habits
That don't require thought
so I am free to remind myself of tranquility
sound in rushes of tentative heat,
blood excited on meeting you in the afternoon,
vivid lines drawn around the tunnels of noon
anticipating burdens and denying weight.
I have no thoughts of pressure, no thoughts of
tea television news outside pencils letters
These are too ordinary, too mundane,
I only want to grasp the limbs of extra-ordinary
shaping, stretching, fitting them inside.

VII

But while you are asleep
you don't recognize my words spilling over
these dark pages
My fingers tightening around thoughts of you
leaving
We are two in this room, one half dead,
one half asleep
and as walking through the mud of my feelings, show
I cannot discard this frightened, solitary love.

VIII

Was it I alone who braved a monsoon,
wading in the storm, happy, full.
Laughing to myself, feeling my body linked to
the secret charms of the unassuming woman
crossing Calcutta lines.
Discontent was a remote store among my visions,
I wanted the desperate, erotic fervour to burst,
filling my eyes with unknown joy.

IX

Woman, I thought this was that rapture,
that you could command my body,
humble to you,
with only a taste of your shivers.
Still I lay alone in my hunger,
frozen as dead, not even wanting
to touch your perfection.
Feeling myself dying,
melting away from my sister night
Even she isn't as dark as this melancholy seizing me sudden,
asking me to sing this grief into her palm, into her soul:

Nothing can shed this border of pain.



WE WERE NOT MEANT TO SURVIVE

No. I have not died.
I transcend your simple fragments
Plastic terrains of identity
And locate myself

As brown
As woman
As rooted
As strong

Remember
I am the face
you tried to forget,
as ghost of your conscience
I have exploded
into the landscape
Of your nightmare

I only haunt you more
hunt you more

No. I have not died.

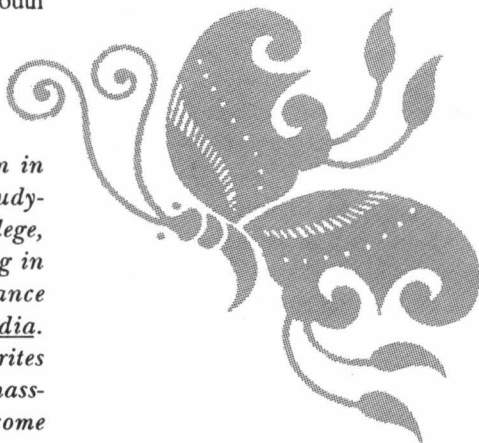
Child Woman

by Meghna Gulzar

She's the one with long flowing hair
the one with skin so fair
Sometimes she soars high in the skies
the brilliance of the sun gleaming in her eyes
She races with clouds as far as they go
She says she's seen the end of a rainbow
Yet if you look deeper, you'll find a space
she's lonely, lost in a maze
Her tears could wipe your smile
her years of suffering etched in her eyes
She didn't play with dolls,
they didn't let her
She wasn't old enough
when the 'husband' came to get her
She couldn't even tie the ribbons in her hair
when he gave her a child to bear
This girl so fair was robbed of her youth

She wanted to be young but failed the truth
Her world had changed
she was a woman now
only if someone could show her how
She submitted letting the years slowly roll
but her silent tears scarred her soul
All she wants is love, a tender touch
but in this world, that's too much
There are others like her
with a story to share
will someone listen?
will someone care?
will someone admit that she's been wronged?
this child-woman, ignored for so long!

Meghna Gulzar was born in 1973. She is presently studying at St. Xavier's College, Bombay, India. Majoring in Sociology, she is a free lance writer for the Times of India. She directs plays and writes poetry. She wants to study mass-communications, and become a film director.



January 17, 1991

I thrive on opposition. I oppose the war but I support the troops. I thrive on opposition. Oh say can you see by the dawn's early light surgical strikes. Droning. That ceaseless buzz. Deep sonic waves bombard the ears the blood the bones. Outside, the ceaseless clatter like hailstones on an aluminum roof. Faraway boom of airplane thunder. Closer by, faint hum of traffic. Water drips.

Tortuously.

And in my head a cacophony, as thoughts clumsily fall about.

bus

The passengers look through the rain-caked mud slashed, weary panes. The world outside through a telescope. Green around the edges, encased in oil-stained, chewed-gummed metal. Little pools of green brown grey indiscernible liquid in the cracks of the window ledge.

They turn to the inside of the bus, searching hungrily for comfort, refuge. Find bleak white light. The white does not purify them, does not soothe them. they look up to see that Kierkegaard now endorses candy bars. Discover that their souls will be saved if they adopt that starving brown child in some far-away country. Parental love sold from a distance. Their frozen masks alter slightly as they imagine the bewildering agony of ulcerative colitis: The Pain Is Real.

They watch hungrily as the strangers, the outsiders, climb the steps. They wait like an audience in some terrible amphitheatre, anticipating horror and delight, wanting to feel absolute pity and absolute relief as they watch the little drama that might unfold before their very eyes. Surely one of them will trip and fall, or drool at the mouth, or shout obscene messages at the driver or the bearded woman starts talking about the advantages of white slavery; they listen with averted faces. School-girls talk about the time the dead baby wrapped in plastic was found in the garbage can. There is an escape-hole in the roof - "Push up for ventilation" - but its handles have fallen off. And outside, the trees scream for oxygen.

Cutting It Close

Carefully holding
the razor
in her trembling
hand
the shiny silver
blade
gently crosses
her brown
dry skin
Making a small
pierce
through the first
layer
of skin, beads of
red,
bright red blood
begin
to seep out from
her
wrist
Deeper she say in
her
mind, the pain is
much
deeper
She takes
the razor
once more,
across the
wrists, flesh peels
back

more blood
Deeper, she wants
to
go, but she stops
herself, pool of
blood
in bathroom sink,
steam rising from
hot
Water running
she looks up to see
her
tear stained face
eyes swollen
lips cracked and
sore
from the dry
weather
She leaves the first
cut alone
moves razor an
inch
higher
blade crosses her
plump
flesh
it is as if the flesh
sees the blade
coming
and separates be-
fore the

blade goes down
first cut still bleed-
ing
She always was a
slow
clotter
second cut opens
flesh
deeper, too close
to veins
razor crosses
flesh one
move inch above
the
last cut, the last
cut
of the day
Arm fully bloody
sink filled with
bright
red blood, hot wa-
ter
scrambles to
pour it
down the drain
white sink will
need to
be cleaned, no
one must
know
Time passes,

blood clots
scab begins to
form, hot water
turns cold, chill
down her spine
She rolls down the
black sleeves
of her shirt
cleans the sink
washes face
puts on the mask of
normality
What took you so
long
Mother asks
decided to take a
bath
she replies
razor concealed
in her
front pocket of
jeans
She rushes to
room,
stares out her win-
dow
the beginning of
the day
and she's already
cutting it
too close.



