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Fiction $15.95 trade paper, 208 pp 5 3/4 x 8 3/4
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 Desh Prades 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 Desh Prades—Home as Mythical Space—is used as a starting point for Amir Ali 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!!
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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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.

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.

Photos Molly A.K.Shinhart
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.

Bhangrajig, 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

**Friday, November 8**

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

The Rivoil - 332 Queen Street West

With special guest British Bhangra DJ "Ritul" and Toronto’s CKLN DJ Michelle Mohabeer.

Special thanks to The Rivoil

**Saturday, November 9**

**Violence Against Women**

Uncovering Truths

Suneera 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 interviews, 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 and The AIDS Committee of Toronto.

**Brown and Out**

Seeing and Being Lesbian and Gay

Video Premiere - Jarsena, Portrait of a Hijja, 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 Hijjas, 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/Gayana, Moez Yassani Toronto/East Africa, Raj Pannu Vancouver/India, Arun Prabha Mukherjee Toronto/India, and Chris Creightton 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, Rungh 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, Moez Yassani, Kaushalya Banerji, Ramabai Espinet, Ashok Mathur, Jamila Iqbal, Chris Creighthon Kelly, Kalpesh Oza, Raj Pannu, Mariam Dhurani, Darini Abyekerkara.

The Tarana Dance School – “Oh Tassawale”

Indo-Caribbean dance choreographed by Devika Chetram, with young dancers from Toronto.

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, Identview 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 Satsang 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


Arnold Iwure, Toronto

Author of a new book of poems Body Rites, TSSAR, 1991

Jamilla Ismail, Vancouver

Born and raised in Hong Kong, Jamilla 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

Cross-Takari and Coke, 1990, Rukhsana

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

Sponsored by Khush and The Nataraj Restaurant
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.

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 postmodern 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 ethnic 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 Gujarat 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 'homeless.' 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.
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 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 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 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.

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 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 cooperative 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 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 choppiness 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 impact was that of something large and hidden, even taboo, being exposed for the first time!"
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?

Writers

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

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...

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Ramabai Espinet is a writer and a cultural activist in Toronto.
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 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 machismo, 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 tightrope 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 movement.
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 Centre 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.

Zara Suleman is a feminist, artist and cultural activist in Vancouver.
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- The environment
- Health
- Reproductive technology
- Politics
- Racism
- Colonialism, class & patriarchy
- Violence against women

Other suggestions for articles, as well as poetry and artwork, are welcome.

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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 black sheep troublemaker, evil cousin or something like that. So you have these two families—there’s one poor family and one rich family.
Desh Pradesh

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

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. Tikoo 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 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 that. But those who know Hindi say, "I get this, this

Sakina Jaffrey as Rita

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

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 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
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 even 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.

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 masolas, 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.
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 rules. You try to create novel ways of processing things or juxtaposing ideas.

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!!

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.

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

My personal taste, my romanticism in my aesthetic, there is a right between the realties of art and its function and the realities of art and its function 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.

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.
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 brown-ness enough?”

Aruna: So that would have been one of the reasons I would have said okay, let’s not shut this person down.
Aruna: During and now, hopefully, after the colonials.

Aruna: 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 candies 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 Asianess. 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 Indianess.

Aruna: Signifies a kind of Indianess.

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 the rupture and therefore deal with the...
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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 no 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 heterosexists 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 heterosexists 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 heterosexists unquestioningly accept the historically western notion that heterosexuality is natural, normal, and biologically correct, and that homosexuality is 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.” Shivananada 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 archaeological 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 begins 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 Shivananada 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 Fransisco.
This interview took place on April 25, 1992 in Vancouver during the National Book Festival events hosted by the Rungh Cultural Society. Poets Ramabai Espinet, Sherazad Jamal, and Yasmin Ladha were interviewed by Rungh 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 Desh 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 towards 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
confrontation 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 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 harks 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...
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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 thing—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 not 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 Blanché, “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
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 administration 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 cannot 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 Rungh for the full version.

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

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