

Rungb

A South Asian Quarterly of Culture, Comment and Criticism

\$5

Volume 1, Number 1 & 2

Desh Pradesh

South Asian Culture in the Diaspora

Memory and Desire

Women of Culture at the VAG

Leather, Sex and Masala

An Interview with Srinivas Krishna

Waffling with Cunning in the Border Country

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Editorial

Rungh. Colour. South Asian. Quarterly. National. Multi-disciplinary. Dialogues. Definitions. Change.

So, what is Rungh all about? I think that the best answer to that question is the double issue you are holding in your hands.

Rungh is about documenting. In Issue No.1, excerpts from the proceedings of Dosh Pradesh have been transcribed and published for the first time. This conference, of South Asian culture in the Diaspora, which took place in Toronto in November 1991, represented a benchmark for the South Asian cultural community in Canada.

Rungh is also about creating 'documents.' In Issue No. 2 one of the most engaging and thought provoking panels at Dosh Pradesh—*Home as Mythical Space*—is used as a starting point for Amiral Alibhai's art project as well as an interview with three South Asian women poets who discuss the relationship between shrimp curry and the constitution!

Rungh is about dialogues. Whether they are between academics and theorists such as Chris Creighton Kelly and Aruna Srivastava or between artists and their audiences.

Rungh is about defining and challenging definitions. And noting the necessity for both in the times in which we live. Thus, artists such as Pratibha Parmar and Srinivas Krishna speak about the challenges of creating and engaging in their art practices.

Rungh is about activism and the frontlines. Whether that activism addresses racism in cultural institutions, the war against women, or the complex convergence of race, homophobia and aids.

Rungh is about communities and voices. Be they the voices of Indo-Caribbean women who create 'community' through sharing oral histories and writing a play or the voices of poet Ian Iqbal Rashid and queer activist Nayan Shah.

Rungh is about creating audiences and providing a forum for the discussion of cultural production arising from communities of colour. Rungh wants to create a dialogue between the margins and the dominant streams of cultural production in the diaspora.

And for those of you who do not already know, Rungh means 'colour.' Get it!!





Volume 1, Number 1 & 2

RUNGH is an interdisciplinary magazine committed to the exploration of traditional and contemporary South-Asian cultural production. It is a project of the Rungh Cultural Society—an incorporated, non-profit society.

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Desh Pradesh ¹⁹⁹¹

A CONFERENCE & FESTIVAL EXPLORING SOUTH ASIAN CULTURE IN THE WEST

Jamila Ismail

Opening Address by Punam Khosla

I want to tell you a little about Desh Pradesh... I think it is important that we talk about the concept behind it as we go into the opening program. This is the second time that Desh Pradesh has happened. The first time it was also sponsored by Khush, as it is tonight. Khush is an organization largely of gay men in Toronto. Desh was conceived largely by a good friend of ours, Ian Rashid, who is here today. He called together and excited people into the concept, and put on the first Desh Pradesh last April in 1990. It was a huge success. It was a two day event.

Desh Pradesh was conceived because there are so many of us who are South Asians living in Western countries doing cultural work and political organizing, producing films and videos; we're writing poetry, literature, we're doing performance, theatre, and much more. We're doing it in a very different form from the traditional South Asian culture that comes either through popular movies, popular culture or the largely upper class, classical traditions. Many of us are working outside those forms because our lives speak to something else. Our lives tell all of our diverse histories and identities as South Asians, and our work speaks to who we have become, different from each other and yet mapping the points where we can come together as well.

This year's Desh tries to bring forward the voices inside the South Asian community that otherwise have no voice either within the community or in the societies in which we live. The voices of women, political organizers, feminists, and the voices of lesbians and gays who find ourselves silenced about our sexuality in the company of South Asians, or find ourselves whitewashed inside existing white dominated lesbian and gay communities. It also allows voice for those of us who are working actively and consciously against the racism that we experience in the West. And in that we have a very marked and clear historical and political difference from South Asian people living on the Sub-Continent.

Arnold Itwaru

Desh Pradesh also tries to cut across all of the different communities that define 'South Asian' here in Canada, the United States and in England. It's important at this point, particularly given the political context that we live in, that we work against the kind of communalism, nationalism and the 'divide and conquer' tactics that racism that has used and is using all around the world. As such, we have made a conscious effort with this year's program to bring forward the views of South Asians who originate from all over the Sub-Continent, the Caribbean and Africa. And I think what this speaks to is a real conscious movement towards unity for progressive social change in the world that we actually live in. It is a moving away from romantic notions of nostalgia towards a forum within which we speak from our real memories, without any kind of shame or apology; within which we can begin to organize against racism, sexism, homophobia, and from which we can extend genuine solidarity to our other sisters and brothers, people of colour communities around us who also know in their bodies the experience of racism and, in North America in particular, the First Nations peoples.

This is not a traditional arts festival, so to speak. Political and social themes are integral to the various workshops and discussions and to the artistic programs that are in the Desh Pradesh calendar. We don't think that art can be without content. No matter what you do, say or create, you are always taking a position, making some kind of statement. The decision is whether to fall into the status quo or rise up against it. We hope that this Desh takes us one step further towards a movement of South Asians in the West working against the status quo for a more just and humane life for all of us.

Raj Pannu

Photos Molly A.K. Shinhat





CONFERENCE PROGRAMME

Wednesday, November 6

Shifting Identities

Canadian Premiere – Khush, 1991, Pratibha Parmar, UK *Khush* is a visual discovery of the lives of South Asian lesbians and gay men in Britain, India and North America using layers of interviews, dramatic sequences and clips from Indian feature films.

Second Generation Once Removed, 1991, Gita Saxena, Canada An exploration of identity in the context of being a mixed heritage woman having grown up in Canada. This video explores the sense of cultural displacement and homelessness having fallen outside of conventional definitions of identity based on heritage.

Ramabai Espinet, Writer Author of *Nuclear Seasons*, a recent collection of poems, reads from her work.

In view, Interview, Identiview by Aruna Srivastava and Ashok Mathur Assistant professor at the University of British Columbia, Aruna and Calgary publisher Ashok, present a conversational montage of photographic images, voices and identities through multiple sets of eyes.

Sponsored by Women's Press and SisterVision Press

Opening Night Reception Nataraj Restaurant, Brunswick and Bloor 9:30 – midnight ...all welcome.

Sponsored by Khush and The Nataraj Restaurant

Thursday, November 7

Brave New Words

A Program of Literary Readings

Moyez Vassanji, Toronto Author of *The Gunny Sack*, Heineman, 1990, and *No New Land*, M&S, 1991.

Arnold Itwaru, Toronto Author of a new book of poems *Body Rites*, TSAR, 1991

Jamila Ismail, Vancouver Born and raised in Hong Kong, Jamila lives, writes, teaches and performs in Vancouver.

Raj Pannu, Vancouver An emerging performance poet creating waves.

Sadhu Binning, Vancouver Long time Punjabi poet, activist, and editor of Vancouver's *Ankur* magazine.

Ian Rashid, Toronto, UK Gay cultural activist and author of *Black Markets*, *White Boyfriends* and *Other Acts of Elision*, a book of poems being released this fall.

The Journey The Diasporic Experience

Sonia Dhillon, Actor, Toronto A dramatic reading from Suniti Namjoshi's work with direction by Steve Pereira.

Video Premiere – Takari and Coke, 1990, Rukhsana Mosam, UK A film examining the changing perceptions, cultural and political identities of South Asians in South Africa through an exploration of the filmmaker's family.

Beyond the Kala Pani, by OSSICC Women's Collective A play tracing the migration of women from India to the Caribbean to Canada by women involved in The Ontario Society for Studies in Indo-Caribbean Culture.

sponsored by The Cross Cultural Communications Centre

Paintings exhibited in the theatre by Zainul Kassam of Omega Workshop

Friday, November 8

India Without Romance Special guest program

Democracy in Crisis? 1991, Manjira Datta, India The Toronto Premiere of this film about the current political situation in India including coverage of the 1991 Indian elections. A discussion with the filmmaker will follow the screening.

Sponsored by Liaison of Independent Filmmakers of Toronto

Feature Films—The New Ground

New Canadian work – Masala, 1991, Srinivas Krishna, Canada A sneak preview of a dramatic-comedy film about the lives of two South Asian families and an angry young man who suddenly reappears on the scene. Starring Saeed Jaffrey (in three different roles), Zohra Segal, and Srinivas Krishna. The Director will be on hand for discussion.

Bhangra Jig, 1990, Pratibha Parmar, UK A four minute television intervention piece commissioned by Channel 4 using Bhangra music and dance to reflect on what it means to be Asian, British and, European.

Special thanks to Cinéfile

Desh Pradesh Bhangra & Dance Party—Indian, British, Caribbean, North American mix

The Rivoli – 332 Queen Street West With special guest British Bhangra DJ "Ritu" and Toronto's CKLN DJ Michelle Mohabeer.

Special thanks to The Rivoli

Saturday, November 9

Violence Against Women Uncovering Truths

Sunera Thobani Vancouver, Fauzia Rafiq Toronto, and Jennifer Chew South Asian Women's Community Centre, Montréal discuss this emerging theme in South Asian cultural expression. Also a video screening of recent work by South Asian women in Vancouver.

Identity, Sexuality and History South Asian, Gay and Proud

Nayan Shah, University of Chicago A presentation looking at the construction of identities by South Asian lesbians and gay men and how we use personal, social, and archaeological histories in order to construct who we are and our desire for community.

South Asians Organizing around AIDS/HIV—Learning and Changing

Video Premiere – Bolo Bolo, 1991, Gita Saxena & Ian Rashid, Canada The response of diasporic South Asian communities to the AIDS crisis is documented through interview, information, and a weaving of images. **Special guest Aisha Khan Muslim Women's Aid UK, with Kalpesh Oza, Anthony Mohammed & Gita Saxena Toronto**, discuss advancing work on AIDS/HIV in the South Asian community.

Sponsored by the Alliance for South Asian AIDS Prevention, VTape & The AIDS Committee of Toronto.

Womanvision We've Come a Long Way...

A Nice Arrangement, 1991, Gurrinder Chada, UK By the director of *I'm British But*, about an arranged marriage, produced by Channel 4 Television.

Video Premiere – Knowing Her Place, 1990, Indu Krishnan, US A powerful and moving investigation of the 'cultural schizophrenia' experienced by Vasu, a South Asian woman living in America.

Baysharam, Toronto's South Asian Sisters in Solidarity A docu-dramatic play tracing the changes in the lives of four South Asian feminists.

Sponsored by The Company of Sirens

Brown and Out Seeing and Being Lesbian and Gay

Video Premiere – Jareena, Portrait of a Hijda, 1990, Prem Kalliat, India Explores the life of a transsexual and her community in the City of Bangalore. It provides a unique insight into the lifestyle of the Hijdas, a society of eunuchs who have thrived in India for centuries.

Ferdous, 1990, Shakila Mann, UK Ferdous [*paradise*] is concerned with the prescription of the Quran on 'deviant' sexuality; that lesbians or homosexuals must "be confined until their death." The film centres on two female lovers; as one is forced into marriage, the other can only look on.

Time Based Art and Cultural Difference, Sunil Gupta, UK

A multi media examination of South Asian Lesbian and Gay Identities in the work of four Black artists in the UK who came to their work through quite different routes, illustrating the range of cultural origins within black photography in Britain today.

Pratibha Parmar, UK A fun examination of lesbian images in select Hindi films.

Sunday, November 10

Home as a Mythic Space

Michelle Mohabeer Toronto /Guyana, Moyez V a s s a n j i Toronto/East Africa, Raj Pannu Vancouver/India, Arun Prabha Mukherjee Toronto/India, and Chris Creighton Kelly Vancouver/India explore the meaning of home to various sectors, artists, constituencies and backgrounds in and of the South Asian community.

Print Media Alternatives

DIVA Toronto, Rungth Vancouver, Ankur Vancouver, Toronto South Asian Review Toronto, Mela Toronto, Khush Khayal Toronto, and Bazaar London

A discussion of the existing and forming magazines and journals which serve as a forum for changing South Asian culture in the west.

Sponsored by FUSE Magazine

Closing CelebrAsian

Sheila James – solo vocals and keyboards
Ritesh Kas and friends – tabla, sitar and keyboards
Writers Cabaret – theme "Home"

Ian Rashid, Sadhu Binning, Moyez Vassanji, Kaushalya Bannerji, Ramabai Espinet, Ashok Mathur, Jamila Ismail, Chris Creighton Kelly, Kalpesh Oza, Raj Pannu, Mariam Dhurani, Darini Abeysekera.

The Tarana Dance School – "Oh Tassawale" Indo-Caribbean dance choreographed by Devika Chetram, with young dancers from Toronto.

Pratibha Parmar

People have explored in very diverse, and sometimes quite contradictory ways, the meaning of home for artists, political activists, for women experiencing domestic violence, for lesbian and gay men, for people living with AIDS and HIV, and for all of us South Asians living in the diaspora. I want to read something from a book that I co-edited with a group of black women in England, and it was published in the early 1980s. What we wrote about 'home' at that time is still relevant today. The book is called *Charting the Journey: Writings by Black and Third World Women*. One of the sections in the book was called 'Alienations: Strangers at Home'... The introduction to that starts off with a quote from the black American poet and writer and political activist June Jordan. She says, "But everybody needs a home, so at least you can have some place to leave, which is where most other folks will say that you must be coming from. Home is a funny thing. Home is where the heart is, home is where the hearth lies. Home is where you were born. Home is where you live. Home is where you can't live. Home is where you're safe. Home is where you're scared to be. Home is a place of mind. Home is a foreign land. Home is homeland. Home is a pavement stone. Home is your blood and bone. Home is where you belong. Home is where you're dispossessed from. Home is your prison. Home is an institution. Home is forbidden. Home is your exile. Home is a smell. Home is a sound. Home is your joy. Home is your despair. Home is for the future. Home is for the past. A young woman loses her pass card in Soweto, or the West Bank, an old woman squats on a pavement in Bombay. A Chilean mother lives in Glasgow, longing for the sounds of Chile. For Palestinians who have been dispossessed and their land divided, home has a very different meaning. Artificially imposed boundaries separate families for decades. Dispossession is a shared reality in South Africa, as in Palestine. But if the land is stolen, the spirit is not. Homes continue to be created. Banishment of the designated homes of the Bantustans, is refused in favour of the corrugated iron huts. Refugee camps stand firm as part of the struggle and determination to remain."

For women of colour, for people of colour living in the west, there are inherent contradictions in the very word home. Can you call a country which has systematically colonized your countries of origin, one which refuses, through a thorough racism in its institutions, media, and culture, to even recognize your existence, and your rights to that existence—can you, can we, call this country home?... The attacks on some people of colour in the supposed security of their own homes further emphasizes the violent insecurity of home. And in the land where homes are supposed to be castles, petrol bombs can

be hurled through your letter boxes, and police can smash down your front doors.

To return to June Jordan, when a white person asks a black woman where she comes from, the implicit assumption is that she does not belong here, wherever that is, be it Canada or Britain. The implicit threat is that she should go back to where she belongs. Even this returning, going back, dreaming of a country of origin, is beset with problems. Women who have never actually been home idealize it to such an extent that 'back home' fulfills all the emotional and ideological holes that this home does not. It becomes the ideal place, the true place. It is so romanticized that 'back home' itself becomes unreal, a dream.