Covering Letter For A Job

(read between the lines)

Dear Mr. Smith

asshole

I hope my resume covers the areas of experience you were
am i white enough for you? have i assimilated well?

looking for. I am applying for this position

i need the money even though i have to work in
because of my great desire to work with your company.

this racist, white-supremacist hell-hole.

as my resume states, I have all the experience for the

read the fucking resume, needed white experience for your white
position, and I would be willing to update any of my skills

position, I know you'll make me take more courses because of the
by further training.

colour of my skin.

I hope my application is acceptable

is it white enough for you?

I hope to hear from you.

probably won't call back,

Sincerely,

piss off

I better scrawl my name otherwise I'll never get an interview



THOUGHT #2

Softly touch the parts
of me that are the
most hidden from your
eyes

Not my lips

Hands, neck, feet
or cheeks

but my sorrow, my
longing despair and
sadness

Touch my pain and
you will have touched
me as close as you
will ever want to be

You will have touched my soul.



Jeannie

by Mina Kumar

Excerpts, continued from the "Voices in Art & Literature," Volume 4, Issue 2

From coming across his Hustler magazine in the closet when she was looking for a box of Kleenex, she learned more about lesbianism. She learned men thought it was really hot.

A few years later, as she did a Cosmo survey on sexuality with her best friend Robyn, she told Robyn about herself. Robyn said that she too would sleep with a woman. Robyn had checked off that she was willing to try nearly all the items on the questionnaire. It was impossible for Neelam to explain that what she felt was different.

Not that Neelam ever felt she was the only one. Neelam was from a post-Stonewall generation and there were books to tell her lesbians were everywhere. She also knew that they were with each other out of feminism and they would be with men except men were patriarchal bastards. Either that or they were lesbians because they were tomboys. She knew she was the only one who wanted the sex. She read all the lesbian-feminist-separatist books and *Surpassing the Love of Men* and two or three pages of *Rubyfruit Jungle*. She read *The Color Purple* and she loved Celie and Shug, but she couldn't identify fully. She had examined her own pussy

years before. Besides, she didn't quite relish the idea of sleeping with a bisexual woman. Shug eventually left Celie for a man. That's the way it was. More importantly, Shug wasn't so much overwhelmed with desire for Celie as moved by her oppression. This was not quite Neelam's dream of love.

Neelam had stopped watching Jeannie, and barely noticed her when she brushed by. Neelam was dancing with her eyes closed to feel the beat. "You used to hold me, you used to touch me"; she moved her hands along her arms. She took advantage of the extra room, sauntering down the length of the floor before striking a pose. "You used to squeeze me, you used to please me."

Finally, the D.J. played some lethargically slow Jodeci song and Neelam sat down. She gulped down the rest of her screwdriver. The no-name brand vodka hit her straight between her legs. Good music, booze, what else was there, she thought happily. A jug of wine, a house record and thou. Oh yeah, that. She crossed her legs and leaned back.

Other lesbians had close friendships that flowered into sexual love but Neelam couldn't imagine looking at her friends that way. It was not the way she wanted it, but she supposed that was the way it happened. Even after she got into the bar scene and saw women cruise each

other, she didn't shake off this belief. She had gone out with one self-described 'stud' who despised women and asked Neelam if she would have the baby if the 'stud' made her pregnant. Then a femme who spent hours giving Neelam dewy looks, turned out to have a boyfriend. Thus, Neelam concluded that the only women who would come to her were pathological or sleeping with men.

She wished she didn't want it. She wished she could be content with her work and her ambitions and her beautiful apartment and her hobbies. She wished she could be a repressed crone. But she couldn't. She wanted to be swept away.

As if on cue, the D.J. played the Diana Ross song. There was no one left on the dance floor but that didn't deter the D.J. from her line-up. Neelam pushed the table away from her so she could stretch her legs and wait out the slow set. The transsexual who had been voguing up a storm a little while back, was sitting at the table across the aisle, next to Jeannie. Jeannie leaned over to whisper to the transsexual who turned around and looked at Neelam.

Neelam ignored it. The transsexual turned around again. What the hell was he...she...it looking at? What the fuck were they talking about? Neelam sucked her teeth. It was bad enough that she had to accept that a woman like Jeannie wouldn't want her, but did she had to accept that Jeannie would make fun of her with some transsexual? Just as she was crushing the empty plastic cup, the transsexual loomed in front of her. "My friend is too shy to come over but she'd like to dance with you."

Neelam wondered if it was some kind of prank. She resigned herself to falling for it. Neelam looked down and nodded.

Jeannie strode to the dance floor and Neelam followed, her eyes lowered. They danced and Neelam felt too embarrassed to even look up.

She was suddenly hyperconscious of her body and her movements were stiff and deliberate. A little liquor made Neelam feel dainty but a little more made her acutely aware of her heaviness. Jeannie asked her her name, and where she lived and where she was from.

"I'm Indian," Neelam said, stopping to catch her breath. "As soon as I tell a woman that, she offers to teach me to dance."

"That's ridiculous," Jeannie said. She pulled Neelam to her as the first beats of "Housecall" started.

"You know you have rhythm," she leaned down and whispered in the shell of Neelam's ear. Neelam blushed. Suddenly, everything was going right, and her anxiousness was eased. She felt like she was floating in a dream. She rested her face lightly on Jeannie's chest, the soft cotton jersey against her cheek, so she could smell Jeannie's musk on it.

Neelam put her arms around Jeannie's waist and gently scooped air with her hips. They were in a corner, near the speaker and through her half-closed eyes, Neelam could see the lights fading down until the dance floor was dark.

When they became tired, Jeannie bought her a drink and after Neelam had downed that, Jeannie took her outside for a breath of fresh air.

The outside air was in fact heavy and moist, hot summer night air that was waiting to break. Jeannie stood against the brick wall of the bar. "Do you want to see some pictures?" she asked. Neelam nodded. There wasn't anything else to do.

Jeannie fished her wallet out of her backpack and showed Neelam some faded snapshots of women in jaunty toques sitting around a table. "That's my grandmother when she was young." Jeannie flipped the page and showed her a heavily airbrushed studio picture of a woman

with a big white bow in her hair and gleaming white teeth. "And that's my mother."

"Where's your girlfriend?" Neelam asked flirtatiously.

"I don't have a picture of her," Jeannie replied, putting her wallet back.

"You have a girlfriend?"

"Yes," Jeannie said. "Don't you?"

"No. What the fuck are you doing plying me with alcohol?"

"Being friendly," said Jeannie. "I wasn't making a move on you." Neelam pouted. "Come on, let's sit down," Jeannie said, leading her across Seventh Avenue. Jeannie took her through a few deserted streets to a church with wide, white steps. They sat down on the top stair.

Neelam was silent. She has a girlfriend, Neelam thought. She has a girlfriend. There was always something wrong.

The first woman to make a move on her was a crazy closeted Bahamian bank teller. She had been a little over fourteen and had noticed Rosemarie right away when she went to deposit the \$40 she had earned compiling the listings at a real estate office. Rosemarie was tall and warm brown, with a big chest and expressive hands. The first time they actually spoke was weeks later, when they met by accident at the bus stop. Rosemarie told Neelam that Neelam cheered her so much that she wanted to know Neelam always, and she gave her her phone number. On their first date, Neelam brought Rosemarie a teddy bear with a pink bow around its neck, since Rosemarie had said she liked stuffed animals, and Rosemarie had bought her a brooch and a purse.

