Stirred in the dance, light upon appliqués: Debjani Banerjee's *Jalsaghar*
Centre for Contemporary Arts, Glasgow
September 2024

Dr Nat Raha

Working across mixed-media textiles, clay, and space-making, Debjani Banerjee invites us into her contemporary *Jalsaghar* (translating from Bengali to 'music room' in English). The Jalsaghar is a space of concerted watching, listening, feeling, relaxing, dreaming, imagining. For the artist, music, dance, and their performance in such spaces have played a pivotal role in her life. Here, Debi is our host — creator of the sculptures we sit alongside upon the floor; curator of the ambience and resonances that fill the gallery, reverberating into the textile works that narrate the space. Come, sit – with the works, words and songs, with the emotions and memories they stir.

In her Jalsaghar, Banerjee presents reworked visions, sensations, and songs readily familiar to Bengalis and Desis accustomed with the Savarna culture of Eastern India, inter-dreamed through visions ungrounding diasporic domesticities in the UK. Works, especially those in clay such as *Putna* and *Mudra* (both 2024), embody and express deeply rooted emotions born out of stories and dreams. Visions of snakes seep from domestic objects such as Henry the Hoover, chores becoming fears becoming deep meditations, wafting from the hookah pipe, pleasures curling tinged with venom. Lighting and textiles brim with the bold colours of Indian fabrics, shimmering in the bling of self-embellishment, diffracting light in the blend of details. We hear Susmita Pujara, the artist's sister perform Tagore songs of longing and other traditional Indian songs, atop the playful electronics of Kavi Pujara, her partner.

These feelings are subtended by the logics of gender and patriarchy in its formations of Savarna South Asian / Bengali culture. Banerjee's work diffracts the personal and familial through the political, to reveal and revel in this light.

Across the works of *Jalsaghar,* Banerjee brings into focus narratives of women in her life and in key cultural representations of South Asians produced or presented in Britain primarily in 1980s and early 1990s. The works include images of powerful, creative, life-giving and life-destroying figures, from family members to goddess immortalised in images of Hindu deities and the mythical epic poem of the *Mahabharata*. Yet these narratives, shifting between mythical epics and familial stories, are not necessarily wedded to telling factual truths. They're knowing refracted through the prism of memory, mis/recollection, amplifying the affective impact and reading of goddess figures or family members. The 'truth' in the story less significant than it's telling, or the telling of its telling.

In the text accompanying this exhibition ('In this world, my dear…') — Banerjee discusses interspersing her own interpretation upon a photograph from a family album, transporting her mother back to the isolated Welsh landscape of her life in the 1960s,

recently married and relocated from Kolkata, India.[1] The artist foregrounds her empathetic connection with her mother, fizzing with the possibility of refabricating a relationship across time. Yet, Debi's aesthetic practice provides the creative spin on the 'reality' or 'fact' of the photograph that inspired it, a spin on what Gayatri Gopinath would describe as one of the "minor histories" – those that are "personal, familial, collective, regional", "stand[ing] outside of official nation-centred narratives", that diasporic artists "excavate and memorialize" through archival practices.[2] Banerjee's melancholia bubbles as she envisions her mother reciting lines of William Wordsworth, in the manner that she would recite those of Rabindranath Tagore. It emphasises the personal in the transformation of belonging, practicing across Bengali and British cultures, experiencing emotions characteristics of both.

If nostalgia occupies a dominant position in the role of memory of the South Asian diaspora, reproduced and ascribed through stereotypes of narratives, it frames our gaze and our understandings as looking backwards, towards stories or time of migration from an origin, of struggle, isolation or belonging. It offers up the muted colours of analogue mediums, grainy, factory-processed 35mm camera film,[2] the means of their times of capturing and storing culture and the everyday.[3] For the second generation, sometimes the 'difficult' second generation,[4] born into and raised amid these media, our creative expressions are by no means contained or determined by their limits.[5]

[2] (*including by other, working-class Desis, such as at Grunwick in the 1970s)*
[3] *See also VHS and audio cassettes.*
[4] A. Sivananda, 'From Resistance to Rebellion: Asian and Afro-Caribbean struggles in Britain', 1981
[5] *Provided we were permitted to develop our creative expressions — valuable time spent away from studying for exams or minding the shop till.*

In the quilt, *that floats o'er vales and hills* (2024), Debi reworks the aforementioned photograph, presenting a vision of a brown woman sitting drinking a can of Pepsi framed in a landscape animated with green, grey brown and red tones at golden hour. The woman's clothes are themselves made with orange, pink and yellow fabrics with dense floral patterning; she wears a cardigan, and her black hair is formed of another shapely piece. The lime green fabric that constitutes part of the hill behind her back, made of sari fabric, could itself be a wild continuance of her sari in the wind, as the figurative flows into the surreal. The quilt itself echoes the Indian kantha tradition of quilting, here marked by the use of a multiplicity of fabrics and the white horizontal running stitches.