Home is an emotional word, a political word. Many crimes have been carried out in its name. While recognizing our right to claim our various homes as our own, we must be wary of the kind of nationalism and

patriotism that only has reactionary roots. A home where we are unable to voice our criticisms is not a genuine home. Nor is a genuine home one where you assimilate, integrate, and then disappear. For being invisible is the same as not being at home. Not being at home enough to be precisely who you are, without any denials of language or culture. Until we can be both be visible and belong, the word home will remain for us ambiguous, ironic, and even sarcastic.

Chris Creighton Kelly

Do Anglo-Indians have a home? Anglo-Indian. The very word, even the more pompous 'Eurasian' that some of my relatives sometimes prefer some of the time, conjures up the worst compromises. Please note, the Anglo comes first. Conjures up that we've always been the buffer. Somehow that... oversimplifies it, though, it gives it a kind of quiet, imperial identity. Anglo-Indian; please note, the Anglo comes first. It doesn't really reveal the mud past, the whole colonial mess, the Portuguese, the Goan, the Irish, the Hindu, the English, the Dutch... and who knows what else resides inside of me. Please note, the Anglo comes first.

So what's home? Home is a bridge, a bridge by definition, Anglo-Indian, between cultures, between white, not white, between straight, gay, lesbian, between men, women. Hopefully, home is a place where self-loathing has a place of becoming, has a hope of becoming self-love. Home is giving, not in some Christian 'turn the other cheek'... way of giving. But giving as peoples of colour, in humility, giving up, sharing

power, facilitating, giving as resistance, resistance as pleasure. Home is hybrid, always. To be living as an ethnic with ethic in these post-modern times is always to be fragmented. Home is always negotiated. Never a refuge, never totally comfortable, always a little dis-ease.

So where to locate home, then? Well, anthropologists, bless their objective little hearts, have taught us that when ethnics lose their identity they first lose the way they dress, then their culture, and their culture becomes atrophied and stale and ossified, and finally reified, so all they have are customs. They lose their customs, and then they lose their language. But always, there's always food. The last to go, food.

Moyez Vassanji

If I have to give a shape to home I would put it maybe round. But even that would be two dimensional. So home for me, thinking back on it now and talking to friends when they talk about home, it meant a certain familiarity, an ease or a comfort, a place in which to be. A place in which you are, and in which you are not conscious that you are. Once that home or state of being or existence is lost, for whatever reason, or is perceived to be lost, which may be the same thing, then there's a struggle for being. A search for that comfort. A search to attain the state of being as natural as possible. And I suppose that is what one is doing here.

Well, what does this all mean? What is home to me? If I think about it, it seems to me that my writing is in fact a search for home. The home that I lost and the home that I am seeking. I don't believe in the simple process of leaving and arrival. I've not arrived, I may have unpacked, but I don't think I have arrived. The antithesis of that is Bharati Mukherjee when she says in her New York Times article, "I have arrived." But I have not felt like I have arrived. I have been in many places. Home for me is a constant process. It is the search, the homelessness. It's like being in a train, where there's the thrill of the motion, the rhythm. Arrival would be disappointing, it would be an anticlimax. And in fact, a betrayal. You see, home is a tremendous guilt. So at best, writing is a home.

I suppose, to make a strength out of this, homelessness comes naturally to me. This is again a kind of analysis after the fact because I come from a migrating peoples. I come from families in Gujerat and Kutch. My families have been in Zanzibar, in Kenya, in Tanganyika. I have lived in the United States, in Canada. And we are also a people of cultural transitions. In fact, we rather perversely take pleasure in moving with the times. So there was Hinduism; those memories still distinct. There was Islam. There was Africa. There was Britain and colonialism, which is a very real presence even now. There was the US and there is Canada, and I don't know what else. So this homelessness comes quite naturally. And writing is a way of making a strength out of it.

For this reason, and I want to contradict myself, I feel most at home in cities... You lose yourself in a city. They are not claustrophobic, at least not the cities that I would like to live in. You can become faceless, change neighbourhoods, you can create your private space in a city. In fact, a city is a world. And counter to that, nationhood is, in fact, meaningless to me. It is abstract, it is artificial. It is more constraining than a city. A city to me is the antithesis of a nation. I once had a sense

of nation but that's because nationhood was defined and was being defined as I was growing up. And I was part of that defining process and that definition was in response to tangibles. Those tangibles were colonialism, racism, signs on toilets which said, 'Europeans only' or 'Asians only.' It was in response to that reality, which I still remember, that one

defined a new nationhood... If anything, that sense has been broadened now, into a sensibility that I would call, for want of a better phrase, 'a Third World

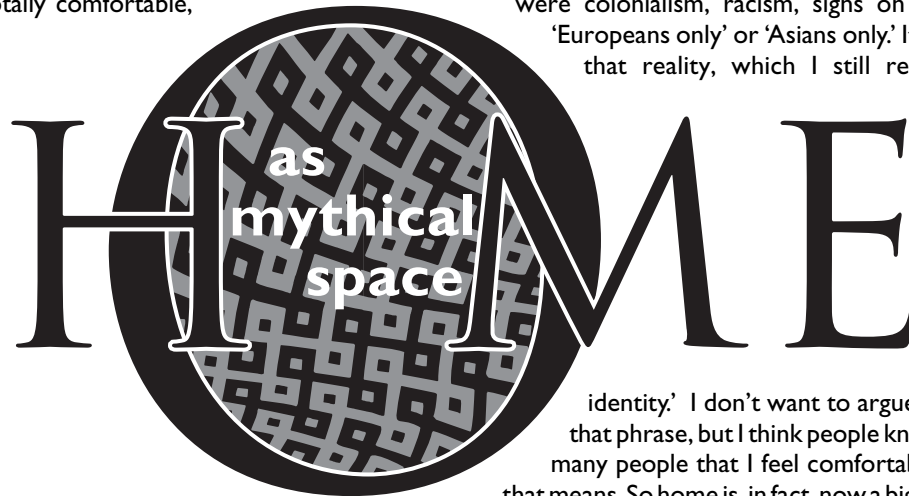
identity.' I don't want to argue about the usage of that phrase, but I think people know what I mean, and many people that I feel comfortable with know what that means. So home is, in fact, now a big place... Boundaries are broken not to be replaced by other boundaries. I was pushed out by whatever reason, and I am perpetually out. Thank you.

From the audience

I'm troubled at this use of the word 'home,' and I wonder why none of you problematize the concept? I should lift out what I'm thinking here. We have homeless people, which is associated with poverty, and if you walk the streets of Toronto, they are indeed 'home-less.' Then I think of Palestine, the people of Palestinian origin fighting for a homeland, and I think 'home' there is different. And I think that being in India, one feels homeless sometimes. And you think about sexism, abuse and misogyny. I'm wondering exactly what is the symbolic value of 'home'? I'm wondering in terms of colonialism and the religious moral value placed on the family as a heterosexual couple, and home, why do we keep on using this very troubling and dangerous concept? I hope the project is to fight against racism, sexism, homophobia, classism, and I'm just wondering why, indeed, we are using this problematic and dangerous category?

Pratibha Parmar

I think that there is an acknowledgement on the panel that 'home' is a very contradictory term and it's a contradictory term for all different groups of people... I think that when we talk about home and the contradiction of that term home for women who are systematically abused within the family by their husbands or their male partners, we also have to acknowledge women who are incest survivors, so where home is actually not a safe place at all. And I think that those are some of the things that we need to begin to talk about when we're talking about this problematic term 'home.' And also try and move beyond our kind of subjectivities, that yes, we do inhabit radical subjectivities, where if we are on the margins and on the periphery and in the kind of marginal identities that we inhabit, we need to move beyond that and begin to make connections across those differences and across our subjectivities. Really, if we get caught up just within our own authentic experiential identities, then we're not actually going to be doing anything towards making any kind of change, or creating any kind of challenge to the status quo.



"Until we can be both visible and belong, the word 'home' will remain for us ambiguous, ironic and even sarcastic."

The Beginning

They came in ships

*From across the seas, they came,
Britain, colonizing India,
transporting her chains
from Chota Nagpur and the Ganges
plain.*

*Westwards came the Whitby,
The Hesperus,
the Island-bound Fatel Rozack.*

*Wooden missions of imperialist design.
Human victims of Her Majesty's victory.*

*They came in fleets.
They came in droves
like cattle
brown like cattle,
eyes limpid, like cattle.*

*Some came with dreams of milk-and-honey riches,
fleeing famine and death:
dancing girls,
Rajput soldiers, determined, tall,
escaping penalty of pride,
stolen wives, afraid and despondent,
crossing black waters,
Brahmin, Charmar, alike,
hearts brimful of hope.*

1988 marked the 150th year of Indian arrival in the Caribbean. The occasion was observed with scholarly and other kinds of deliberations in New York, Toronto and in several Caribbean locations. Since then, OSSICC (Ontario Society for Studies in Indo-Caribbean Culture)

has observed the event annually. At Desh Pradesh, OSSICC facilitated the production of *Beyond the Kala Pani* (Black Water). This article is a record of the creative journey which resulted in the play.

The words of this poem by Mahadai Das, a Guyanese poet and the author of *Bones*, begin the play as the actors appear on stage in a dance sequence simulating movements on board a ship. The first scene takes place on the deck of this ship of indenture, with its cargo of 'coolies.'

The Historical Setting

In 1838, the ship *Fatel Rozack* left Calcutta on a voyage to Demerara in the colony of British Guiana (now Guyana) on the north eastern tip of South America. Indentured labourers were on board bound for the sugar-cane fields of Guyana, their labour bailing out the fortunes of planters who, after the emancipation of slaves in 1838, found themselves without the means to keep their estates going at a desired profit. To the labourers, the voyage meant work and money to

this, a sense of being marginalized in the social and political spheres has led to discontent and demoralization. One result of this has been significant migration, especially from Trinidad and Guyana.


For Indians, the ground for acculturation and assimilation into the social fabric of the Caribbean was not assured. The equation was complicated by the British colonial agenda of 'divide and rule' which led to deep political and other fissures between the two major races in countries like Guyana and Trinidad and Tobago, even as the 'creolization' process continued unabated. The consequence for artistic and intellectual activity was that Indians were late in making an appearance in general, although such major figures as V.S. Naipaul and Samuel Selvon did emerge during the first surge in West Indian writing. Women's writing was even later in developing: in fact, literature produced by women of Indian extraction was virtually non-existent until a few years ago.

were speaking about issues of importance to us, as women, in a gathering of other Indo-Caribbean women. That realization was exhilarating in itself. For those of us who had been active in the women's movement previous to this, it was particularly novel not to have to undertake a translation exercise before speaking honestly of setbacks or affirming well-known and loved practices in our own community.

Out of this amazing dialogue came the idea of dramatizing our collective experience as Indian women in a format which would tell the story of our journey historically up to the present. That was the scenario for the germination of the play, *Beyond the Kala Pani*. From the beginning it was a collective enterprise, and it remains one of the most wholehearted and generous coöperative efforts I have ever participated in. The pervading sense of unearthing something integral to our beings as Indian women drove the project forward.

Research on this project took several months; apart from printed resources, oral sources

“The impact was that of something large and hidden, even taboo, being exposed for the first time.”



Rehana La Borde as the fifth Rohini

be saved and brought back to India. They were, for the most part, simple village people who were led to believe that the islands to which they were journeying were a short distance away. When months later, they disembarked on the other side of the world, exhausted and bewildered, several of their number had died at sea, while others were ravaged by fevers and disease. This was the inauspicious start of India in the Caribbean.

Indentureship continued by fair and foul means until the year 1917. During this period, thousands of Indians arrived in the Caribbean, their greatest concentrations being in the colonies of Trinidad, Guyana, Surinam and the French island of Guadeloupe, although there are minority populations in virtually every island today. Today, Indians form 20% of the population of the region and occupy positions in almost every sector of society. In spite of

Breaking the Silence

The result of this series of events was that the experiences of Indian women during this passage of almost 150 years have been lost to their descendants except through fragments collected randomly over the years. And so it was, one Sunday afternoon in Toronto, Canada, that about fifteen or so of the grand-daughters and great-grand-daughters of these unwitting immigrants sat down together in a drawing room setting to collectively map their history. The occasion was a meeting for planning a session on 'Women's Issues' during the 4th annual Indo-Caribbean Heritage Day celebrations in Toronto.

As we talked together that evening, many of us realized that it was the first time that we

were consulted, interviews done, and there were forays made into material culture, dance and music. There was no budget for any of this because there was no time at hand in which to put the grant-writing machinery into effect. There were four writers, one for each character's period piece.

The play is innovative theatre in the extreme—it maintains no loyalty to any particular theatrical style or dramatic tradition, and the chopiness of its transitions empowers the text to demand that the audience perform closure in order to achieve comprehension. The minimalist set, multi-functional props and authentic language registers work toward an alienating effect.

The Play

Beyond the Kala Pani is a play which is one hour long. It is unique in that it is a first attempt to dramatize the journey of the Indo-Caribbean woman from India, through the Caribbean to life in Toronto, 1992. Indentureship, toil, escape from the labour of the fields, consolidation in deepest secrecy, such is the history of Indian survival in the Caribbean, particularly the survival of the womenfolk of that community. The 'consolidation agenda' (i.e. the acquisition of education as a means by which to attain material security) meant that intellectual pursuits were postponed in favour of practical, and immediately prestigious professions such as medicine and law. Nowadays, business and science subjects are the preferred occupational goals. The Arts and the Humanities remain a low priority among people who have not yet achieved 'place' and have little interest in reflection. Such is the dilemma of the fourth character in the play, a conflicted young woman who is torn between past and present. It is also the dilemma of the play itself. Very early in the process, it became clear that saturation was a very large problem. What should be left out?

Nothing...because nothing had been said about any of this until this moment. Everyone's grandmother and great-grandmother clamoured for her story to be told. The first performance utilized four characters from different historical periods: a woman on board the *Whitby* bound for Demerara; a woman on Plantation Port Mourant in British Guiana, circa 1930; a woman in Trinidad, circa 1960, migrating to Canada and experiencing life there; and finally, an alienated young woman in Toronto in 1990. In this first production, the characters remained isolated in their descendant's predicament. By the time the production was staged at Desh Pradesh, however, major alterations had occurred. One was the creation of the unifying figure of a storyteller, portrayed as an ancient crone, whose presence fused the narrative line together more tightly as she hovered over the opening movement and reappeared at the end with a lighted deya. While there is no overt statement of connection by a line of descent, all of the characters utilize the single name 'Rohini.' This is muted in all but the third character from Trinidad who works through letters and journals and whose signature "Love, Rohini" becomes the name tag of all the women.

The shadowy helper-figure of the *Koken*, a device from Japanese *Noh* theatre, functioned as an agent serving to execute the minimalist features of the play—its scant props, for instance. The *Koken*, dressed in black, silent and improvisational, lent a post-modern touch to the stage.

One major development occurred in the use of characters themselves as focal pieces in the set construction. Each scene does this in a different way—for instance, in the ship scene, while Rohini, on board the ship from India, delivers her monologue, other actors create the squalid environment through sound effects while the *Koken* holds the sail aloft.

Honor Ford-Smith, founding artistic director of the Sistren Theatre Collective in Jamaica, took on the job of lead director. Under her direction, major choral improvisations were worked out. Devika Chetram of the Tarana Dance Company gave advice on dance improvisations.