They rode the subway to a tiny Palestinian restaurant on Bathurst, and Neelam shouted to Rosemarie above the train rattle that she was beautiful.

"I'm not beautiful," Rosemarie protested,



smiling. "I am not beautiful at all. You should see me without my clothes on." She paused. Neelam began to wonder what she meant.

"If you come to my apartment, I'll take my clothes off and show you," Rosemarie added.

The train pulled into Lawrence station. They walked through the fluorescent-lit corridor to the escalator to the street level and tentatively, Neelam took Rosemarie's hand in her own. Rosemarie squeezed her hand, her gold rings pressing into Neelam's palm. At the end of the dinner, which Neelam paid because Rosemarie did not have much money, as they said goodbye in the subway station because they were going home in separate directions, they stood close and Rosemarie leaned down, her thick lips an inch away from Neelam, and Neelam reached up to kiss her lightly on the mouth. "You can't do that, that's a devil thing," Rosemarie said. Neelam drew away in surprise.

Rosemarie, it turned out, was a Pentecostal. They talked a few more times, and she accused Neelam of trying to seduce her. Neelam won-

dered if she had misread the situation? How could one misread 'let me take you home and show you my naked body'? Did women generally buy presents for other women they barely knew the first time they went out together? Did women generally make friends in the subway station? Neelam stopped calling Rosemarie. It was all too complicated.

The next woman she went out with was years later and in a different country, but the situation was just as ridiculous. This woman was a Texan 'stud' who told Neelam, "You are attracted to black women because you want a 'big, black buck', and Neelam wondered if this was true and why she was with a woman who was decidedly wimpy in bed. Later, the Texan told her that they should be just friends and then told Neelam she wanted to fist her. And then she said they should be just friends, and then she told Neelam she wanted to eat her pussy. After a few rounds of this, getting neither friendship nor sex, Neelam gave up and the Texan ran off with a Dominican girl who it later turned out, was pregnant by her live-in boyfriend who knew all about the Texan, so there was a modicum of karma. Then the Texan became the mistress of a rich butch chiropractor who took the Texan on all-expenses paid holidays to Puerto Rico, so maybe there wasn't any justice after all.

And Jeannie had a girlfriend. Neelam sighed. Her butt hurt from the rough concrete stair. And the air was like a layer on her skin. She watched the flies buzz around the street light in front of the church and screwed up her eyes until it was all a blur. She could hear crickets and cars and some people having a conversation around the corner. Why were there crickets in the city?

"And, girlfriend, I told that boy he was out of his mind. He can take his fine self and jump in the river. This is no ordinary woman. I do not

need to be taking this," a husky voice said.

The other person laughed.

Neelam was suddenly hungry. She realized she hadn't eaten dinner. She had bought a bag of sourcream and onion bagel chips right after she got off work, but she had to stand and hold the bag on the train so she hadn't had a chance to eat it and then she forgot about it. Neelam took it out of her bag and ripped it open.

"Do you want one?" she asked as chips tumbled from the packet. She held one out.

Jeannie shook her head.

Neelam ate it and held out her salty fingers.

Jeannie looked down at Neelam's outstretched arm, her fingers tipped with a paste of onion flecks and salt, and then back at Neelam's face. The street lamp's yellowy light made Neelam's light skin and her white blouse, glisten. The street suddenly fell silent. And Jeannie said, "You know how bad I want to suck them."

Neelam felt her pussy clench. She barely perceptibly leaned towards Jeannie and then they kissed, Jeannie's tongue sliding into her mouth.

Jeannie said, "Are you trying to make me unfaithful to my girlfriend?" and kissed her harder. Just then, a man came out of the church and Jeannie pulled Neelam towards her to let him pass by. Neelam sat, triumphant, between Jeannie's thighs, Jeannie's arms around her waist. The alcohol was beginning to wear off and everything seemed in sharper focus. Jeannie's arms felt heavier around her, Jeannie's bare legs warmer beneath her hands.

Soon a white straight couple came to sit at the bottom of the stairs, they rose.

"Do you want to go the Pier?" Jeannie asked.

Neelam nodded.

That was after all, what gay people did.

Jeannie led her through the dark maze of the West Village. They passed a group of fags

and the flaming bald queen at the forefront cackled, "Now that girl has got some beautiful big breasts."

Neelam laughed, embarrassed.

"Even fags notice," Jeannie teased her.

"Please, I can't even get a girlfriend."

"I can't believe you don't have a lover."

"Neither can I"

This was not strictly true. Sometimes she could and sometimes she couldn't. For one thing, she was short. She somehow felt she hadn't fulfilled her potential by being short. When she was a kid, everyone thought she would take after her uncle who was six foot tall, but around sixth grade, just as all the other kids started growing, she stopped. Now, she was short. And plump and unathletic. It seemed incongruous. Lesbians were supposed to be tall and lean and androgynous, weren't they? Either that or shapeless feminist blobs. Renee said that was a white lesbian thing. But that was who wrote the books. Except for *Tar Beach*. Maybe Jeannie would take her home and plunge vegetables in her. Not that this was her particular fantasy.

The Pier was fairly desolate, even though it was a warm sultry night. Maybe because it was Wednesday. There were some banjees at the other end, but that was it. Before they crossed the highway, Neelam said she needed to use the ladies' room, so they stopped in at Kellers.

When they entered, Neelam saw that they were the only women among the dozen people in the place. The rest were, Neelam thought 'rough trade'. Jeannie checked the bathroom for toilet paper and gave Neelam some cocktail napkins before standing guard over the lockless door. The toilet was filthy but Neelam couldn't afford to discriminate after two drinks. She washed her hands.

When she came out, Jeannie was sitting at the bar.

"Will you buy me a drink?" Neelam gently pushed her luck, emboldened by Jeannie having kissed her. Jeannie nodded. Neelam climbed onto a torn leather barstool and ordered a ginger ale. It was something cheap at least. Jeannie didn't order anything for herself. They sat for a few minutes watching two skinny men in jogging suits play pool. Neelam sipped the cloyingly sweet gingerale. She felt giddy like a little girl, a polite little girl. She didn't often have a chance to feel this way and it did feel good. She put her drink down. They went across the Pier.

"Why don't you have a girlfriend? Are you really picky?" Jeannie asked, heaving herself onto the low wall. Jeannie had just been laid off of her job as a secretary in some city government office.

"I just want a good-looking, tall woman of color who is goal-oriented and doesn't have any diseases, addictions or severe neuroses," Neelam replied.

It was her rehearsed spiel. She who had once said she would never sleep with someone who hadn't read Flaubert, had gone out with a sorter at UPS who was thinking of getting her GED, a green-eyed 28-year old prison guard, various fillers of the unemployment rolls, and a drug dealer or two. And Marita, which was not worth mentioning.

"I don't know what it takes. Tell me about your girlfriend."

But Jeannie wouldn't say anything beyond the woman's name and that she was from Barbados. She wouldn't tell Neelam what she did. "She's not a prostitute, is she?" Neelam was suddenly afraid.