At Desh Pradesh, the play touched a raw nerve in the diasporic South Asian community. Many, many people, from areas outside the Caribbean found that it was also their story. For the Indo-Caribbean community, however, the effect was electrifying. The impact was that of something large and hidden, even taboo, being exposed for the first time. If it had been possible, the community's demand for the play would have turned the actors into a traveling company overnight.

The collective is now trying to decide how best to develop and disseminate the material gathered. In more ways than one, the form arrived at here is a product of its content, but as the content develops, the form keeps shifting. The final product is yet to come...



Ramabai Espinet is a writer and a cultural activist in Toronto.



Tamara Aggarwal as the first Rohini journeying from India to the Caribbean.

Credits

Writers

Nira Dookeran, Helena Singh, Ramabai Espinet and Valini Geer.

Actors

Evelyne, Tamara Aggarwal, Helena Singh, Sharon Lewis, Shameeda Saffie, Rehana La Borde.

Direction

Honor Ford-Smith, Ramabai Espinet.

Production

Surojini Lang, Michael Latchana.

Choreography

Devika Chetram

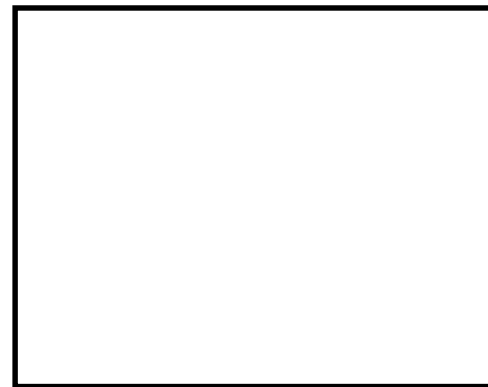
Photographs

Molly A.K. Shinhat

For more information about *Beyond the Kala Pani* write to:

OSSICC

55A Woodbine Downs Boulevard
Rexdale, Ontario M9W 6N5
Canada
Telephone 416 674-2700





“..There is a war on women”

Women and Violence

A Desh Pradesh Workshop

Sunera Thobani

...There is a war on women. And it is so good that that violence is being named. Violence against women. That is what it is, and it's wonderful to see a workshop that actually calls it that, because there are so many conferences, so many workshops which are organized, which call it 'family violence,' 'domestic violence,' and it is really wonderful to see that it is being named for what it is.

Now, I think the issue of violence is very, very difficult to deal with in our communities, because we live in a racist society which just jumps on any issues and problems that we have in the community, and uses that as yet another sign of our backwardness. So it's quite common when we're talking about violence in the South Asian community, to have women, white women, feminists even, who are committed to doing work in this area, explain it away in the name of sort of Third World machoism, Third World culture... "See, you are from a backward culture. See, your men are worse than our white men here." ... So you're constantly walking this sort of tight-rope and hoping that you don't fall and drown on either side. Because when it comes to work against racism, it is with these men that you're fighting. It's not this white women's movement who's going to be there to support you in any way in this struggle against racism.

At the beginning of this year, a South Asian woman's body was found dumped off a highway in BC. She had been murdered and by the time they found her body, half the face had been eaten away. There was no one who was willing to come forward and claim this woman as our own. There wasn't any organization that was strong enough to step up and say, "This woman was one of us." There was no women's organization that was strong enough to stand up and say, "No, she was a sister." This is the kind of fate that women are meeting, and we need to organize. What we need really desperately is a national women's

Creating **Solidarity:** **Race, Gender & Violence**

One in three women is sexually assaulted. Eighty-five percent of rapists are acquaintances of the women they rape. Eighty to ninety percent of women experience sexual harassment in the labour force, and the majority of women who are murdered are murdered by their male partners or acquaintances.

These statistics enumerate the reality of women's lives as casualties in the war against women. Desh Pradesh's panel on "Violence Against Women" addressed the war against South Asian women on both fronts, those of sexism and racism.

Desh's panel consisted of Jennifer Chew, from the South Asian Women's Community Center in Montreal; Fauzia Rafiq, from the Toronto South Asian women's journal, *Diva*; Sunera Thobani, from the South Asian Women's Action Network in Vancouver (SAWAN); and, writer/feminist/activist Rita Goli, who moderated the panel.

The "Violence Against Women" panel was set for noon on Saturday, in the hectic schedule of Desh Pradesh. Due to the well attended and late-ending Bhangra Dance Party held the night before, there was a meager turnout. This was unfortunate, given the critically important issues to be discussed.

In her presentation, Sunera Thobani addressed the dual issues of racism outside the community and sexism inside the community, both of which combine to victimize South

Asian women. For example, while the white feminist movement tackles the issue of violence against women, it buys into the racist mythology that when so called 'Third World' women get raped, it is because 'Third World' men are more violent, or the manifestation of violence is 'culturally specific.'

In addition, although the white feminist movement proclaims to help ALL women against male violence, most white feminist organizations are not accessible to the majority of South Asian women and women of colour due to difficulties with, amongst other things, language and cultural sensitivity. When the issue of violence against South Asian women and women of colour is raised within white feminist organizations, the tendency of these organizations is to focus on dowry deaths and the marriage of child brides. The oppression of South Asian women and women of colour is presented as being inherently linked to our cultures instead of to the overriding patriarchal power relations between men and women.

The racist assumptions of white feminist organizations and the lack of service provided by them, form barriers that do not allow for valuable and often life-saving information to be passed on to South Asian women and women of colour. By categorizing the violence experienced by South Asian women and women of colour as 'culturally accepted,' these organizations fetishize the violence experi-

enced by South Asian women and women of colour, and minimize the universality of violence against women.

One of the results of there not being sufficient services available to South Asian women and women of colour who are the victims of violence is that they feel trapped, alienated and alone in their painful struggle. The panel at Desh Pradesh attempted to address the issue of alienation and explored strategies for change.

Jennifer Chew discussed the variety of services that the South Asian Women's Community Center provides for women; services such as counselling, potlucks, social events, information, accompaniment, and advocacy. Generally, the centre provides the services which white feminist organizations either cannot provide or will not provide. Jennifer also discussed a theatre production that addressed the issues of violence in the home. The production was organized and performed by members of Montréal Serai, a South Asian cultural group in Montréal. The idea of theatre or any public performance of the issues involved, aids in the fight against the alienation felt by the female victims of the abuse by saying, "You are not alone."

The discussion panel also examined the difficulties that the South Asian community, not unlike other communities, has in acknowledging the reality of violence in South Asian women's lives. The panel talked about the many reasons why the South Asian community does not want to address the reality of violence. Much of the discussion revolved around the roles of women in family, religious and community life. To address the issue of violence against women, the South Asian community, and other communities, must face issues such as the oppression of women, the dominance of men, and the demands for equality. A meaningful discussion of these issues would eventually culminate in a restructuring, a redefining of so called traditions and roles in family, religion and community. It is the fear and obstruction of those who presently hold power in the patriarchy that hinders any meaningful and reconstructive dialogue.

One method of approaching the topic of violence against women in the South Asian community would be to universalize the problem to all men, not specifically South Asian men. Such a universalization would, I believe, allow South Asian women to show solidarity with South Asian men in the fight

against racism without compromising on the issue of the violence which they experience at the hands of men. This strategy allows South Asian women to, on one hand, display an understanding of the conditions of racism experienced by people of colour in this country. On the other hand South Asian men, along with other men in society, have to be held accountable for their misogyny, sexism and the violence they commit against women. To recognize the issues of violence against South Asian women, South Asian men must educate themselves, acknowledge their position as oppressors and learn to give up their power so the status quo can be abolished. Basically, South Asian men, and men in general, have to want to change. They have to want to give up their power, and the resistance to giving up power is a significant problem in society at large.

As a part of her presentation, Fauzia Rafiq read a story she had written in 1987. The story was entitled, *The Birth of a Murderer*, and related an incident which took place in 1982. In this story a woman's baby was stoned to death on the steps of a Mosque in Karachi. The intense and powerful story that Fauzia read aloud to the small audience was not only painful to listen to, but as displayed by Fauzia, painful for her to read. For me, the story illustrated yet another means by which the South Asian community can put the issue of violence against women on the table. It is clear that the role of literature, drama and other forms of cultural production can play a significant role in reducing alienation and creating solidarity amongst women.

One of the benefits of the different styles of presentation on the panel is that they helped to expose the different approaches which can be taken to battle the problem. One aspect of the struggle is to create centres, lobby, rally, and develop strategies. Another aspect of the struggle involves listening to and understanding the individual experiences of women; the pain, anger, injustices and sadness. The two aspects are necessary so as to provide solidarity and empowerment. Desh Pradesh's attempt to facilitate a forum on "Violence Against Women" was an important step in the South Asian community towards dealing with the continued war against women.

Rungb

Zara Suleman is a feminist, artist and cultural activist in Vancouver.

"We live in a racist society...it uses [the issue of violence against women] as yet another sign of our backwardness."

organization, where we can come together, where we can break this marginalization, where we can break this silence on this issue, come together, and look at how women are coping with this in different parts of the country.

Jennifer Chew

People ask, "Why do you want to have a South Asian Women's Community Centre?" We had to explain that there are basic needs of women that we had to attend to. We needed to bring the women out of their isolation in the homes to the Centre, [which is located in Montréal], to feel at home talking languages that we are familiar with. We do this. We also bring them out to go to English and French classes, so that they can also participate in the life over here. And we run many referral services, such as health and legal advice, treating abuse and problems that arise through immigration. Then we provide translation services, and we support the network for battered women. Apart from that, we come together at potluck lunches every last Friday of the month. At these we have information sessions that are built into our needs. I've also left our magazine, *Shakti*, and a pamphlet that describes in more detail the work that is done by SAWCC, on the table outside.

We, the women of the Centre, we wanted to express ourselves [in a play]. We didn't want anyone to write it or interpret it for us or act it out for us. We wanted the women from the Centre to participate in the play. We didn't want to have people from outside, or amateur professionals, or anything like that, and we found that a lot of women, many women, were very, very shy to come out and act. But I think that once you overcome that shyness, it's okay. The greater problem is that women are seen as people who have homes, commitment to children, commitment to husbands, and it was very, very difficult. It was like drawing teeth, to get us all together in time to practise. A lot of women could not participate in our practices because they had to go home and see to the children, and see to the meals, and if the husband calls up from work and says, "I'm working late," that was it, they could not attend rehearsals, they had to be there. I find that performance for women is a very difficult thing to accomplish.

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Leather, SEX & MASALA



By March 1992 Masala was playing to full theatres in Toronto and had reached England for the first CAN-Asian film festival. I spoke with Srinivas Krishna, the film's director/writer/actor and co-producer (co-produced with Camelia Friberg) in England in March 1992 before the premiere of his film at the CAN-Asian festival. Following are some of Krishna's reflections nine months after the release of his first feature film.

I get asked often, "Why did you make this film?" On the CBC, I remember during the Festival of Festivals there was a live radio interview and the presenter asked me, "Why did you become a filmmaker and make this film?"...And I said, "What prompted you to become a journalist so that you could interview me?"...And I just, I wonder exactly, well, why does one do the things one does?

[But] why this film is because... I was in New York, and Philadelphia [and] by that time I [had] made two short films myself and I thought, "Wonder what do they really have to do with the world that I live [in], or the ways that I see the world?"

They didn't really adhere to personal experience or history at all. I want to do something that is rooted in something that is very familiar, that is much more personal. And so I thought, "Set it in Indians." It didn't really matter if it was Toronto or New York but I thought certainly in the New World. I drew out the plot on a napkin in a café in Toronto. The plot was really simple. You just start with two families. When you start with Indians, you start with families. Families—it's so easy because it's what you know. There's always one guy who's outside the family, some blacksheep troublemaker, evil cousin or something like that. So you have these two families—there's one poor family and one rich family.

Srinivas Krishna
as Krishna



Womanvoice, Womanvision— South Asian Women and Film

Excerpts from Desh Pradesh
Workshops

Michelle Mohabeer

Whether [as a member of a] community or as an individual, I'm coming to realize that I define the parameters of what is home rather than accepting some prescribed definition of home and community. The communities that we claim as our base represent a place of negation, power struggles, petty jealousies and exclusion rather than space for affirmation. As a lesbian of mixed race ancestry, I have experienced negation and exclusion both in the lesbian of colour community and in the broader Caribbean community. Many of us claim to be politically progressive as feminists, as lesbians, as people of colour, et cetera. But our political ideals are limited and cease to be truly transformational when we do not take responsibility for our actions, and when we do not put our politics and theory into practice in terms of how we relate with each other.

As a filmmaker, home is something that is in a sense indirectly central to my work. Some of the central themes of my next film are about reclaiming history and [recounting] stories of Indo-Caribbean experience. [This is done] in the form of a visual journey, both literal and symbolic, and it combines the autobiographical, which is my experience of emigrating to Canada at the age of twelve from Guyana and not having actually returned to the Caribbean until the spring of next year. In a sense, I don't consider Canada truly my home despite living here for twenty years, and Guyana is only my home to the extent that I was born there. Given that I've changed and that Guyana has changed, there is a kind of a problematic and fragmented relationship of not quite belonging.

As I said before, how one understands one's reality and one's [identity], particularly around the notion of home, is a constantly shifting thing. This film about faith is both an autobiographical, personal and political event. It combines the historical use of film that is neither an historical document or a personal account. What it is instead is a fusion of the autobiographical, historical and experiential in a kind of a poetical and meditative style.

Krishna laughs and continues to explain his story of story of a troubled youth/rebel who lost his family five years ago to a crashed flight destined for India. He is searching for home amongst his rich uncle's (Lallu Bhai Salanki) family, and Lallu Bhai's poor cousin, Mr. Tikkoo and his family. As the interviewer, it is now that I begin to understand the clarity as well as the headiness and energy of **Masala**. Originally, Krishna intended to make a 'genre' picture, a "Rebel Without a Cause," a "Boy Meets Girl," but this concept soon became too limiting, first evident when Krishna decided that he wanted to put Lord Krishna in the film. And then all of Krishna's stories toppled, not finding space in the New World context of film. Krishna described having a feeling of 'apartness' that maintained itself through his stories and childhood fables which did not seem to have any currency here. And so he decided to 'unravel' the genre, saying that the world could indeed be like this, as he described it. "Why," he asked, "should I use these outside constructions to define this world that I am talking about? It is deserving of a language of its own." The result? A richly layered narrative film that defies both the conventional Hollywood, and European Arts Cinema genres. **Masala** is also a film that looks at stereotypes, meets sexuality, and 'humanizes' gods, all of which has put this director and the film on the controversial list in Canada and in India where a film screening has yet to be accepted.

I asked Krishna if he predicted any audience reactions.

I thought surely some people would be pissed off but I didn't know the shape of what would happen. I didn't know what was really going to happen because the thing about this is that I didn't know who my audience would be. If you know who your audience is, you can predict; you can act for an audience; you're talking to someone. I really wondered sometimes, "Who am I talking to?"

If you have that genre: Hollywood, anti-Hollywood, first world discourse, then you know what you're referring to, you know who your audience is, you know the frame for it; it's all contained within a frame. I was very well aware that the film was not in that frame at all because the world of the people it describes is outside of [that frame] and this is going to have interesting effects for any audience.

People here watch European Art Cinema: stories, in other words, fashioned from one position and stories fashioned from another position—they're in it, and of it. But what happens if you're in it but you're not of it? Who is then the audience for it? At the time [of writing] I just didn't know, I thought, "Well, you know there are some things that Indians living outside of India will understand but will they understand other things? And then there are some things that people who

Sakina Jaffrey as Rita

are not Indian will understand but will they understand the things that Indians understand?"