"I wish she was. Then maybe she'd be making some real money." She looked down at Neelam, who was standing in front of her.

"What do you do?"

"I work at a museum up in Harlem," she said.

"And I write book reviews for a magazine and tutor high school kids." She said with an edge of spite.

"I guess you're very productive," Jeannie said, looking over at a group of Latino homeboys carrying a stereo who were coming toward them.

"Freud said civilization was built on sexual frustration," Neelam replied, carelessly, looking at the lights on the river.

"You're sexually frustrated?" Jeannie asked, with a slight smile.

Neelam nodded.

"So what is it you want in bed?"

Neelam looked up at Jeannie. And told her.

...It had been a couple of months since a woman had touched Neelam. Since Marita. Neelam inwardly winced. Marita was in her late thirties and not quite pretty, with a voice corrupted by years of smoking. When they met, Marita had had her hair natural and this had excited Neelam. Neelam enjoyed courting Marita, she had never done it and it had its pleasures. She had refused to let Marita touch her the first few times they were together, holding Marita's arms behind Marita's back when they kissed and moving away if Marita resisted.

From the beginning, she had known Marita was living with someone but Marita had said they were breaking up and Diane was in the process of looking for another place. Weeks later and with no progress on that score, and since she found Marita's kisses slobbery and repulsive, and after the rather annoying discovery that Diane had courted Marita similarly when they had first met, Neelam let go. She had liked the idea of being courtly with an older

plain woman who had never been cherished before, but she was hardly going to follow in some former lover's footsteps.

It was somewhat humiliating to think that she couldn't draw Marita away from Diane. She had a whole lot more going for her than both of them put together. She had declined when Marita suggested they stay friends. She didn't find her interesting on that level. As she joked to Billy, "You date someone because you wouldn't want to know them as a friend." Besides, Marita had gotten braids. Perhaps it was Halle's remark that Marita resembled a girl they had gone to school with, a girl whom Neelam found quite unappetizing, that finally soured her attraction to Marita. That and the uncomfortable sensation of sleeping against someone with narrow shoulders.

After Rosemarie, Jeannie was the first woman that Neelam had been with who wasn't skinny. Neelam cuddled up to Jeannie. It was so nice. Broad shoulders, a big chest. Jeannie pressed her hand down.

Finally, they got to her apartment.

"It's a little messy," Neelam said, opening the door.

"Do you live alone?" Jeannie asked as she entered the small studio apartment littered with books and papers.

After a quick glance at the time, Neelam went into the bathroom to run the bathwater. To her surprise, it was nearly one in the morning. How had it gotten so terribly late?

Neelam felt soiled by her long day. Besides, she had taken a leak at Kellers, and she didn't want to be touched by Jeannie without washing herself.

She had a beautiful bathroom. The building had been a house once, and the rooms had been redivided, so the bathroom was quite large. She had an old tub with claw feet. The walls and the shower curtains were blue and

the cloth mat was nubby pink and blue, and a pastel fish of 3D jigsaw pieces stood on the window ledge. The enormous counter around the sink was full of tubes of lipstick and bottles of perfume and her pink soap pig and other pretty things. Her toothbrush was in a small jar full of cowrie shells. Neelam picked up the cherry-scented bubble bath.

Jeannie had locked the door and was sitting on the edge of her bed.

"Can I use the phone?" she asked.

"Yes," Neelam said, over the sound of the gushing water. "Who are you calling?" "My girlfriend," Jeannie replied. "I told her I'd be there when she got home from work, so I have to call and make up something." Neelam said nothing.

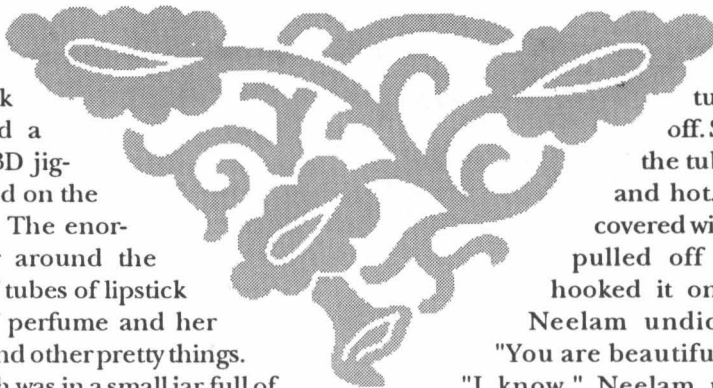
Jeannie was not being particularly tactful, but after her own behavior right before they caught the cab, she had not much right to complain. Besides which, Neelam knew from Jeannie's gaucheness that she wasn't used to this kind of thing. But she couldn't help herself with me, Neelam thought happily.

She unbuttoned her blouse and took off her pants. She was wearing a lace white one-piece with satin cups. Nice underclothes gave her an extra bit of confidence on a date but she didn't think of why she was wearing it. It suited the moment, that was all.

Jeannie came in and fingered its satin spaghetti straps.

"I guess you were planning on bringing someone home with you," she said.

"I've never done this before," Neelam said truthfully. But the idea of her as a deliberate, lingered seductress was not displeasing. She



reached over and turned the water off. She put a finger in the tub. Water was nice and hot. The mirror was covered with steam. Jeannie pulled off her jersey and hooked it on the doorknob. Neelam undid her ponytail.

"You are beautiful," Jeannie said.

"I know," Neelam replied. And at that moment, she did.

"I know you know."

"But no one loves me," said Neelam, sadly.

"You know if I didn't have a girlfriend, I would scoop you up," said Jeannie.

Neelam raised her eyes. And then Jeannie scooped her up.

They sat in the bathtub with Neelam's back against Jeannie's chest.

Neelam could feel Jeannie's thick, stiff nipples poking against her. Neelam splashed the hot, soapy water over Jeannie's strong legs. There should have been music in the background but Neelam knew it would spoil the mood to go turn some on. Without a great deal of gentleness, Jeannie entered her.

"Didn't you ask about the nailclipper?" Neelam reminded her, wriggling away.

Jeannie rose. Neelam washed herself quickly.

Jeannie upset the contents of the jar that held the nailclipper and clipped her nails, letting the cuttings fall on the floor.

"There is a wastepaper basket right over there," Neelam remarked, getting out of the tub.

"Now you'll have to clean before you invite the next person up," Jeannie said.

Neelam wrapped herself in her blue towel. "There doesn't have to be a next person, you know," she said, tentatively, going into the

other room.

But Jeannie had a girlfriend, she thought. She felt cold in the bed and got under the covers. She threw the towel on the floor.

"Turn off the light," she said, and Jeannie did.

And then Jeannie crawled into her bed, shoving the blanket aside.

Neelam knew what the inside of her pussy felt like. She had felt it. And though it was fine, she couldn't imagine a woman wanting to be there. What for? It wasn't that she thought it was icky, just unexciting, and yet she wanted a woman to want it. Her fantasies always abruptly veered into trying to imagine why exactly a woman *would* want it. She knew that she wasn't overcome by the desire to be inside another woman, so why would another woman want to be inside her? Women probably did it out of politeness. Billy said he sucked dick because he liked his dick sucked. This was simply not good enough for Neelam. But fags have anal sex, which they can both feel. What a ridiculous thing a lesbian was. Two polite women doing boring things. Didn't any woman want it?

She was forced to admit that she never looked at a woman and wanted to suck her pussy or get inside her. The thought just never occurred to her. She never thought at all about the act of sleeping with a woman she knew. Neelam somehow felt that it was impinging on the woman because the woman might not want to sleep with her. Neelam rarely appeared in the fantasies she used to get off and the other kind rarely managed to overpower this kind of discussion. When she did succeed in suspending her disbelief, she felt like she had cheated. The only way she believed a woman could want another woman was out of pathology, like the Texan.

The Texan wanted to be a man. In fact, the

Texan liked to pretend her lovers were men. The Texan wanted to be a fag. This was too quandy to other people. They would describe scenarios where two women could come at the same time, but that wasn't the point. She wanted a woman to be stimulated by what was stimulating her, not by the idea of stimulating her. "*You think too much*," Marcia said. "*What choice do I have? I never have any sex*," Neelam replied.

As Jeannie got inside her, she wondered what was going on in Jeannie's mind but knew better than to ask. Why were women so ridiculous, she wondered. Why couldn't she just believe?

"Do you have any lubricant?" Jeannie asked.

Neelam reached for her breasts. "We have to do this the natural way," she said. "Besides, I'm so wet."

"You're so tight," said Jeannie, looking down at Neelam's pussy. Neelam was embarrassed. "And your clitoris is overgrown."

"Overgrown?" Neelam said. Not again.

"It's enormous," Jeannie said. "It looks like a little dick."

"Oh, stop," Neelam cried out, half-laughing and half-insulted.

It was no doubt the reason she was a lesbian, at least according to the medieval Europeans. That and the porno magazines of her stepfather's that she came across as a child, and her domineering mother, and some inner *perversity* that disposed her towards the impossible.

She leaned over to suck Jeannie's breasts. There was not a whole lot else she could do in the position they were in. Jeannie's pussy was beyond the reach of her hand. She wondered if Jeannie was having a good time.

Straight women had it so easy. All they had to do was lie there and a man would be satisfied. Besides, everyone always said that the only thing a straight man wanted was pussy. Straight women didn't have to ask themselves how and

why and if this was true. Why did a woman want pussy, and did any woman really ever want it at all?

Jeannie made her lie back, plunging deeper inside her. Neelam arched up to accommodate Jeannie more easily. Jeannie tried to put it all inside her. Neelam clenched her teeth. She didn't want Jeannie to stop but it was beginning to hurt. Jeannie's powerful movements made Neelam's whole pussy shake. Finally she couldn't take anymore.

"You're hurting my clit,"

"Can't you move it?", Jeannie said breathlessly.

Neelam was dumbstruck. What kind of a question was that?

Jeannie was staring at her as if she expected a response.

She doesn't want to stop, Neelam thought with astonishment, she wants to be inside my guck. If she is unwilling to stop, then it means she wants to. And suddenly she realized that it was possible and Jeannie wanted her and everything tumbled into place.

As ridiculous as the comment really was, it thrilled Neelam. She felt as if her lungs were full of clear mountain air, and she was almost crying. She moved Jeannie's hand out of her and pulled Jeannie on top of her.

"You didn't even come yet," Jeannie said, reproachfully.

"It doesn't matter," Neelam replied, ridiculously happy. She wants it, she wants me. She really does. It's not just to make me happy. She wants to.

They lay in silence for a while. Then Jeannie shifted to lie beside her.

"I have to go soon," Jeannie said. "My girlfriend is expecting me." Neelam rose and put on her ruby-colored satin night shirt.

Neelam turned on the light and looked at Jeannie, her dark, beautiful naked body.

Jeannie was about to draw the covers over her, but Neelam stopped her.

"Don't," She parted Jeannie's legs. "I've never really seen a pussy."

This was not strictly true, but it was close enough.

Jeannie laughed and unclenched her thighs.

"I'll let you see mine," she said in her rich voice. And she did.

Neelam remembered Jeannie fondly, even though she never saw her again.

As a sleepy Neelam stood by the door to lock it after Jeannie left, Jeannie paused awkwardly and said, "I guess I'll see you at the club." Even while lying in bed, she had said she would keep an eye on Neelam in the club to see who else Neelam was picking up.

The next few times Neelam went into the Box, she expected to see Jeannie, but she never did.

Right afterwards, Neelam felt cold and slutty and guilty, but not for long. She was full of Jeannie and when a friend from high school whom she hadn't talked to in years called up, she helplessly started telling Kathy about what had happened.

Kathy was initially discomfited by the turn the conversation was taking, but then her curiosity overcame her other emotions.

"So when did you know you were...," Kathy asked.

"What is there to know?" Neelam responded.

"It has nothing to do with knowing. It has to do with your pussy getting hot. Ask me when I knew a woman could feel the same way about me. That's what you have to realize. That's what you have to learn. Your pussy getting hot is an involuntary physical reaction. It's the other thing you have to figure out or find out or have shown to you because the world does not want you to know.

"Kathy was silent.

"Alright, when I was in fifth grade, after reading Colette," Neelam said, to keep the conversation rolling.

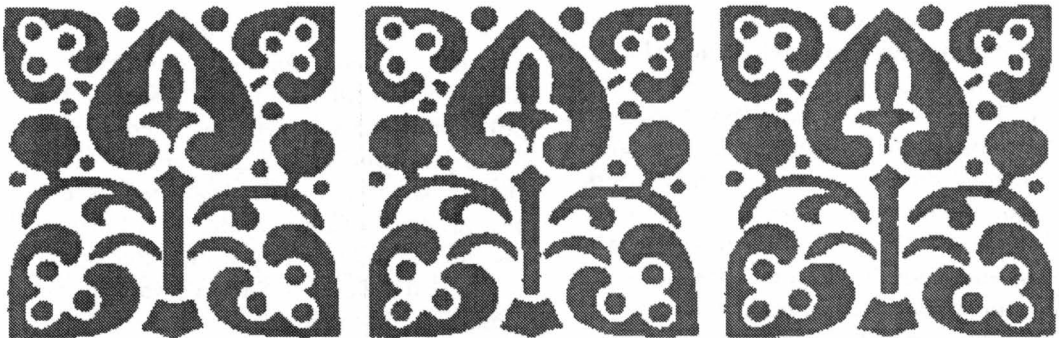
Neelam didn't always have the faith but thinking of Jeannie always improved how she was feeling. Once, after eyeing a dark, hard dread all night, just as she was getting her coat from the coat check because it was obvious that this eye contact thing was not working and she was ready to go home, the dread touched her elbow. The woman made mild flirtatious conversation and asked for her number, and just as Neelam was settling in to enjoy the moment, the woman said, "Let me ask you something. I see a lot of Indian girls with acne on their faces, is that a really common thing?" Neelam reeled from the shock and rushed out the door.