Remember when *Midnight's Children* came out? I read that in India, and came back to the University of Toronto to hear a non-Indian student say to me, "Oh, I loved that book, it's so fantastic!" And I said, "How could you understand it? You're not Indian." A very good answer came back which was, "Well, I understand different things than you do. How do you understand what I read in it?" That was a really good answer; it made me think a lot about it.

The reason why I didn't subtitle the Hindi in the film? Hindi, first of all, isn't even my language, but the reason is when you sit on a bus and people chatter away in their own languages and you just don't know what they are saying, do you now? And so I didn't want to translate it because I wanted to reframe

Ultimately, I couldn't predict who the entire film was meant for, but do we really live in a world where everybody gets everything?

that. But those who know Hindi say, "I get this, this was meant for me."

Ultimately, I couldn't predict who the entire film was meant for, but do we really live in a world where everybody gets everything? Where there are total explanations, overarching narratives of the world? Total explanation? We don't.

I thought certainly there were some things that would draw the ire of some people and others that would draw the ire of other people, but really, I just didn't know how it was going to come out.

I've had a lot of negative reactions; tell you about that in a minute.

Krishna is clear about his lack of desire to have his film labelled as 'ethnic.' In a society where ethnic has come to mean marginalized, he is sure that he did not want to go through the pain of making a film that would not be seen. In response to my question about the racism in his film, he tells me that there is certainly violent racism in Toronto, but that his film is not about racism, because, "Racism is just a function, it is just a given of life. Everyone's a racist—so what? Am I saying something we don't know already?"

*Krishna describes his frustrations of writing **Masala**. He confides that he had to overcome the "awful fear that he was just talking to [him]self," adding that he believes his writing/film creates a new language and ways of seeing that have not existed before. For Krishna, **Masala** is an exploration of what happens when you're within a multitude of discourses but you're not of any of them. In other words, what happens when you're you are not part of the how and the why of the way things are told. According to Krishna, this is the condition of life for 'third world' people living in the 'first world' because "the discourse has already been determined for you."*

Krishna explains that he is ultimately describing people "who are not at home." I ask him if he is speaking of a notion of 'displacement.'

I wouldn't even say displaced. Who says displaced? It's all those people who think they have a place. In other words when they say

you're displaced they say, "I own this place, you're displaced: Fuck off." In other words, "Go away."

So what is the discourse? What is the frame? What and where is the home? Perhaps it's only in memory, usually encased in nostalgia or something, but perhaps it's only in memory. And is one at home [in] the place one's at now? If home is something we remember, then we think we can go home.

For the Air India incident, there is no explanation. We would like to think there is, we speculate, we hold our prejudices—Oh, Sikh terrorists or whatever, but who really knows? There are no answers. I'm saying we don't know.

When you don't know why something happened, then it becomes a kind of a vessel for other meanings to start filling it, and what it sort of meant to me is that perhaps we can't go home. If we go home, we realize it's changed, and one has changed too, having left.

And here is this Sikh character that is unlike the other characters. Home does not exist in his memory. Home is yet to exist: Khalistan. So he doesn't have what all the other characters have—the home encased in nostalgia—because he is a character that is living far away from a home that is yet to exist, a home that he must create. It's not even a home that you could go back to in time and memory. But to go back in geography, not in time and memory. It doesn't exist.

Of course the stereotype is that he's a terrorist. He's not a terrorist.

*Convinced that "people's intelligence is really skidding," Krishna defends his film, explaining the meanings behind his supposed stereotypes. For example, in response to audience claims of misogyny in **Masala**, Krishna questions the reading of the film. He refers to a dream sequence that the young medical student, Anil, has in the film. The point, he says, was to show that particular character's view of women. Krishna is surprised that some do not understand the irony of his portrayals. One controversy surrounds a Sikh character, who throughout the film*

"I think that as diasporic Asians, we hunger for images which in some ways reflect our dreams, desires and realities."

Manjira Datta:

One of the last lines of the film *Democracy in Crisis?* is that "India should look inwards for solutions." Meaning they should be self-reflective. Meaning that the people should start changing the system. Within the chaos I showed the layers of problems, all things happening, which is seemingly chaotic but in fact has a certain order to it. It's how you interpret it. And certainly a filmmaker is not a person who gives answers to any of the problems of this world. I can only raise contradictions.

In any society there is a lot of contradiction, politically. Take Canada for example; when I reached Montréal, I heard about all these things about separatism. This kind of contradiction and ambiguity is present in Canada as well as in India; you have to recognize it. We can't be cynical about it. All we can hope is to understand the roots of these ambiguities and contradictions, and an awareness will, hopefully, finally, bring about some kind of a dialogue in the process, and bring about a much more equal system. I think until that equal system comes about there will always be this contradiction.

This is the first time I made a current affairs program, meaning that I had no interaction with the people who I went out and shot. It was very male dominated. Every time you started with a woman they'd say, "Turn off the camera, this woman knows nothing. I'll tell you what's going on." People were pushing the women all the time. [Indian politics is] male dominated, totally, because it's based on religion, and religion is male politics.

Pratibha Parmar

I hope by the time you've seen the two clips, especially the second one, that you'll go home feeling tingling and happy—anyway, the women may, I don't know about the men. I want to just start off with a few remarks about what I'm going to say. It's not a theoretical exploration of how we look at images, and I'm not speaking as a film theorist or about to present a paper on deconstructing particular filmic texts for the lesbian presence. Instead, my observations and impressions and anecdotes are gleaned from sitting around with other South Asian lesbians on long winter evenings in England and watching Hindi movies. Fast forwarding the boring, predictable, comic scenes, or the painfully long and languorous

is working towards the creation of a Khalistan—a separate Sikh state. Until the end of the film, the audience is unsure of how he is going about his plans.

There was a man at the Desh Pradesh screening in Toronto [November 1991] that thought my Sikh characters were being belittled. He mortified me. Who's political hammer was he picking up to bludgeon me with? If he thought the character was being belittled, did he really see the same picture I saw? And if he thought the character was a terrorist, did he even see the same picture that I made? The point of it was to say that he is not a terrorist. This thing about belittling—what is it? That people can't laugh?

People who take offense are justified in any action that they do. If you're offended, you're obviously right; this is the time that we live in. And I disagree entirely.

If you're offended you're an idiot. Because to be offended is closure. If you're going to live in a state of closure you might as well just retire, go to bed. Find a grave.

The thing with the toilet paper is to say, "What happens when you're put in that position?" Why do people take up arms? One thing is that it's an extreme position. If you're not going to take those kind of extreme positions, then political struggle must come through other means like language, and history. But you don't have access to the media. Do you think any newspaper would actually print the evidence that might actually support the creation of a Khalistan? No. What happened after Indira Gandhi was assassinated? That kind of butchery that happened in Delhi is hardly talked about. So what are you going to do if you don't have access to the media that constructs our narratives, our histories? You have to print it anywhere you can. Print it on toilet paper—send it, give it away, people don't use toilet paper in India.

But audience responses, especially predominantly Indian audiences of *Masala* have been loud. "Have they really been loud?" Krishna asks, "because no one talks to me." Eager to enter into a dialogue, Krishna tells me that the most he hears of people are during small screenings like the one at Desh Pradesh in Toronto. But he says, "People don't talk back so what can you really learn?" So

Krishna, who began writing his film without knowing who his audience was, is still unsure of who is out there. "Unless people talk back you're not going to know who your audience is." For Krishna, for the time being, 'conjecture' of his audience is all he has. But he does know that his audience holds a 'wide range' of people who are quite 'passionate.' The problem he says, arises when audiences assume that he is representing a community. But Krishna refuses the position of a Canadian-Indian envoy. "I'm not representing anyone," he says. "I just describe the world as it happens for me. No one represents an entire community."

If you're offended, you're an idiot. Because to be offended is closure. If you're going to live in a state of closure you might as well just retire, go to bed. Find a grave.

In the kind of fragmented society that we live in, you find yourself mingling with all sorts of people, invading and being invaded. That's why I called my film *Masala*. When you use this word and you take it outside of cooking, it describes quite adequately what life is like, in that there's all these different things that make up a *masala*. But a *masala* tastes differently than any of those things individually. There are different *masalas*, of course, and this is what I think we are becoming. The world is changing.

This film is an act of description. It sounds very boring, but ultimately description is what we do. And it's the most essential thing.

When I was writing this film, there were three events that really marked it: the collapse of the Berlin Wall, the incarceration of Rushdie and then the Gulf War. Those were the three events I mean. There were other events in between, like Oka and all that....

I really wondered,...the world, I think, is finally coming to a head. This feeling that all these discourses, these frames of the world, these subjective constructions, which are then imposed and then called objective realities or explanations of the world—they're bullshit.

What we have are battles throughout the world about the definition of "home". Look at Québec—who's home is it? You have First Nations people, Native people saying, "This is our fucking home, this is our land," and I think it's going to take maybe ten years, maybe 100. People don't feel part of discourses anymore.



Vinita Srivastava is a children's author and a videographer in Toronto.

heterosexual seduction scenes, but rewinding or slowing down the dance sequences with Rekha in *Umrao Jaan*, or moaning with delight at Parveen Babi singing to Hema Malini in *Razia Sultan*.

I think that as diasporic Asians, we hunger for images which in some ways reflect our dreams and our desires and our realities. Media representations are a critical component of our identities, particularly for those of us who are perceived to be on the margins of the mainstream, the malestream, and the whitestream. Our need for reflections of ourselves and our communities is pivotal to our survival. As cultural outsiders, representations of ourselves, both on the big screen and on the small screen, are important in shaping our sense of self. For lesbians and gay men the ability to make oneself heard or seen, and the ability to alter what others hear and see, is also very necessary. For many of us, Hindi films play a crucial role, especially for those of us whose links with our ancestral homeland are historically and geographically distant.

I just want to say something about the Indian film industry, which today is the largest in the world, in terms of the annual film production. In 1990, India produced over 800 films, which is more than two per day. It's the Hindi films made in Bombay that have a wide appeal to South Asians scattered around the globe, providing a cultural and a linguistic connection. For many people these films not only keep alive memories of home, but also sometimes provide reference points for creating notions of Indianness in different cultural contexts.

As South Asian lesbians, we have a great stake in media representation. Many young women form a sense of their lesbian identity from media representations. But what is it that they actually see? Lesbians of all and any colour, culture, and ethnicity have been singularly unrepresented or obliterated from any and every media. In mainstream Hollywood films, lesbians have appeared primarily as predatory icons, in such a film as *The Cat People*, or *The Killing of Sister George*, or bitter, old, angry spinsters, or lost, confused, pathologically deranged women. Inevitably all these images have been of white women. Black lesbians or lesbians of colour have been completely absent. But what we want is not equal time on the screen, but much more importantly, we're concerned with how we are portrayed on film, because this affects our ability to affirm a lesbian sexuality and existence, and also reflects and shapes our concept of our sexuality. As lesbians of colour, we have a desire to see ourselves on the screen within our own cultural contexts, with the signs and symbols which have resonances in our childhood, our families, and communities.

My personal tastes are away from art that hits you over the head, that screams murder at you. Write it down, if that's what you want to do. Write it down!!

BRAHMA
the creator

I'm very much a believer in that you have to deconstruct and destroy to create. I like to be romantic about it and link it to the Dance of Shiva and the creation/destruction thing but really it's the nature of creativity. You break the roles. You try to create novel ways of processing things or juxtaposing ideas.

You start with fragments... food, ritual, spice and religion. We're like chameleons.

Does that mean that we change colour? CHANGE colour, as it were? His work is full of COLOUR. The browns of tamarind and mehndi. The oranges of saffron and food dye. The yellows of turmeric. Reds. Purples and greens.



And what about a sense of home? Where do the fragments come together?

Ghar? I always have a home because I carry it around in my imagination. My home is not a physical space. It involves a conglomeration of memories from my East African childhood, my fantasies about India and the mythological stories and fables.

I'm very intuitive. I do know my colour theory but I'm always looking for combinations. I mean colours for me are a major part of the language I use, especially in paintings. The whole idea of layering is an aesthetic I'm very interested in. This idea of layering...melding realities—mythological with real.

VISHNU
the sustainer

SHIVA
the destroyer

In my aesthetic, there is a fight between my personal taste, my romanticism and the realities of art and its function in society.

Signifiers, Saris & Samosas

This dialogue is a composite of a conversation between Chris Creighton Kelly and Aruna Srivastava. It is a reflective and reflexive reconstruction of issues raised at Desh Pradesh.

1. A Common Language

Aruna: I think that a common or shared language is a very suspicious concept.

Chris: It's that the common language is the dominant language. Right? That's what you're suspicious of.

Aruna: Even any common language that seems common or shared soon becomes, first a *lingua franca*, and then it becomes a sort of way of seeing things that excludes others.

Chris: No, that's a good point. How do you acknowledge that? Let's just take it back to the conference. At Desh Pradesh, for example, people brought up agenda, like class, that are all entirely appropriate on some level, because the conference had not addressed them, but then all the agenda and grievances started coming out on the table, very fast, very quickly. And as we discussed before, that's because there's no place to air those agenda. People come with their grievances; I don't want to call it baggage because that implies that they shouldn't have it. It's totally legitimate grievances that people have, from whatever their position.

And they come to a space which is a semi-safe space, let's say it that way—

Aruna: A safer space—

Chris: A safer space, okay, and out it comes. And how do you feel about a position where someone comes into a situation like that and says, "No, this person can't speak. What this person is saying hurts me too much, takes up too much space, is racist, homophobic, sexist, misogynist, whatever 'ism' that is touching there, and I don't want this person to speak." It may be that that's just the way this person feels, but I don't care, this is not a space for those views"?

Aruna: I have a lot sympathy for that—

Chris: For shutting people up?

Aruna: In certain contexts, yeah. And I think my only reason in this particular situation for resisting that at Desh Pradesh was recognizing difference.

Chris: No, I agree—"Is a roomful of brownness enough?"

Aruna: So that would have been one of the reasons I would have said okay, let's not shut this person down.

Chris: We talk about racial dynamic facilitation or facilitation along gender. It acknowledges that it's not a liberal context.

Aruna: And my feeling is that eventually it would really teach a lot of people a great deal to actually have an event like Dosh where you included as many different kinds of groups, in terms of race and class; or geographical origin; or age, which was mentioned as well. And see how radically heterogenous then things become. With the anger arising there about homophobia, that in a peculiar sense would become an example of one sort of dominating discourse silencing another group's sense of what makes the world right and wrong.

Chris: But how can you allow for that? How can you create a context where all the 'isms' are on the politically correct side?

Aruna: I don't think you can. In that sort of liberal way, which is where I get really uncomfortable with this, you have to allow that if you're going to include working class participants, for example, then what you have to do is include the possibilities of their very class creating a whole set of views and identities that are inimical to yours. The organizing structure of the conference would still be not with those people, would be with, by and large, middle class people.

Chris: Well, just to go back to this notion for a minute of brown people speaking theory. Is there a way of doing theory that is not western European based? Because most of the writers and academics of colour in the world are, even if they don't live in the western world, they've been trained in the western world. They've gone to school, they're part of this international academic elite.

Aruna: My suspicion of the question is that theory is not necessarily western. I want to challenge somehow the assumption that, because theorists are trained and working within western institutions, therefore their theory is western. Because that begs the whole question of identity, the fact that these people, as privileged as their backgrounds may have been, have come from other places—

Chris: Yeah, regardless of their class, they've come from another culture and another place.