Mina Kumar was born in Madras, and lives in New York City. Her work has appeared in The Kenyon Review, Turnstile, Christopher Street and Manushi, among other publications.

It had been almost a year since that time with Jeannie and that was the last time she had been with a woman. She felt ugly and empty and she felt like it would never happen. The drinks she had downed and the year of celibacy made her feel weak and insecure. She would never find anyone, she thought, crying but then she stopped because she thought maybe she was overdoing it and besides she would find her woman. At least the women were getting better and better, so one day, she would actually have a girlfriend.

She undressed and got into bed, remembering Jeannie's pussy. It had such pink petals. She had wanted to suck it. But it would be her first time, and she knew she would be terribly depressed later if her first time was in a one-night stand. She had contented herself with a swipe of her finger to taste Jeannie, and Jeannie tasted slightly bitter, like appleseed or pink champagne.

Jeannie's pussy was so pretty and rimmed with dark, tightly napped hair like a pink rose surrounded by baby's breath. She had leaned closer to the pink jewel at its heart and she had seen, Neelam remembered with a smile, possibility.



Theatre

TORONTO, CANADA

CAHOOTS

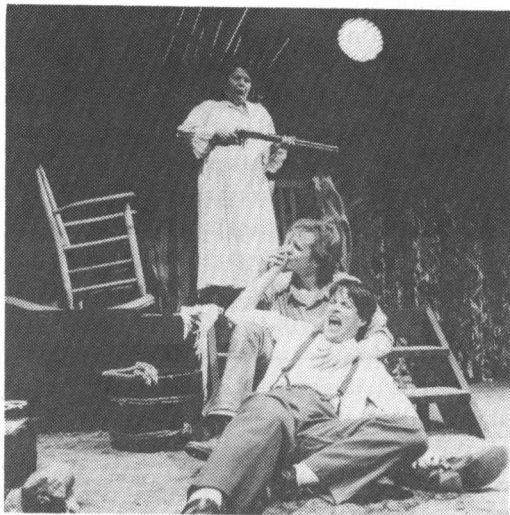
t h e a t r e p r o j e c t s

by Dilara Ally

Over the past year, the voices and talents of nearly one hundred artists from different cultural traditions and varying disciplines have echoed together inside many Toronto theatres. Very few theatre companies can brag about employing that many artists of diverse cultures. But the eight-year-old Cahoots Theatre Projects, with its intercultural mandate to promote, produce and develop theatre artists of diverse cultures, has shown how difference can be a source from which "creativity can spark like a dialectic."

Founded by Beverly Yhap, Cahoots was put on the theatre map when it produced the country's first conference for playwrights of colour called *Write About Now!* in 1990. It was later recognized for its innovation when Phoenix Cabaret (1988) won a Dora award for Denyse Kam's set that featured hundreds of Chinese food containers. But through projects like *Lift Off*, a new play development series and *3D: Three Daring New Works By Writers of Diverse Cultures* (first staged at Theatre Passe Muraille's Backspace from Nov. 17 to Dec. 6, 1993), the company encourages playwrights to challenge and consequently redefine traditional notions of Canadian identity, history and culture. For as former artistic director Jean Yoon says, "it is in the development of a script that a community finds a voice."

The Moon and Dead Indians • Cahoots Theatre in association with Theatre Passe Muraille
Doris Linklater, Murray Oliver, Rick Roberts



3D was a laboratory where artists of diverse cultures were able to cross different traditions, generations, languages and traditions changing the ways of thinking, categorizing and perceiving theatre. In all three plays, the writers handled the dialectic of colliding languages, identities and cultures through various aspects in the mise en scene. In Sheilla James' *Canadian Monsoon*, directed by Lynda Hill, a South Asian family is forced to deal with its own secrets. The characters confronted by a multiplicity of identities and loyalties in both the public and private arena, wear costumes reflecting the plurality of their mental states. In Daniel David Moses' *The Moon and Dead Indians*, directed by Colin Taylor, the "white man's nightmare" is poignantly represented on stage by the body of a First Nation's woman (Doris Linklater) playing out the racist fears of a white frontier mother. Within this performer's body

we see not only the confrontation of myth and reality but also the collision of two cultures. Finally, in M.J. Kang's *Noran Bang: The Yellow Room*, directed by Marion de Vries; the cultural rift that occurs when a family leaves its native land to set up life in another; the schism of identity which happens in Gyung-June (played by M.J. Kang herself) who vacillates between the memory of a culture and her adopted one, are paralleled by the partitioning of Korea into two nations in the 1950's. This cultural rift is poetically marked by the collision of languages and the confrontation between dialogue and the sounds of live percussion.

In *Lift Off*, the new play development series, Cahoots adds a new page to the re-imagining of Canadian theatre. Here emerging and established playwrights have the opportunity to develop their visions over a four-week process by working in collaboration with experienced directors and dramaturges, often of different cultural backgrounds than themselves. By providing a place where theatre artists from whatever culture can come together to work interculturally rather than ethno-specifically, Cahoots embodies Audre Lorde's definition of a liberated community – bringing together previously isolated artists to celebrate their differences as strengths. As a facilitator in this explosion of culturally diverse theatre, Cahoots is, as Yoon states, “mandated to develop plays that are going to change the Canadian theatre landscape.”

This year's *Lift Off '94* once again revolves around the issues of colliding languages and traditions. Thematically known as 'Speaking In Tongues', *Lift Off '94* continues to define the experiences of Canadians straddling a plurality of cultures. In *Mother Tongue*, playwright Betty Quan explores a family separated by three very different languages, Chinese, English and Signing. When Mimi, the only

means of communication between a deaf younger brother and a mother who speaks very little English, decides to accept a scholarship to a distant university the family comes face to face with a crisis of silence. Marlene N. Phillip's *Coups and Calypsos* addresses the challenges faced by inter-racial couples. While turmoil and riots sweep the island, Rohan, A South-Asian man and Elvira, a black woman re-examine their relationship, moving in a slow and tender dance towards greater understanding and intimacy. In Marty Chan's *Mom, Dad, I'm Living With a White Girl* issues of identity and inter-racial conflict explode on stage when Mark is forced to tell the truth and reveal his living arrangements to his parents. Finally *Scowlitz: Where Two Rivers Meet* by Joseph A. Dandurand is a poetic and haunting tale of personal and cultural loss which evokes a world in which bewildering changes quietly suffocate hopes and desires, a world in which unspeakable forces impose upon the living.

Cahoots is committed to theatre that “includes, embraces, and springs from the cultural contexts of communities which speak only in whispers; theatre that validates a community's language, images, stories and rituals.” This company is more than a theatre company that crosses borders and celebrates differences. It is more than a group of artists who share a common desire for curiosity and exchange. It is, in fact, a community whose members inhale the raw materials of individual experience and exhale an artistic and cultural vision. And I should know, as I have had the luck of meeting, working and breathing with some of these people.

This year's Lift Off '94 readings will take place at Tarragon's Extra Space on June 6, 7, and 8.

Women Film Directors

Material taken from a brochure entitled "Women Directors from South Asia: A Film Festival" Nov. 19-21, 1993.
Presented by Sakhi for South Asian Women and AT&T at Florence Gould Hall, New York.

Meena Nanji

About the Director

Meena Nanji was born in Nairobi, Kenya into a family of South Asian origin. She moved to Britain when nine and then again to Los Angeles when seventeen. She was Political Science undergraduate at UCLA and later received a BFA from the California Institute for the Arts.

Meena Nanji's work enriches the dialogue about notions of cultural differences and purity while undermining the racist, classist, and heterosexist ideologies that are derived from these constructs.

She was the video curator for the *Los Angeles Gay and Lesbian International Film/Video Festival* in 1992, and co-curator for 1993.

About the film

Voices of the Morning is an experimental video starring Sarita Choudhury that explores the psychological territory of a young woman growing up under orthodox Islamic law. The video depicts her attempts to find her identity away from the traditional definitions of a woman's role in society as only a dutiful daughter or wife. This award-winning black and white video follows her struggle in finding a space amidst the web of expectations imposed by familial and societal conventions.

(14 min., English)

Dinaz Lynn Stafford

About the Director

Dinaz Stafford was born in London and grew up in a Parsi family in Bombay, India. After earning her undergraduate degree from St. Xaviers College, Bombay, she went on to do a Masters degree in Psychology from the University of Richmond in the United States.

Stafford worked with Mira Nair as Assistant Director on both *Salaam Bombay!* and *Missipi Masala*. She was largely responsible for setting up the Salaam Baalak Trust, a non-profit organization that provides services to street children in various cities in India.

From 1986 to 1987, Stafford worked with Warlis a tribal group from Western India as a social researcher and writer. This experience inspired her to make her first film, *Kisses on a Train*. Never having attended film school, Stafford views this piece as her thesis film for the 'real life school of film making.'

About the Film

Kisses On a Train was shot in 1992 on an Indian Railway train between Neral and Matheran, a popular tourist spot in the hills outside Bombay. The film is the story of Sukhadi, a twelve year old Adivasi girl who makes a daily trip to a sleepy railway station to fetch water. This banal activity is transformed into an adventure by her chance meeting with Zainaab, a beautiful and mysterious thirteen year old gypsy girl. Zainaab challenges Sukhadi to jump on to the old-fashioned narrow gauge train that takes holiday makers to Matheran on top of the mountain.

Sukhadi is introduced to the dizzy world of urban India by Zainaab, who takes her new friend from compartment to compartment selling goggles to the passengers on the train. A special friendship develops between the two girls, but events take an ominous turn which makes this a journey neither will ever forget.

This heart-warming film features two young girls who are not trained actresses but who show remarkable talent and poise in front of the camera. *Kisses On A Train* was funded by Britain's Channel 4 and is currently premiering at film festivals all over the world.

(31 min, Hindi)

(New York Premiere)

Courtesy: Jane Balfour Films

Pratibha Parmar

About the Director

Pratibha Parmar is the award winning director of various films which deal with questions of race and sexuality. Her films come out of her experiences as a lesbian woman of Indian heritage growing up in Britain in the 1960s and 70s. Her identity crystallized as she dealt with the upsurge of anti-Asian sentiment, skinhead rampages, and the trauma of coming out as a South Asian lesbian in a predominantly white lesbian community.

In 1980, while working at a community centre in London, Parmar began using photography and video as a medium of expression. Frustrated with the lack of positive role models for Asian women in the media, she began to create her own and went on to become a researcher at Britain's Channel 4. She has since gone on to make programs for Channel 4's *Out on Tuesday*, a gay and lesbian show.

Parmar's films include *A Place of Rage*, *Sari Red*, *Khush* and *Double Trouble, Twice the Fun*. They have been screened internationally and have won critical acclaim.

About the Film

Warrior Marks is a compelling and controversial film which confronts the cultural and political complexities surrounding female genital mutilation, a painful practice which is inflicted on thousands of women every year. While raising an important issue, the film has also generated debate among African women activists about whether it objectifies the affected women and deals with the practice without attempting to understand the socio-political context from which it emerges.

The film was initiated and produced by Pulitzer prize winning author Alice Walker. Walker was inspired to make a documentary about female genital mutilation after writing her best-selling novel, *Possessing the Secret of Joy*, about the same issue.

The collaboration between Alice Walker and Pratibha Parmar has produced a film making journey through Senegal, The Gambia, Burkina Faso, United Kingdom and the United States. Interviews with women who are affected by genital mutilation are interspersed with personal reflections by Alice Walker and performance footage.

(54 min., English)

Sonali Fernando

About the Director

Sonali Fernando was born in London, of Sri Lankan and English parents. She studied English Language and literature at Oxford University. She has been actively involved in the Black arts scene in Britain since 1989 as a writer, director, critic and designer.

Fernando has several screen credits. In 1990, she was the scriptwriter for *Aiya's Apples*, *Aisha's Eyes*, a series of fables which parodied Orientalism. She also worked as a set designer for *Khush* which explored South Asian sexuality. She has directed a number of documentaries for television on the resurgence of fascism in Britain and the strategies adopted by anti-Fascist groups to combat them.

About the Film

Shakti, Fernando's best known work, is a fable about the power to transform. The film invokes stereotypes and archetypes to challenge the notion of Asian female power. The character does not speak verbally but through creative production such as drawings that reveal her dreams, rage, hunger and power.

(14 min.)

Aparna Sen

About the Director

Aparna Sen was born into films and weaned on cinema as the daughter of well known Indian film critic, Chidananda Das Gupta. Sen was discovered and cast by Satyajit Ray in the Samapti chapter of *Teen Kanya*. The film launched her as an actress on the Bengali screen where for many years she received popular as well as critical acclaim. However, Aparna Sen did not shy away from commercial cinema. She acted in numerous Bombay films but her Hindi acting career did not make much of an impact. It was this discouraging stint and the monotony of stereotyped roles that led her towards directing.

She wrote the script for *36 Chowringhee Lane* and directed it in 1981, 20 years after her first appearance on the screen as an actress. After this debut, she went on to make *Paroma*, *Sati*, and *Picnic*, which demonstrate Sen's roles as the interpreter of the marginalization of Indian women by society.

About the Film

Aparna Sen worked on the story idea for *36 Chowringhee Lane* over a period of time. The idea finally came to life when Bombay film actor Shashi Kapoor decided to produce the film in his new role as promoter of serious cinema.

The film is a humanistic portrayal of the loneliness of a middle-aged Anglo-Indian teacher in a private girls' school in Calcutta. The teacher, sensitively portrayed by the late Jennifer Kapoor, encourages and aids the romance of an ex-student after a chance meeting on the city street. The young couple, trying to spend time together in a secluded space away from the restrictive confines of upper-middle class Hindu society, jumps on the teacher's offer of hospitality at 36 Chowringhee Lane. She begins to view them as an integral part of her life. The film subtly chronicles her subsequent disillusionment as she realizes that the friendship of the young couple has an ulterior motive.

The highly acclaimed film won an award at the Manila International Film Festival.