Aruna: And there's a sort of an awareness that comes with that, even if it's a learned awareness—in my case I would suggest that in many ways my sense of racial and political identity is learned. I've learned it through my education and peer group and so forth. But that doesn't mean that, because it's learned that it's not real, or that it's undeniably and irrevocably western.

Chris: That's a good point. Not so much Gayatri Spivak, because I do see that as mostly western discourse, but if I look at Trinh T. Minh-ha, she does an academic thing in the sense that she stands up in a room full of people and begins to talk from a text, but when she does that, she's moving her own subjectivity, she's talking from four or five different places at the same time. It reminded me almost of a kind of presentation that an artist might make. It had a certain aesthetic to it. As much as any question can be value-free, and no question is, is it possible to do theory? I think what I'm hearing back from you is obviously yes, and it doesn't matter even if it's filtered through western thought or western philosophy like binary opposites, all these kind of dialectical principles, all these taken for given ways in which we see the world.

2. Cultural Appropriation

Chris: When I think about cross-cultural communication or cultural appropriation the issue becomes more and more clear to me, apart from the kind of reduced and reductionist debates that go on in this country, like "If you haven't lived it, you can't write about it," and on the other side this liberal, male, you've heard it before, "It's my imagination, you can't put chains around my imagination." When we really start to look at it, this idea that if a culture, or a cultural tradition has lasted thousands of years, and is strong, relatively, speaking—people understand it. It's got a lot of artifacts, a lot of rituals, a lot of institutions that support it, money goes into it. It's in the vernacular, people understand it, at least in a minimal kind of way. They can then afford to take on things like western discourse, and inflect it, filter it put new energy into it, to revitalize it in some sense. The search for a 'people of colour' way of thinking right now is really

starting to infiltrate everywhere because the Western mind is looking for new intellectual vistas to conquer. But what about a culture that has not been allowed to survive, that has had to be on the run, like most aboriginal cultures in the world, and that is surviving completely despite, not because of, some invigorating cross-cultural activity? Because often it will be aboriginal people that will comment about this business of theory and how theory obstructs rather than connects us. But I don't want to be reductionist about aboriginal people either. There are Native academics.

Aruna: And there certainly are Native artists. I don't know because I, personally, have learned most in a very immediate way about remaking western culture and ideas through aboriginal art, where you have an artist like George Littlechild who consciously uses both sets of traditions, and makes strong use of post-modern irony, in entitling his pieces. Their strength comes from our perhaps false perception that this is a culture that is disappearing; these artists do a very strong and willful act of appropriation that really reaches the westerners as well as the aboriginal viewer or reader. A lot of identity politics in a sense requests that you stake out a certain ground and refuse...there's a certain purity—

Chris: Essentialism.

Aruna: I'm not sure I'd go as far as essentialism.

Chris: Nationalism, perhaps.

Aruna: Once you see those identities in practice, in the contemporary post-modern world, there are very few of those cultural forms that actually inhabit that exclusive space of essentialism...

3. Post-coloniality

Chris: I wonder if that dialectical synthesis of modernism, the ethical stance of modernism, and the liberating multiplicity-of-voices way of post-modernism, which drops from the modernist side all of the 'isms', its ethnocentricity, its pillaging of other cultures, its male baggage, and drops from the

post-modern side the kind of apolitical morality of—“Well, isn’t it all fun, it’s just a phantasmagora of images,” and moves forward so that we can still talk about multiplicity of voices, experiences, cultures, but have some kind of ethical way of working; I wonder if that isn’t post-colonial? I wonder if that is an ethic to strive for? I don’t want to call it an ideology because I’m very suspicious of that word, but if we embrace post-colonialism as more than a theoretical construct, as a way of living in the world, and a way of understanding the world, understanding every transaction and interchange in the world. Are

Chris: It’s that it is existent both before, during and now, hopefully, after the colonials. I do think that it is a particular historical moment. I really do. I think that all the forces that created colonialism have come back to haunt Europeans. The birth-rate, technology, migration, movement of capital, every strategy that they used to dominate the world for five hundred years—“Who’s got the technology? Who’s got all the people? Who’s moving where? Hello?” I’m fond of saying these days that the white race will be the first race to go. And I think it’s dawned on a few white people, and they’re joining the Reform party, but a few other people haven’t figured that out yet. What’s the world going to look like in a hundred years? Really. What’s Canada going to look like?

4. Marmite

Chris: I bet I know something that my post-colonial friend loves.

Aruna: Oh, yes, you have to be raised on it, though. I’m one of those people who gets into this argument about whether Vegemite is better than Marmite.

Chris: Vegemite is not Marmite. Vegemite is a poor substitution for the real thing. And you know, Australians are like that, they’re like Canadians, they think that they are substitutions.

5. Signifiers, Saris and Samosas

Chris: One thing that Zainub (Verjee) said the other night was “I’m glad you brought the incense and candles to the meeting.” It’s a kind of Indian semiotic. Are there specific religious, historical modes, customs, cultural practices, “South Asian” ones, that can be brought to bear? Using that as a metaphor could you talk about South Asian places?

Aruna: I’m not sure. My instinctive answer to that is that there’s nothing special because of the absolute diversity of South Asianness. Not only because in a place like Desh you had people coming from a variety of different historical cultures and religions—

Chris: Countries, and castes—

Aruna: But also you have added several types of generations worth of migration. Just take me as an example. Hybrid.

Chris: Or me.

Aruna: Or you. Of hybridity. There should be a recognition of some of those semiotic structures, so that we would say, okay, that is loosely-speaking “South Asian,” even though

we know it’s not, like the idea of candles and the incense.

Chris: So the sari is no way out, or ‘in,’ is that what you’re saying? The sari can’t contribute to a sense of identity?

Aruna: No, I guess what I think is, that if it does, it only contributes as a kind of marker, not as any real historic connection between all those diverse groups.

Chris: Only as a marker, wait a minute. I’m not going to let you slip by with that. Only as a marker?

Aruna: What I mean is, say in a geographically distinct community, say where my father comes from, a small, small caste, and a family in that caste, so you’d have this real specificity of interest, so that the sari there functions in all sorts of ways to indicate, or as a sign of, a religious unity, a historical unity, a family unity. It tells the people in that community something about gender, and all sorts of things. Whereas at a place like Desh—

Chris: All it does is signify Indianness.

Aruna: Signifies a kind of Indianness.

Chris: Signifies ‘other’ to white people and a ‘kind of Indianness’ to other Indians.

Aruna: But to some of the other South Asian people, for people whose histories are in the Caribbean, that becomes much more problematic.

Chris: I agree, especially people from the Caribbean. One of those persons said to me at the conference, “If I see one more sari—”

Aruna: Or, “If I see one more samosa”...

6. Poco Pedagogy

Chris: In a sense, we’ve been talking about all the same things that the conference was talking about. So I think that you already know, Aruna, it’s how people sit in a space, it’s the notion of the panel as a kind of colonial mentality, pedagogically speaking. It’s a question of circles, it’s a question of light, it’s a question of a way of speaking and ultimately, in any kind of setting like that with hundreds of people, it’s a question of really good facilitation.

Aruna: The size of a group, I would have liked to see facilitating things at Desh Pradesh by paring down the size of the group. But I am thinking about something else, too.

Chris: Okay, but before we go on, what do you do when you’re there? How do you make

Aruna Srivastava

you comfortable with the term, post-colonial? A lot of people aren’t.

Aruna: In my experience again it’s aboriginal people who have had most trouble with the concept of post-colonialism. And I’m not comfortable with the term post-colonialism. I think it’s like using ‘modernism’ and ‘modernity’—for me there’s something about the concept that makes me want to call it ‘post-coloniality’—the state of being in the world—

Chris: As opposed to ‘-ism’

Aruna: Yes. Because then you can quite differently argue that post-colonialism is somehow dependent on the idea of colonialism and imperialism and so forth. I think historically, in a sense, it is, but in another sense it’s not—

the rupture and therefore deal with the fragmentation that you see? That's important to know and I think you have that knowledge to share.

Aruna: Part of that does depend on what position you're in, but I would say that if I felt that I had an insider's authority, I would have called 'time-out' immediately as soon as there was a hint of disruption and said that this is the kind of thing that needs airing, and in a sense, larger contexts, smaller groups. I would have also suggested that if the individuals involved, the actual individuals involved in the discussion, wanted to discuss the issues separately, they should do so. And possibly using, if that's the threatening kind of situation it might have been, to use allies for both parties so that you would have a group of four or five people. So they could sort out in their personal dynamics, what's going on as well as their political dynamics. And then you still can't avoid the potential of more confrontations happening as you do that large group thing, but at least you would have a time and a space where people are coming together.

7. Identity and racism

Aruna: There still is something in terms of identity. Something struck me about what you just said about 'real' Indians, and those not being you and I, and that sense of weird inauthenticity, and fraudulence, at times coupled with a sense of belonging. Gloria Anzaldúa talks about the *mestiza*, about the accusations against all the types of interraciality that there are. She says something about that *mestiza*, mixedness, as being the crux, crisis of identity for someone who is Chicana. The threat comes from those like us, who are hybrid or from those who, like a 'real' Chicana, might have a white mother.

Chris: Well that's when we choose racially to place ourselves in the middle of something dangerous, but if we are already a hybrid person, then we have no choice, like bi-sexual people; they're always under attack from both sides.

Aruna: There was a sense of community at Dosh Pradesh which was based on its conceptualization as a South Asian event.

Chris: It was pre-constructed to have a South Asian identity, whatever that identity turned out to be.

Aruna: Those of us who were there who were South Asian did imagine ourselves within that identity.

Chris: But I consider myself to be on the outside of that circle, not at the centre—

Aruna: Oh clearly, I feel that way too.

Chris: It's interesting to wonder who might see themselves at the centre.

Aruna: I'm not sure that many people would identify themselves with the centre of a conceptual South Asianess, but I think others did see themselves as being closer or centres of certain groups that are figuratively South Asian. Say, the Ismiali community, from East Africa, or a bunch of people who speak the same language, or all the jokes about those of us who didn't understand Gujarati. That became clear when the Sikhs were there as well—

Chris: Speaking Punjabi—

Auna: Yes. And you could hear them talking, arguing among themselves—

Chris: There were Punjabis there that aren't Sikhs too. So as I understand you, one of the signifiers to move you to the centre is language.

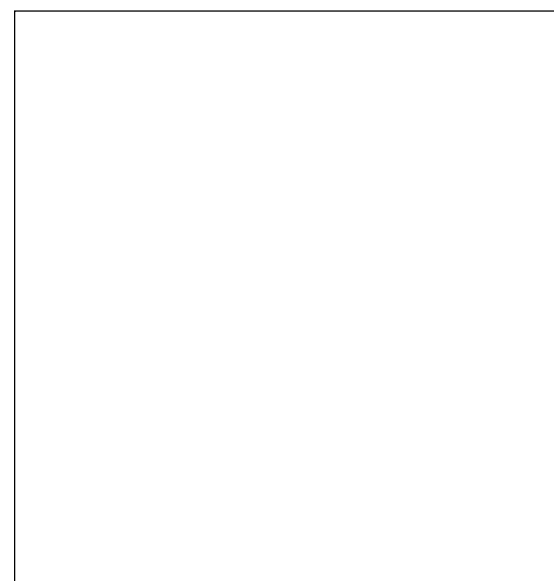
Aruna: Language, religion.

Chris: I've come up with this interesting hierarchy that I've tried to figure out what to do with. People, I actually mean white people, use the following categories of signifiers. The first one is what I would call language or utterance, or accent—what comes out of a person's mouth. And if what comes out of their mouth is only Punjabi, then that's a certain kind of signifier. If what comes out of their mouth is kind of confused English, that's a signifier. If what comes out of their mouth is English with an accent, that's a signifier. And if what comes out of a mouth like mine, someone with a brown skin who speaks 'proper' English, it's a very confusing signifier, right? Then, the second signifier is cultural ways. That has to do with what kind of food you eat, how you dress, even really subtle things, like body language, how you walk, not what you speak, but how you speak, even like the way you might move when you're speaking. I think of these as cultural ways, not lifestyles, but life ways, cultural life ways of people of colour. The third level of signifier, the most obvious one, is this—skin. Someone who I work with and respect a lot, says "our skins have histories." Regardless of who we are, or how else we either construct ourselves or others, if white people see this skin, or that skin—poof—they're into some kind of notion of otherness. What's interesting to me is that the first one can change, very easily, it can even change within a lifetime; the second one can change very quickly, as a friend of mine says, "I'm a Jew—a culinary Jew." The third one, which is colour, is the one, of course, that you can't change. You can, but

only at great expense and great attack on your body. So racism is all those semiotics functioning at the same time.

Aruna: Yes, because I was thinking about the kinds of racist verbal attacks I've had have all focused on my Indianness; you know I've been called a Paki; in Vancouver for some peculiar reason people use the word Hindoo. Fucking Hindoos; thought at least they're getting more accurate. It's as if there's a sort of sixth sense

that has something to do with skin colour; the racist's sense. No one has ever in that public



Chris Creighton Kelly

context identified my Indianness in anything other than a racist way.



Photos: Ashok Mathur

Chris Creighton Kelly is a cultural theorist, artist, and writer.

Aruna Srivastava is a professor whose interests are Post-Colonial Literature and cultural activism.



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Aisha Khan

As AIDS work has developed, women have raised issues in a more explicit way...For example: defining and using words that were thought rude, swear words, as there are no equivalent words in South Asian languages to talk about and describe parts of the body and sexual acts; general attitudes towards taboos such as sexuality, sexual behaviour, safer sex; relationships and arranged marriages. At this point, the issues become more intense and HIV infection seems to lose its importance, and women are more inclined to talk about other things, like pressure from the community, i.e. acceptance. If you work in or are interested in HIV/AIDS, it's actually looked upon as if you're affected by it, directly or indirectly, or you're a lesbian...these sort of labels.

There is a need for supportive networks with racial minority profiles. True for all is the fact that individuals tend to gravitate towards others like themselves, because of kinship, trust, and security. The services then seem to be more credible for individuals as it is seen that his or her interests are part of, not a separatist move, but an extension of available options. And people need options and have the right of choice. Racial minority people already face a triple jeopardy where black means racism, gay and lesbian means prejudice, HIV/AIDS means stigma. From my experience, these three are the most traumatic things for parents and people who are directly or indirectly affected by HIV/AIDS. It tends to result in rejection and ostracism from family, friends, and the community.

Kalpesh Oza

Yes, we are people living with HIV, but to lose friends and to see ourselves being HIV positive in that situation, suffering...stink in the hospital rooms because of uncontrollable bowel movements, incontinence, which is uncontrollable bowel movements and bladder movements, and stink because of cancer, a very putrid stink. I'm sorry if it appears as a negative image, but it's reality, and it also has to be portrayed. I think this leads me to conclude that such is the poverty of education and prevention campaigns, and such will remain the poverty of education and prevention campaigns unless revolution comes from within the community-based AIDS movement.

Anthony Mohammed

ASAP (Alliance for South Asian AIDS Prevention) started as a result of a need, as most other community services. A South Asian man went to the AIDS Committee of Toronto (ACT). His wife and his two daughters had already died, and he had started to become very ill. He didn't speak English all that well, and there were just general cultural differences. ACT just didn't know what to do. They contacted Khush, the South Asian gay men's group here, and ALOT, Asian Lesbians of Toronto, and together they found that one of the member's mother spoke the same language as this person, and she acted as the counsellor/translator for this man. He later died. It was a very sad story.

These three groups as well as the Toronto Counselling Centre of Lesbians and Gays formed the South Asian AIDS Coalition, in 1989. The first task was to do a needs assessment within the local South Asian community. The needs assessment found that the messages put forth by the mainstream AIDS organizations were just not getting through to South Asians. They felt that they were not affected by HIV at all, that in some magical way being South Asian made you immune from getting HIV. For example, South Asian languages are rarely represented in brochures, and you never see South Asian faces on any posters put out by the mainstream AIDS organizations. This helps us to understand a little bit easier why people might have some of these ideas. They also described AIDS as being a Western problem, and that of homosexuals, and they just felt that they were completely not at risk. SAAC later changed its name to the Alliance for South Asian AIDS Prevention, to differentiate itself from another AIDS organization in the local Toronto South Asian community.

Our first objective is to increase AIDS awareness, taking South Asian cultural and linguistic needs and differences into account, basically educating our own community. Our second objective is to increase awareness in the established AIDS community locally and nationally on the needs of the South Asian communities across the country. Our present services include the provision of workshops, displays, printed materials, and videos. The printed material we have right now is actually one brochure that's done in English. As we speak, it's being translated into six different South Asian languages, so hopefully we can outreach to a larger number of people...We will expand on our video collection hopefully in the next two years.

We have come across barriers in reaching South Asian adults, especially women, and men who have sex with men but who do not identify as being gay. South Asian women have traditionally not had a voice in relationships, therefore the idea of a woman telling her husband to use a condom, who she may suspect or knows that he's having sex with others, is out of the question within our community, and it's looked upon as ridiculous and outrageous. We've realized that we cannot just promote condom use, we can't say, "Use condoms," to all groups, to all factions of the South Asian community, without speaking openly about these issues that affect us. Youth is another area where silence plays a role. Many South Asian youth will not admit to having sex or using IV drugs, and therefore they feel uncomfortable seeking information.

Racial minority people already face a **triple jeopardy** where black means **racism**, gay and lesbian means **prejudice**, HIV/AIDS means **stigma**.



Silenced in both South Asian patriarchal societies and in white queer communities in North America and Europe, South Asian gays and lesbians have had to invent themselves, often with new words and names of identification. We've appropriated *khush*, which means happy, and some have reconfigured it to mean gay, while others have defined it as ecstatic pleasure.

A lesbian collective in the United States used the Sanskrit word *anomika*, meaning nameless, to address the lack of names in South Asian languages for relationships between two women. A new lesbian collective chose *shamakami*, which in Bengali means desiring one's equal.

A South African graduate student in New York writes of the alienation and fear of rejection he feels from his family. "I'm an outsider, an outcast in my own natural community, a hidden, silenced, non-person. To participate in the life of my family, I bury my sexuality, my politics, my anger as deeply as possible. I suspect there's a secret dread in my family that I might ultimately shame them horribly." He fears that the support and affirmation he receives from his family may disappear once he reveals his sexual identity. This dependence on family and South Asian communities for affirmation has paralyzed many gays and lesbians in South Asian immigrant communities. Members of *Khush* in Toronto have discovered that, "The greatest obstacle to our members coming out is a fear of losing our ties to our families and communities. We are a people whose sense of identity is constructed in a very large part by these institutions." I think here is where it's obvious how race, to me, structures the fact that there are very few safe havens.

One woman wrote in *Shamakami*, "I know not any word for myself/but *khush*/and even that is a mocking translation/I cannot envision living in India/preserving my 'American' individualism/loving a woman/building a home with her/defying family, friends/ignoring disapproval, silence/and still speaking, still fighting/to prevent silence." Trying to speak and live, we confront the contradictions of our identities head on. South Asian heterosexuals have often denied the authenticity of queer identified South Asians by labelling homosexual relationships as 'a white disease', insinuating that our presence in North America or Britain has "contaminated our minds and desires." These heterosexuals attempt to use the politics of race to condemn lesbians and gay men. They perceive queer identities as a threat to the cultural integrity of South Asian immigrant communities. Ironically, these heterosexuals unquestioningly accept the historically western notion that heterosexuality is natural, normal, and biologically correct, and that homosexuality is

Photo stills from *Bolo Bolo...* a video by Gita Saxena and Ian Rashid, courtesy of V-Tape

unnatural and perverse, to buttress their position.

In an attempt to resolve the conflict between national racial identity and sexual identity, several South Asian queers have searched for "our very own gay tradition." Shivananda Khan states that sex between those of the same gender is discussed in many Hindu texts and sex manuals. Homosexuality was also depicted in religious statues. And Subodh Mukherjee of Calcutta has explored the descriptions of tantric initiation rites, Hindu festivals and sex which celebrate homosexual acts. The descriptions of sodomy in the *Kama Sutra*...and references to women loving women in the *Mahabharata* have been used to establish that there is a gay tradition for Indians.

Giti Thadani, a lesbian living in Delhi, has also embarked on an archeological project which substantiates Shevanan's claims. She interprets the texts such as the *Rig Veda* and sculptures which depict sexual acts between women as revelations of a feminine world prior to 1500 BC where sexuality was based on pleasure and fertility, but not on the practice of progeny or identifying children with the father. That's her way of saying 'patriarchy.' Giti's analysis begs the question, "So whatever happened to the Vedic Dyke?" Giti argues that this world was suppressed by the emerging dominance of patriarchy and its vestiges were systematically destroyed since the Aryan invasions. And so here we have a sense that the Vedic Dyke existed and then she disappeared.

These new histories reconstruct and revise the master narratives of the past which have sought to erase differences and ignore

contested values. The alternative visions that we can create can empower us to reclaim and remake both our present world and the understanding of these historical contexts that shaped it. But there's a danger if there's a refusal on our part to question and problematize these very strategic narratives that we use, these new histories. And this is precisely what Shivananda does when he interprets Giti Thadani's work as proof that same sex relationships were socially acceptable several thousand years ago in some parts of South Asia. The presumption here is that sexuality is a definable and universal activity. It ignores a variety of cultural patterns and meanings. How do we know that a representation of two women embracing meant sex for the historical actors of the time? And even if they did refer to it as sex, does sex have the same meaning as it does for us today? How does one go about proving that some social practices are acceptable and highly esteemed? What kind of evidence does one need to make these kinds of claims?

The representation of physical acts does not necessarily reflect social acceptance. I think about the fact that it could mean the exact opposite. And so I think it's very important to understand the context, the map of social reality of the time. We can begin by reading legal texts, religious documents, court texts, and even the placement of sculptures within architectural complexes. These texts, of course, are usually prescriptive; they provide ideals. They cannot be used to understand attitudes, actual behaviour or motives.

We can use these texts and materials to speculate about how people lived and thought. Perhaps, though, the only people we will know anything about are the elite men who wrote and were written about, who endowed temples and who designed law.

And as we do that, we also have to question the people that are writing about these things because Indian history has been very much a site of Orientalism, ancient Indian history in particular. There are certain political agendas at stake in making certain claims that have been made about Indian history and the Indian past. Orientalist scholars have presumed that India was more primitive, sensual and eroticized than the repressed, civilized Western Europe.

While the project of reclaiming and reconstructing the past is critical for present political and cultural struggles, let us not read too much of 'us' today into the past. South Asian lesbians and gay men are present now. On that alone, we demand acknowledgement and acceptance.



Nayan Shah is a queer activist and writer in San Francisco.

Trying to Speak and Live - The Construction of South Asian Lesbian & Gay Identities

Market Tavern

South London bar.

Too sober to dance on the lip
shuffling in the bowels instead.
Closed eyes hidden
—trying to perk up my buzz—
slight movements from my groin
little motions, moments
skinny as parentheses,
which restart my heart when necessary.
Arms all around, circling over,
ascending from below,
flicking the glisten off my head.
Pretend to be Tippi Hendren for a second.
Think about having to fuck Hitchcock the next.
Two seconds pass.

A song from 30 years ago, souped up,
now placed on a motorcycle.
I'm moving now, picking up my shuffle, elbows
angled a few degrees higher.

My mother was young in London once, not
dancing, a honey coloured girl refusing
to dance. Dreaming of marriage, of Englishmen that wouldn't
look into her eyes, dreaming of home
where she might never be cold,
where she would only be refused:
too much for any man, having gone foreign,
having learned of adding machines, short-hand, memorized
running routines home to her bed-sit
should a kiss be demanded, (but dreaming of a kiss,
dry, a kiss without tongues, no mess) and refusing to dance,
but memorizing every step, to dream later,
much more to dream, every word of every song
memorized so she can dream in them today.

And now her son also so far from home
—home a place where he was seldom warm—
finds a white hand—
a hand whiter than the Queen's—
on his crotch. Hand moves up, lifts
my shirt, finds my brown belly streaked
laser white, stays, as if memorizing the colours.
Fingers spread wider search for an outline
like I was a tattoo, count every black hair
as they move upward toward my neck.
I stop moving, not afraid, just
stunned by the possibility of such heat
from fingertips. No dreams
for my mother's son. I'll sleep
hard and long and empty.

Ian Iqbal Rashid's first book of poetry, *Black Markets, White Boyfriends and Other Acts of Elision*, was published last year by TSAR Press. "Market Tavern" is from *The Paisley Problematic*, a new volume to be published in 1993.

HOME

waffling
with
cunning
in the
border
country

This interview took place on April 25, 1992 in Vancouver during the National Book Festival events hosted by the Rungth Cultural Society. Poets Ramabai Espinet, Sherazad Jamal, and Yasmin Ladha were interviewed by Rungth Editor, Zool Suleman.

Zool: I should start by explaining that the idea behind this type of interview arose from the “Home as Mythical Space” panel at Dosh Pradesh which dealt with the whole idea of what constitutes our sense of identity...it was very interesting to see that for different people on the panel there was different senses of it. Some saw themselves as being in exile, that home was ‘over there’, wherever they had come from. To others it was wherever they put their hat out; they could create home wherever they were. So I thought what we might try to explore that issue in terms of your poetry. Does it speak to the issue of home? Or do you think about creating a sense of home in your work?

Yasmin: I think I started with many people who were immigrants here, with the anguish of being homeless. The search for me has shifted to women, and to finding a home for women, in terms especially of romance, to be passionately involved in things, and that comes with the concept of ‘woman identity.’ I look at it in terms of romance, it involves searching myself in terms of romance. So it’s shifted from home to romance. But I also think in terms of Rushdie’s sense that he spoke about imaginary homelands...I live in an imaginary homeland constantly...

You see, I was born in 1958 at which time, by ‘61 the independence movement [in Tanzania] had started. And when I was growing up... I knew that my place...was both shifting and sifting. So it was very hard, I couldn’t trust the place and then I came here. This is a place where I had to have roots and these roots were down in that land. I have grown up, virtually living without homes and that’s a positive space for me. So perhaps I don’t suffer the anguish that many other people do because it’s been overtaken by woman search and woman finding, and romance.

Sherazad: For me I recognized for quite a while that home is not attached to land...I feel as though my body is a site of contest between many different notions of what home is...that are trying to negotiate

with each other. And that’s why I’m very attached to this idea of being...culturally schizophrenic, at this point in time, because I haven’t found a way of merging my ‘personalities.’ And then as an extension of that, I haven’t found a way to create my own sense of imagining a homeland as yet. It’s still kind of a hodgepodge of different things...The only place in which I feel a sense of being at home is around my family...and around my family of people who are experiencing what I’m experiencing, and thinking about things in similar veins to myself. This is the site of a weird no-man’s-land in an intellectual and an emotional space where we live, and where we carve out whatever this sense of home is.

Ramabai: Well, I have no home. That’s very much my feeling. I feel as if I have to almost aggressively claim whoever I am...wherever I find myself. It’s possible to make that home a very private place and I think that’s why, originally, I found that the only place I wanted to be was somewhere as an artist, because that’s where I can create my home. Growing up in the Caribbean...we had to perform a series of negotiations in order to survive. And that negotiated reality caused us to lose a lot of self. Some aspects of self we held onto tenaciously, negative aspects also. Other aspects we just lost, we just let go. And letting go of that, I think, we lost a lot of our identity and the sources that made us whole.

So I feel a sense of having to create wholeness from various pieces, and that’s why I agree with you (Sherazad) about these pieces providing a sense of home. This is home...you know, us being here, talking, this is home. When I read in a context with five other South Asian women last night, that was home. So home is not Canada. But then, you know, in the way global politics are playing up right now, Canada is the Caribbean, and North America is the Caribbean, and I honestly don’t see a difference. Sitting here is a good place for me to be right now, to interlock with various other communities, and to also get, strangely enough, more information about what’s happening in the Caribbean, than if I lived there, where information sources are deterred to an enormous degree, where wealth multiplies and becomes more information-poor. And so home is, I don’t know, I’m homeless.

Zool: What I hear is that home is this kind of intellectual space, or emotional zone, and then you all have your different sites...What

are the constituent elements of home? Certainly you can give away the physical location. You can give away an address... So what do you need as a minimum, to say, "This is home", and "This is not home"?

Yasmin: Well it depends on how one looks at home. When I came to this world I didn't have a home because things were changing in Tanzania, right? My home is within my body, I think as Sherazad pointed out. I like that almost irresponsibility of just travelling through everywhere and taking pieces that fit and leaving pieces that don't fit. It is in that way that it's not very complicated at all. And I speak entirely for myself in that. But I like to have Canadian roots, to have the maple, but that is not home to me. I have a home everywhere, and I think it comes mostly with spaces. For example, Ramabai talked about this space as home. I think sitting here in this space, a cappuccino with a friend and excitingly discussing something, that's home. And I'm perfectly content with that. Perfectly content, and it is an intention that I practice all the time.

Zool: I think that there's an inherent contradiction. With rootedness, and being a stakeholder, you can claim a space in the dominant stream with, I think, perhaps more legitimacy than you can by self-marginalization by saying, "Well, I'm not rooted because of whatever reasons, I want the ability to be irresponsible, the ability to have this ephemeral identity, this ephemeral notion of home". Don't those two cut at cross-currents? Does it not matter?

Ramabai: No, we pay taxes, we have a stake, we just claim it!

Sherazad: I think that as a group of people, doing the kind of work that we do, one has to realize that while we live on this land, the place in which we really live exists up here [in the mind]. It's sort of like a border country. What I sense now is that we're actually negotiating our citizenship in that border country, before we can even figure out how that relates to the land [Canada]. And I think that this becomes really important in a cross-cultural sense, because there are many other peoples just like us, who live in a border country. And eventually, the people who hold the land are going to have to come to terms with the fact that over fifty per cent of the population of this country lives in border countries. And then that will in turn have serious implications for what happens to this country in terms of its sense of itself.

Zool: So your responsibility comes in playing a role in defining that median space? Is that how you're being responsible as citizens?

Sherazad: I feel that I'm being responsible to me and all the other citizens of the border country. As yet I have no affinity or connection, save the fact that I live in Vancouver and I pay taxes and I use the medical system. I don't feel any kind of connection or responsibility to the powers that hold this land.

Zool: Then why does it surprise you that they don't hold any responsibility to you? There's an anger about that, too. While...you are negotiating these spaces, life is constantly going on, constitutions are being written, all sorts of laws are being amended, all sorts of things are going on. I want to press this point because I think it's kind of an interesting issue. If you don't feel a sense of responsibility to the politics, the state, whatever, then why do expect the state to be responsible to you?