(165 min., English)

P O W E R :

The Invisible Issue of Feminist Collectives/Collective Feminists

by Alessandra Mimma Figliano

Attempting to humorize my collective feminist workplace experience of seven years, I am not sure if it is the collective feminist or feminist collective experience. It is like asking myself what came first, the chicken or the egg. What I want to talk about is the subject, metaphorically speaking, the 'omelette' the 'frittata' the 'scrambled eggs' the 'curried eggs' etc...

In other words, I want to talk about how feminist collectives are participating in creating/concluding often in similar ways to middle class patriarchal power methods of organizing, to maintain the interest of certain individual groups or social/racial classes of collective members, under the ideology of feminist collectives. In trying to create an 'alternative' or some other 'opposition' to mainstream hierarchic

cal structures, I question what are we doing that challenges the oppressive power structures that silence and deny access to the 'woman's experience'. I am using 'woman' as a generic term for the sake of this argument.

Like eggs, the actual forms of practices: what we actually do and how we do it, feminist collectives/collective feminist come in different packages and are differently practised/hatched. However, they all have one thing in common, the denial to discuss, acknowledge,

take responsibility, take ownership and accountability to the practices of power relations within the collective. In other words, what they have in common is the egg/source: the ideological philosophy that a feminist collective



structure, for woman by woman, will inherently be an 'egalitarian' organization.

To address power in the collective, is to go against the egalitarian vision of what the collective structure is supposed to address/eradicate. At least this fear is a barrier to personally challenge one's self/ideas/practices/group practices. To address such issues implies that something is wrong with the structure. But to not open the Pandora's box, maintains the status quo.

I believe that my collective feminist experience has not been radical enough to radicalize me. What it has done is given me a forum to question my own methods of understanding social changes and now I arrive at the conclusion, that what has maintained the status quo is our hesitance to discuss and to take responsibility of who, what form of power and who's interest does a collective serve.

I want to re-think humorously my collective feminist experience. I then think again, how can I laugh at my experience that I often find so painful, so silencing and so unpolitical. My socialist feminist politics have no acceptance, no value, no respect in my collective feminist experience.

But something is funny about all of this. The funny thing is that when one applies for work to be hired by an organization run by feminist collective structure, political questions regarding feminism, patriarchy and hierarchical structures are asked. These are the three main areas of the initial interview. It is important to acknowledge that these questions do not ask if you as a woman have used your power to silence another woman and how much you as a woman are interested in maintaining the white middle class status quo.

Furthermore, these common questions asked at the time of being interviewed i.e. what is our understanding of feminism, collectiv-

ism and patriarchy, are often asked separate/divided. What it can mean is that you do not have to make links about relations of power. For example, how is the power of a white woman manifested/formed/experienced that is different from a woman of Color. But here, you do not have to make links regarding issues of class, gender and race. If you do make links you might be labelled as "too political", and then "we are a service provider". If you answer the feminist question and you answer by saying that feminism is the empowerment of women, to achieve equality and to challenge systemic sex-



ism, this answer might be sufficient to enter the club, you do not have to address racism, classism or heterosexism under the feminist question.

As patriarchy has/is using the method of conquering by dividing, so do the interview questions of feminist collectives.

A common phenomenon among feminist collectives is division among staff belonging to certain groups/clicks in the collective, often based on personal friendships outside the collective. One can predict how one will vote (often referred to as participate in decision making) depending which group one belongs to, in some ways its like knowing how a member

of parliament will vote depending which political party she/he represents.

Personal friendships in the collective have the same effect as the business lobby groups organized to maintain their capitalist interest in the government. What a radical idea, something to think about, to laugh at. I guess I need to give credit at this point to the feminist analysis that the Personal is Political and that personal relationships in the feminist collective have a political meaning/practice. This is what feminists call group process or is it power process? You also have a few individuals that float from group to group. They are usually the ones that have the power to make the majority process break the deadlock. In other words they have the power to create coalition alliances with one of the 'dominant' groups.

If I decide to dream, I would like to put a microphone in every Collective feminist organizations staff meeting on Tuesday mornings and I would make an announcement about the issue of power not being addressed in such organizations. Wait! Political question. Will this announcement be made before the staff check-in or after the. Do I follow process and be polite to ask each collective feminist organiza-

tion if they can give me ten minutes of their lengthy agenda to be heard or do I organize collectively with other women who share my issues and follow through our political act and not ask for permission to speak.

But then I think, to act as one needs to with my sisters, I am then judged. I am told I am too angry, too abrupt, unprofessional, uncollective and that in order to be heard I have to follow process. Process that does not address the issue of power. I re-think. But wasn't the feminist movement validating that women have reasons to be angry, that women have a right to fulfil and assert their needs, for women to not be judged as otherness - but be taken as a 'person'.

As I write, the slogans are more apparent to me. The collective feminist/feminist collective; the woman's movement did not address what power practices are oppressive so that we can become accountable to the process of social change for all and not to reflect the interest of some.

Violence of a Racist Dialogue

By Mariam Khan Durrani

"Now that we, here in North America and the Western world, are using industrialized things that, as we know now, create a lot of pollution, all the third world countries are gonna want the same things we have too. People in Africa are gonna want air conditioners, etc."

It is my seventeenth year in life, I have been 'highschool-attending' for four years. Basically, my overview on schools has been quite damaging...

Nevertheless my adventures in experiencing racism, sexism in grade 12/OAC classes of the 'western world', will be unravelling...

Classrooms have been a drag, no windows and no friends, not to mention, a lack of interest in what is, if I frankly may say so myself, being taught.

Oh, but even before the teacher teaches, s/he must have the whole class listen to the teacher talk to his/her favourite students at the front, about politics, the problems of the Canadian economy, global issues (after all, this is a world issues class), bla, bla, bla.

Well if it isn't Mr. Bush's wife, and Golden Boy, talkin' about what's right for the world.

"Well I think the Canadians, or the Americans should send some people down there and just get everything fixed."

And I was waiting to talk about the strings that are attached, like foreign aid, loans and pressures of world commercialism.

"We have to discourage the third world from using these industrialized things that cause pollution"

This sounded like a poor excuse of an environmental solution. You see the third world, can not want these privileged air conditioners and other materialistic, modernised, 'more convenient', efficient creations, when the world is interdependent. Natural resources are being exhausted to make these 'products', which actually force all inhabitants of the earth to eventually be left with no choice but to use industrialized ways of life. Pollution spreads. As pollution spreads, there still will be more toilet paper than water, available for cleaning!

Teachers don't have an open mind. They teach from their own philosophy, or rather the systems' philosophy, also labeling it correct in a very subtle but ruthlessly direct, manner.

On the other hand, the response I get from teachers when I find courage to speak in a hostile and potentially violent environment and I give my views on world issues, environmental issues etc.; which all link back to specific community issues (poverty, sexism, racism, homophobia), is listened to in mock silence and is brushed swiftly aside with a "Oh, well, anyway. As I was saying..."

Disturbing. Maddening.

Ears have walls.

*Title from "Violence of a Racist Dialogue", Fauzia Rafiq in Tregobov, Frictions: Stories by Women, Second Story Feminist Press, Tor., '93.



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