Ramabai: Can I say something? I feel a great sense of responsibility to the state.

Zool: You do?

"Friction for me creates fiction... And as a writer, I'm totally dedicated. I cannot possibly have a dual citizenship living in this world. I belong to my own cities.."

Ramabai: I do. But I don't define the state as Canada only. I think that the agenda of Canada, the political agenda of Canada, is inextricably linked to the political agenda of the United States. Which concerns me... as a citizen of the globe... And the dominant cultures of the west are getting together. And all of these things concern me, so that having a stake in Canada per se, is having a stake in the globe. I have a stake there, and I do feel responsible, and I address it in my art... I just feel that these issues we can't sit down and take lightly. When something happens at Oka, I respond to it, and I feel responsible for it. The constitution is very much a part of what I feel we should discuss. It's not that I personally sit back and say, "Let this go on and I can just earn a living here," and so on. But at bottom, I think if we just sit back and say, "We pay our taxes and we earn a living and we have a stake," we are exactly like any other white working class person who has that stake and is unquestioning. We have a right until death.

Zool: But it's not that stake that's being questioned, it's the effective use of that stake. I don't think that anyone would say that as a citizen of Canada and as a taxpayer, you don't have a stake. However, any other... person who has the white-picket-fence sense doesn't have that notional, transitory sense of home. So they are rooted.

Ramabai: No but I'm thinking of space in a different way. If we do not bellow for cultural spaces and for the largesse that creates, that enables, the creation of these cultural spaces, then we don't get it. That is the kind of thing that I would try to fight for because we have a right. That's why I say we pay our taxes, and these cultural grants and so on, who do they go to? We have a stake in that, and I think that we have to claim that... Political responsibility occurs on every level. I would fight, for instance, for a person of colour to be in government, I would work for that. I wouldn't particularly want it for myself, but I would work for that, and I would do whatever I can to support it. That's how I work. I don't want direct political responsibility, but that's not the only way.

Yasmin: My person is not made [to take on political responsibility] and I don't want to get into that. When we were talking about that in writing, and I'd like to say that I think I am political in that what I do is I "waffle with cunning".

Zool: Does [waffling with cunning] become the first right in your constitution in the imaginary homeland? (laughter)

Yasmin: It would, right?

Zool: It would have to.

Yasmin: Yes, yes indeed. Yes, to waffle with cunning...is very exciting to me. Everything does not come to a closure. That sort of constriction would not frighten me, frightens me very much. Waffling with cunning, I'm exempted from doing that. Now, you could tell me, how are you going to actively live in this world, how are you going to build the constitution, etc. Then I guess I'm not the person for it. My strength, my romance, lies with "to waffle with cunning."

Ramabai: That's wonderful.

Zool: The thing is that...when I see a constitutional debate, I see it very much in terms of not carving in stone, but as a carving process, which doesn't allow for much waffling...The waffling sort of occurs, for me, in the political process after an inscription has occurred, an inscribing has occurred, and the judicial interpretation. I guess what I'm feeling is that there's a moment right now, within this country, where it's a time to inscribe, not to waffle, it's a time to stand, not to waver...There's an imperative now, and I kind of feel that it's going to pass this particular group by. Now it doesn't have to be one or the other, I agree...but I just kind of wonder if you are gladly letting this occur? Is it awareness that is occurring, or is it something else?

Sherazad: I think that there's a fundamental issue of gaze, here. The...political process works...from a western gaze, which is also a male gaze. And it is not a process that is organic in nature. It is not a process that [respects] the continuum of time. Which I think actually harkens back to what you (Yasmin) were talking about, being able to weave a story, to weave a situation, a conversation in such a way that...it actually becomes a catalyst for something else, and not an end in itself. And I think that way of approaching things, it's just not a part of the process that the country, the politicians are going through. You know, they want an answer and they want it now...

I feel that we, as South Asian women, are receptacles for [continuity] within our own cultural contexts...We have to be very aware of what has passed, of what is now, and where things are going, so that we can do our part in the weaving in the lifetime that we have...And I think that there's one other element that has to do with being a part of 'diaspora,' that...we're very good negotiators... Our strength is that ability to negotiate, and that consciousness about negotiating between all of these different parts that live and breathe within us... This is my hope for a political future, that we in some way will be a receptacle of knowledge and experience that will be called upon at a later time. Right now, I don't think that the mainstream is ready.

Yasmin: Let it simmer, it's nicer, the shrimp curry is nicer.

Sherazad: Exactly.

Yasmin: I think that gaze thing I'm understanding but I also understand the panic about the time is not now...Because the mainstream is giving me space right now...I follow his or her temple? I don't want to do that because still I am dancing for the anthropologist, right?...I'm letting time go...I think things have to sit, have to be thought out...I don't think there's a great differentiation between art and real life, they come together. I live in both of them. Art is taking time, living is taking time...accept it as a process...

Zool: I guess I take Sherazad's point well too, I think she's absolutely right. Given my training as a lawyer and my gaze, I sense an urgency about what's going on out there...I feel a certain sense of being on the sidelines even as a male, coming from what one would think of as the perfect profession for politics. Even I am feeling...very disempowered. There's an anger I feel about that. Because I pay taxes.

Ramabai: You know, the thing is, I saw this report recently in the *Toronto Star* that spoke about the constitution being decided by eleven white men in suits, behind closed doors. And I think it's largely true. I mean you talk about us, South Asian women, where are the voices? Look at the difficulty that First Nations people have had to interject their voice. And in the end, just giving them permission to say two or three things, has taken so long. I mean, for me, it is very important to be political and to be aware all the time. But politics is also forgiving things and appreciating the art of the possible.

Yasmin: Art of the possible, indeed.

Zool: Getting back to the taxes and the vote, and sort of a sense of citizenship, it seems that you have all, in your own ways, decided that that doesn't involve direct engagement with processes that are defining in a very male, or in a very kind of goal-oriented, linear way, what constitutes this country. So do you opt out, and it doesn't matter?

Ramabai: I don't think so. I resent that! I have not opted out!...You do the things you know. Deciding on your competency is a very important part of living. You have to, otherwise what you do is you just dissipate your energy into everything...I have learned from generations of doing that, that you can't do everything well...One of the things that you must do, is to create

spaces for other people to flower in. I think that's very important. And for me, that's not less than doing anything else.

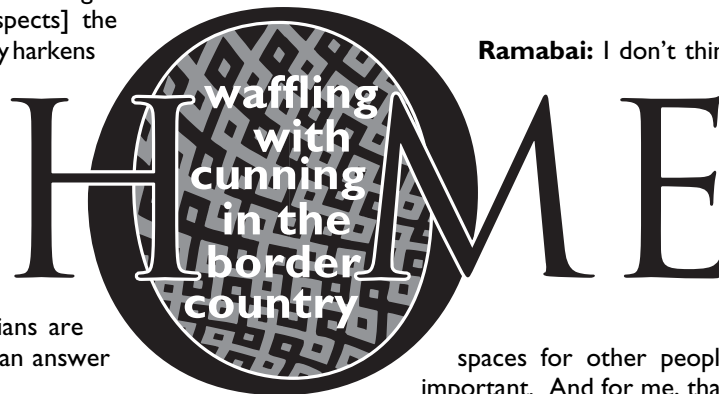
Yasmin: Friction, for me, creates fiction...And as a writer, I'm totally dedicated. I cannot possibly have a dual citizenship living in this world. I belong to my own cities, the country, and again, the real friction creates fiction. That sort of space, or whatever, is a positive space for me. A positive border, a positive margin.

Ramabai: I have to agree with that. Even if I were more situated in a place, being as contrary as I am, I would find some way to have that friction. I think that's true.

Zool: So in a way it's a boon, to all of you, that there is so much fracturing, or so much displacement, or whatever you want to call it. (laughter)

Ramabai: I want to ask you something, really, seriously. As people of colour across Canada, now...what can we do to interject our voices into the constitutional debate? Do you see that there's a way?

Zool: I say, "Why not?"...Why don't we say that we want to assert a "displaced agenda" into the constitution of this country? This sense of location and rigid rights that "I have this right", "you have that responsibility", is a very western, rigid and compartmentalized way of looking at your relationship to your community and to your state. Why not inject some kind of uncertainty into that?...We have an agenda, why aren't we asserting it?



Ramabai: Well, why not? You are in the best position to assert it.

Zool: I resent that, because then if artists are going to...say that art is political, then we're all equally in the same position to answer that question. So I'm not going to take that on. I toss it back out and say, "How do we do it?" It certainly can't be on the basis of sheer numbers, at this point. And part of it is that...we don't feel the sense of confidence yet, to democratically assert the numbers that we already have within the population. We can't even get the vote out, frankly.

Sherazad: I'm finding this very uncomfortable, because basically you're saying that...it is 'our problem' that...our agenda is not being heard. Your very question, in the way it's framed and the way it's worded, denies the whole systematic operation that's going on here, to marginalize and to repress. It is a bloody miracle that the aboriginal peoples are even at the table. And then for you to say, "Well, what about the rest of us people of colour, why aren't we down there?"... The time will be there. This thing has to go its course. And I agree totally with Ramabai...right now it's the First Nations' agenda. It's their place. When they're ready to ask us to come, we will come. What we have to do is prepare. That is, to continue the process of our own awareness, our own education, and our own work, which to me involves making other people aware of these issues. So that when the time comes, we'll be able to mobilize more than just the people who are in this room.

Zool: So what happens to privacy in all this? I know that with Yasmin, that's very important. You see that as very sacred in some ways, because it's kind of the fountain from which your magic happens. Are you all very stingy with your privacy?...How do you define the private within this realm of negotiation?

Yasmin: Sacredness is not stingy, or I couldn't afford to be stingy with it...I share it very generously with people with whom I share an imaginary homeland. I work in that space, so I have a few steady members and that's it. I don't mean to sound militant, it's not that at all. Because in our lives we basically can take so much anyway for a day. So what I am doing is exactly that, only I have defined it so severely that the outsider is a bit afraid. It's a steady process, for example. I'm not casual about my privacy in any way. But I don't want to sound uppity. It's not that, it's just that I cannot function otherwise...I live very simply. Nothing is complicated.

Sherazad: I think it's really important to me...to have space to make things in, to create in, and it's not simply being stingy with my time. It's being stingy with my energy. It's being very much aware of where it is that I want to place that energy, and where it can have a maximum effect...I don't have time to educate every Tom, Dick, and Harry on race issues. I'd rather spend that time working on my stuff. Even just in terms of physical privacy,...I guess I'm just at a point where I really enjoy my time at the keyboard, working on a story, or working on a piece. Amazingly, for the first time in my life, I feel at home when I'm doing that. I feel those pieces, those voices within me are having an opportunity to be heard. And they come out sometimes as a cacophony, and sometimes in really limp, stringy strains, unsure, wavering, but they have a place to come out to, which they have never had, in the whole twenty years we've been in this country. And that to me is just so empowering, so empowering.

Yasmin: As she (Sherazad) said, she doesn't want to educate everyone, and again it's sort of a very mainstream thing—that

working for the anthropologist, whom I call...the Damwallah (maker of dams). This whitestream is so organized, you know...And so what you do with anthropologists is you work toward the anthropologist...So it's again a different kind of colonization, right? And that's why I have problems with that because I...feel that for me, the colonization finished a long time ago, and so I don't want to give that person [the anthropologist] space anymore. That person has to relearn...and there are so many hurdles to get over.

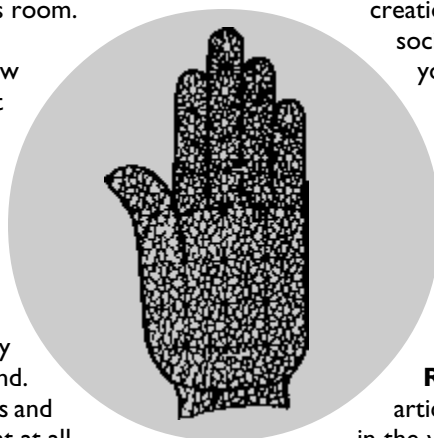
Ramabai: Well I listened to both of you with great interest, about privacy and so on. I think it's a kind of avaricious attitude to people, if you come from small cultures and small places where everything is pressed together, which is the place I come from. Big families, small spaces. There's a way in which you are easily consumed. I find that it is one of the greatest hindrances to development and creation and creativity and so on, for me. It's something I've noticed as well, with the emerging group of Indo-Caribbean women writers that I see. There's a sense of being imperiled...One woman gives to her family, she gives to her community, she doesn't give to herself. That attitude is very much there. And I think that's in conflict with everything we have been brought up to do. The need for privacy and solitude and so on, to create. Coming from a big family in a small place, I have always felt that. Therefore, I have got my privacy with equal avarice. And so I feel the encroachment of society, family, duty, responsibility, and all of this, of a single act of creation, I feel it as an enormous threat...Well, the way our society is organized here, it's more possible to isolate yourself within, to lock your door, turn on the answering machine.

Zool: Well...this interview...makes apparent...that there's this incredible power and strength and solidarity that I feel speaking to you as a group...That strength...seems to be to the 'dominant' world view a tiny, marginalized sort of voice, but is in fact a very powerful voice.

Ramabai: For me, the direction...that we have been articulating for ourselves, it's very different. I don't feel, in the work that I am doing personally, that I am being left out...Even if all we are doing in a way is raising consciousness and awareness...

Yasmin: Well...my waffling with cunning would allow me the space...to see it from this point of view...Divergent points of view make waffling with cunning. So I am still on the side of letting the pots simmer...Whatever I do in my outside life is utilized in my art, and it comes out there. And so for me, art is not something that you put in the living room.

Sherazad: I think I would agree with Ramabai in that every act you make out there, in whatever work it is that you are doing, if you can...inject that kind of consciousness into it, and so affect just a handful of people around you, to me, that is doing...political work. If you bother to do that, you're engaged. And to do that is, in itself, is an act of responsibility. Really speaking, we don't owe anybody anything. We have a long litany of oppression. So much has been removed and taken away from us, stripped from us, and so really we don't owe anybody anything. In my mind, there is really no separation between art and politics and all these other things.



Thanks to the Canada Council, National Book Festival and Province of BC, Cultural Services Branch for making this interview possible.

Reclaiming Fabled Territory

Photo: Sandra Semchuk

He faces them, dressed in a soldier's uniform, sword at his side, explorer's map in hand and lush uncorrupted Canadian landscape behind. His eyes are cast slightly up and aside, as if consciously looking away from them, perhaps disdainful, perhaps dreaming of conquests to come. He is a colonizer par excellence, and his name is General William Frederick, Second Duke of Gloucester.

He looks on from within an elaborate frame, facing into the main room which houses *Memory and Desire* a exhibit by eleven local women at the Vancouver Art Gallery from March 7 to April 12, 1992. On the ground floor, surrounded around and above by colonial images, the show is packed into three rooms. The work is emotionally dense with honesty, with the pain or disappointment of loss, with the troubled joy of remembering, with the affirmation of long buried desires. It is exciting to see such strong, introspective work adamantly putting down roots in such a location. The work is confident and mature. It seems to say, "We belong here."

Following on the heels of *Fabled Territories*, an exhibition of British South Asian photography, curated by Sunil Gupta and sponsored by the Leeds Gallery in London, the success and scale of *Memory and Desire* was largely a result of protests from the community and the Artists' Coalition for Local Colour. They were concerned about the lack of outreach to the local South Asian community with respect to *Fabled Territories*, which, according Haruko Okano, went up quietly, with little publicity and no opening.

The Coalition acted in solidarity and with the support of the British artist in *Fabled Territories*. The Coalition was concerned with the way issues of race are traditionally defined. That is, as separate from issues of local vs global. International exhibitions by artists of colour should not be used as means by which to placate demands by local artists of colour, and dominant art institutions should deal with their own racism.

Okano notes that *Memory and Desire* breaks the aura of mystique around the notion of art as separate from the everyday lives of people. That work which is meaningful can be produced and shown without the producer needing the validation of the title 'artist' has immense implications for producers in marginalized communities for two reasons. Some are excluded from the definition 'artist' by the European art bureaucracy which has traditionally validated only Eurocentric art. Others do not choose to label themselves that way. Others do not choose to label themselves that way (in order to deny the validity of a term that has seldom included racially conscious producers of colour).

The exhibit consists of a collaborative piece, and eleven individual works by local Vancouver artists Ana Chang, Sherida Levy, Alexis MacDonald-Seto, Shani Mootoo, Marianne Nicolson, Haruko Okano, Linda Ohama, Sandra Semchuk, Alfreda Steindl, and Kiki Yee. British visiting-artist-in-residence, Sutapa Biswas, conducted the workshop during which these works were constructed, and is represented in the collaborative piece. Because of space limitations, this review will deal with the collaborative piece only.

The collaborative piece is made up of windows into the lives and histories of each of the eleven women. Each artist has hung a transparency sandwiched between two pieces of plexiglas. Behind each plexiglas window is a shelf holding a number of items significant to the personal history of each artist. Image and object—the first represents the subject visually, the second affirms a history, a physical sense of time and belonging. Each window is like a small altar to the past and the future, contrapuntal melodies setting one another off.

Clothing is used by a number of the artists to represent belonging. In Sherida Levy's piece, masculine shoes placed beside feminine shoes are used to indicate differences in character between siblings. In Kiki Yee's piece, a stranger is mistaken for a dearly loved grandfather partially because of his clothing.

Clothing, as an outer trapping of culture, is used in Sutapa Biswas's piece to suggest both location and separation. Longing and belonging. Two hands hold one another tenderly above a heap of fabric: denim and Indian silk. One hand has a traditional style bracelet on it. Are we to suppose that the individual belonging to the unbraceleted arm dresses in denim, while the other dresses in silk? Perhaps they are reaching across generations, across the evolution of culture from one with a history in Asia to one which looks to the West and incorporates not only Western dress, but Western ideology and Western desires into its lifestyle. These two cultures are connected. One has given birth to the other. They exist on a continuum, there is no clean line between one and the next. There is tenderness between them, but they are both aware of the violence that has been done, of how their relationship is mediated by the British colonizers. Behind them on the shelf is a little pile of rocks. Paper slips are strewn among them to make the phrase: "to touch stone." Although stones, like culture, seem solid, seem to keep still, they too change over time as they are worn by the elements.

Haruko Okano's piece uses clothing to represent culture and

Métis Girl's Dream by Alexis McDonald-Seto

belonging. Okano references ritual, material desire, and how these things are reinterpreted, and incorporated into the lives of individuals who come to belong to two cultures. On the plexiglas are two little girls of Japanese descent dressed as flower girls for a Western-style wedding. On the shelf in the back is a house shrine complete with incense, oranges, a household god, and two photographs, presumably of one of the artist's ancestors. In one of the photos she is dressed in a kimono, in the other, a smart, Western-style suit circa 1920. In Okano's piece, the photos seem to represent both memory and desire, documents to trigger feelings from the past, but specifically framed (in the past) to represent the kinds of things the subjects and/or the photographer perceived as desirable. Although it is less clear here than in her individual piece, there is reference to the notion that belonging to both cultures, however much one wants to, is not as simple as putting on the clothing and cultural practices of the West. In this piece, as with others in the collaborative work, the use of family photos necessitates the insertion of a non-white face. An Asian face in Western clothing speaks volumes, not only in terms of the impossibility of assimilation, no matter how much it is desired, but also in terms of the sacrifice of a part of the one's self, represented by clothing, but meaning so much more.

Alfreda Steindl's piece deals with a memory of her mother, reconstructed from small fragments of the past, a mother that belonged to her only in fragments, having left her marriage and her child, early in Alfreda's life. She comes back in photographs and occasional postcards. Perhaps the photographs themselves are the tangible memories, part of a paper correspondence exchanged between mother and daughter. Photographs and postcards, memories of photographs and post cards—that is all. There is no original blood memory. In this piece the relationship between personal and mass-generated images is striking. The plexiglas image of Steindl's mother, in a room full of books, dressed in fashionable 1920s lingerie, suggests both a real woman, Mother, and a popular image, an ideal of what a mother should be. She is at once real and mythological.

What separates the mother and daughter in Ana Chang's piece is a language barrier. Using text in English and Chinese, she calls her audience directly into question. Mounted in the plexiglas are two images, her mother's face and her own. They are layered in such a way that it is impossible to tell which features belong to which face; the lines and features of each are blurred. They are both looking at one another, and such an intrinsic part of one another that the boundaries between them are undefinable. Beneath them is text in both English and Chinese. As the viewer faces the piece, the English text is in mirror image. The Chinese text is the right way around, but unless you know how to read it, there is no other means of access into it. Since, looking front on, the most legible text is in Chinese, the piece privileges a Chinese speaking audience. It could very well be the first piece to be shown in the VAG which does so. At another level, the only audience for the mother is the daughter, and vice versa. That they can not

understand one another because of the language barrier is indicated in the confusion of the jumbled layers.

The use of two languages in Linda Ohama's *One Man, Two Chairs and the Land*, produces exactly the opposite effect; instead of confusion, there is a painful clarity. A man sits in a wide open field in a garden chair, looking into the distance at a blossoming cherry tree. Beside him is another chair, empty. One gets the feeling a ghost is sitting there. Imprinted on the wide open sky in the photograph are the Orders from the BC Security Commission which required Japanese-Canadians in Vancouver to leave their homes and businesses and report to Hastings Park or other internment camps. The text is highly legible in both English and Japanese, so that its intended audience, Japanese-Canadians living on the West coast just after the bombing of Pearl Harbour, will make no mistake about what it says. The injustice of that legislation, the sense of loss and longing for his coastal home, and the vastness of the land that separates him from Vancouver are apparent in the wide open space and the man's distant gaze.

In Alexis MacDonald-Seto's piece a representation of a personal experience is layered over a representation from popular culture to demonstrate how beauty and ugliness become equated with whiteness and non-whiteness, respectively. The plexiglas portrays an image of her mother as Miss English Bay, 1952. She looks white. Behind her is an image of the same woman as a child dressed as the evil stepmother in Walt Disney's *Snow White*. Beneath that is a miniature log cabin, and a perfect suburban home. The two homes suggest a polarized notion of culture, indicating two discreet places of belonging.

The girl disguised as the evil stepmother, who's skin is emphatically not 'snow white,' evokes the process of 'othering,' the mainstream identification of a non-white subject as bad, as ugly, and as unworthy of love. Both *Snow White* and the evil stepmother in Walt Disney's story desire the same things—youth, beauty, and, as a consequence, heterosexual desirability. Because *Snow White* has it, she is deemed to deserve it, and gets the handsome prince. The stepmother, on the other hand, has lost the privilege of her beauty; she is no longer the "fairest (or whitest) of them all". While her desire for beauty is no different from *Snow White's*, because of her age, she is portrayed as unworthy of beauty and as evil and vain for wanting to be beautiful. The implications of this tale are 'agist,' having more to do with the displacement of older women by younger women, in the eyes of the mirror, and in the eyes of men. Remember, in the Walt Disney adaptation (which is recognizably represented in this work, and referenced more explicitly in MacDonald-Seto's individual piece), the mirror speaks with a male voice, and could be assumed to exert a male gaze, just like the handsome prince.

For Blanche, "Age 6", the Métis girl disguised as the evil stepmother the desired thing is not beauty bestowed by youth, but beauty bestowed by whiteness. It is not only from the gaze of the mirror (herself? a

man?) that she is displaced, but also from her own land, and her place in a society which existed before the advent of the European colonizers who brought with them such tales as “Snow White” in the first place. The racial dimension of beauty, of the lost thing, suggests other things lost as well: land, a home, power, a more healthy structure of social organization. That fact that she grows into the white-looking beauty on the plexiglas, is both positive and ironic; positive because, unlike the evil stepmother, she has attained the beauty she desired, ironic because between her identity and her desire, the notion of beauty itself has become less clear cut than it seemed when only white girls played Snow White. Beauty has been pointed out for what it is in Western society, that is, racially specific.

The feeling of loss that often goes with intimate memories is also present in Marianne Nicolson’s *Melkwal: To Remember*. On the plexiglas are layers of images. On top, six Native children smile into the camera. Their photograph sits on top of a photo of unspoiled land, sky and water, a spiritual and physical homeplace. These photos appear to be attached to a black background with buttons. It is as though the memory of childhood itself has been colonized and has become an artifact. On the shelf in the back the word “melkwal” (to remember) is printed inside the outline of a house. To remember and use a word from Kwakiutl is an act of resistance. To remember the past, associated with childhood and the Kwakiutl language is painful because of all the things that have happened between the image and the present. It is also a celebration of survival.

Shani Mootoo’s *Wedding Album* is the only piece in the collaboration that deals specifically with desire in terms of sexuality, and also the only consciously lesbian work. The plexiglas panel is a collage of photos—of landscape, of family, of celebration and ritual. All of these images refer to a home and family in Trinidad. Directly on the wall above the shelf is a photograph of the artist kissing another South Asian woman. Text on this image reads: “On looking back, I find that I have, for the most part, thought, said and done whatever I pleased...at great expense. No greater, however than to have thought, said and done, to discover, uncover and know.” Between this image and the collage on plexiglas, sits a scale with a model house, car, wedding ring and treasure chest on one side, and on the other, a slip of paper with the words “autonomy”, “self-definition”, and “pride” printed on it. The notion of a trade-off, of things balancing out, comes from a realization that there is no complete sort of belonging in either her Canadian or her Trinidadian home. In Trinidad, there are family expectations of heterosexuality and material desire for the items which represent a conception of home and success. In Canada, there is a measure of anonymity that facilitates an out lesbian identity, without the kinds of repercussions for the rest of the family that would occur if one lived in the same city, or even country. But in Canada, she has no blood family. The specificity and the support of the South Asian Trinidadian community is not as present to affirm that part of the artist’s identity.

Collaborative Piece—Haruko Okano

What exists in its place are only the images from imported magazines, and images generated to cater to a tourist audience. In affirming those parts of herself which turn to different communities to find her places of closest

belonging, the artist also gathers them together in one place. The margins intersect in the physical presence of her work, and in the artist herself.

That work from the everyday lives of women working at a personal and community level, without the validation of the art bureaucracy, is showing in one of the VAG’s main gallery spaces, is a break with convention. The space in which the show is currently housed is not the space which was initially offered. From its inception, until very late in the game, the exhibit was slated to go up in what is publicly known as the “Children’s Gallery”, although the VAG’s administration has lately been referring to it as the “Annex Gallery”. Protests by a number of the artists from the inside, and outside pressure by the Artists’ Coalition for Local Colour, compelled the VAG to offer an exhibition space that would not undermine the validity and importance of the show.

The publicity and the support for the event’s opening was not as extensive as that hoped for. Invitations were prepared on in-house stationary and mailed too late for even local people to receive them in time for the opening. Initially the number of invitees to the opening was restricted to one hundred, allowing less than ten for each artist. A number of artists remarked that their extended families were larger than that, and that to invite only some family members and exclude others would be to bring about internal animosities that might last for generations. To solve the problem, the artists took on a share of the responsibility for the opening so that more people could be accommodated.

Judith Mastai, the Head of Public Programmes, assured me that that her administration has been committed to increasing the representation of artists of colour since 1988, and indeed that *Memory and Desire* is part of an on-going project at the VAG. However, *Memory and Desire* is the first show to include so many local producers of colour dealing specifically and overtly with issues of marginalization and identity. The other workshops that were organized in a similar manner to the one which resulted in *Memory and Desire*, and that involved artists of colour as facilitators, were usually intended for either students or seniors (marginalized groups in their own right). The other workshops did not deal with issues of representation, and if they resulted in exhibitions, were displayed in the Children’s Gallery. Nevertheless, I was also told that if policy and tradition had anything to do with it, the *Memory and Desire* artists would be invited back either for shows or to give workshops. As assurance that local artists have been supported in this way in the past, Jeff Wall and Ken Lum were quoted as examples. There was no reference, however, to the fact that both of these artists received their initial validation outside Canada; it was only after they had attained international acclaim that they gained the support of the institutions at home. It is understandable that in such an inhospitable



Collaborative Piece—Shani Mootoo

climate for art in general, that the VAG is concerned about its own validity as an institution among corporate, government and/or cultural institutions. The question remains as to whether it should be the institution which validates the artists (be they Jeff Wall, Ken Lum or the artists in *Memory and Desire*) or vice versa.

Mainstream institutions still seem to have a problem with the notion of voice, and are uncomfortable specifically with what is local and not white. It is okay to address one's own racism, as long as one maintains control over what is said by being the only one to speak. It is okay to invite discussions around racism and racial identity in other countries, such as Britain (in the case of *Fabled Territories*), South Africa, China, and even the United States. To admit racism is alive and well in one's own backyard, even within the hallowed halls of our finest monuments to 'culture' is another question. Suddenly, we are talking about re-ghettoizing the already marginalized. It is time that the white cultural mandarins make a distinction between groups who identify themselves as marginalized and the groups who do the marginalizing in the first place. Accusations from the admin-

istration of reverse racism, or of being made to feel marginalized do not take into consideration the vast and historical power (and income) differences between themselves and the *Memory and Desire* artists, differences which are statistically related to race. With such advantages in terms of power and privilege, based on race, the perpetrators of

the notion of reverse racism have a severe case of logical discontinuity on their hands. Women of colour can not oppress, as the white administrators of major institutions can, with the weight of history and of institutionalized racism behind them. While the VAG espouses a liberal policy to the effect of "everyone is welcome regardless of..." that "regardless of" only reluctantly and reactively includes people who have an awareness of their own oppression with regards to race. Everyone is welcome, as long as they do not recognize the historic (racist) agenda of the institution. *Apologies to the artists whose sections were edited out due to space limitations. Interested parties may contact Rung for the full version.*



Larissa Lai is a writer and a cultural worker in Vancouver.

Samachar

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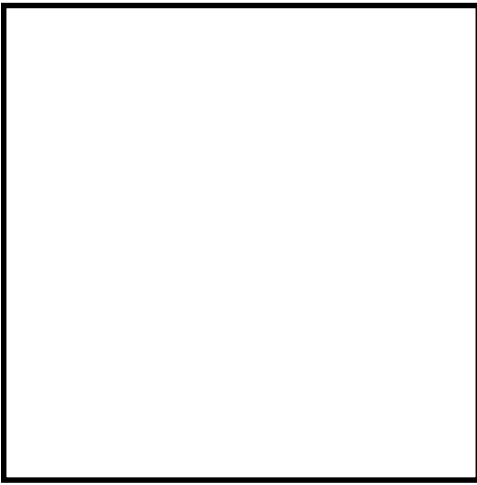
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WINDOW, 1991

Amirali Alibhai

Mixed media on canvas 72" x 72"