Banerjee threads for us narratives of figures who are often framed as merely mothers (of Gods or sons, or of children in general), centring their emotions and pleasures, powers and allures. Debi sits us with these feelings and their potential to skew or challenge patriarchal expectations of women. South Asian artists involved in the Black Arts Movement in the UK in the '80s, including Sutapa Biswas and Nina Edge, attest that

[1] Debi Banerjee, 'In this world, my dear…' *CCA Annex*, online at https://cca-annex.net/entry/jalsaghar/ (accessed 8 October 2024).
[2] Gopinath, *Unruly Visions: The Aesthetic Practices of Queer Diaspora*. Durham: Duke University Press, 2018, 11. Gopinath specifically addresses queer diasporic practices, which provide a framework for such readings.

aesthetic practices are key for countering and forging alternatives to the patriarchal expectations of women. These aesthetic practices do not exist without the support of brown and black feminist community organising; aesthetics playing a critical role in the expansion of political consciousness of our communities. Goddesses and other deities provide mythic narratives and powerful iconography, connecting teaching, witnessing and learning lessons, alternate agency and possibilities to the work of intervening into the social order — undermining it or leaving it in peril.[6] The patriarchal and casteist order — at present animated with a Hindutva ethnonationalism in India and in the diaspora — is upheld through gendered expectations and caste divisions, maintained via emotional manipulation, gaslighting and various forms of abuse, including violence.

Through forging a space of deep – even cinematic – emotionality within a gallery setting, Banerjee turns the homosocial, patriarchal setting of the Jalsaghar (perhaps most familiar from Satyajit Ray's 1958 film of the same name) upon its head, recentring subcultural narratives upon those easily and often consigned to margins of the plot. This is a reorientation of the affective priorities of such a space – from performance as spectacle to entertain (or service) men, as cultural or literal capital for a family (ala Ray's film), towards the centring of expression out of play, need, possibility, or the imaginary. Affect through the aesthetic create vibrations of belonging, here holding us in the room together. *Sometimes you must stop talking (bok bok bok) to hear what the women of the second generation have to say, experienced and* seen.

In her *Mahabharata* textile piece, spanning 12 metres, Banerjee presents to us – running left to right – the figures of Satayvati (in a sari of two towns of blue), Kunti (decorated with jewellery over her eye), Gandhari (covering her eyes with a blindfold, two gloved hands bejewelled; her 101 babies born from a pot of ghee), Draupadi (draped in an orange sari, protected by the blue hand of Krishna to the left), Banyan roots mixing with dreadlocks (symbolising the forest of Draupadi and the Pandava's exile), Hidimbi (a rakshasi hiding in the forest), completed with smaller figures of Shikhandi (Draupadi's trans brother warrior, with bow and arrow), Arjuna and Krishna (riding in the chariot), and six naga snakes (dancing and writhing up from water). The figures are adorned with, or watched upon by, cinematic eyes or bodies, printed on silk. Their eyes and bodies are drawn from the era-defining representations of the *Mahabharat* — including the five-and-a-half-hour film directed by Peter Brook (Channel 4, 1989-90, in English) and the 94 episode television series by B.R. Chopra (1988-90, in Hindi)— alongside works by Satyajit Ray. This reuse (and reappropriation) through collage appears to be encouraging us to look *with* the eyes of the women, to witness their struggles and the harms enacted against them in their human forms.

Draupadi stands at the centre of Banerjee's tapestry, pictured in an act of resistance and self-survival. The polyandrous wife of the five Pandavas Brothers, in the scene depicted Draupadi has been dragged to Court of the Kauravas in the moment of her loss of freedom, as the last possession lost by Yudhisthira in a game of dice with the Kauravas. Yudhisthira had already lost all of his wealth, land, cattle, enslaved people,

[6] Sutapa Biswas' *Housewives with Steak-Knives,* 1984 is exemplary in this regard. See also the forthcoming work of Alina Khakoo.

clothing, his siblings and his own liberty in a game of dice rigged against him. In her own defence, Draupadi argues that she herself could not be waged in a bet *after* Yudhisthira had waged and lost his own liberty, when she was thus no longer his to wage. In the court of Kauravas, the defence does not stand — seemingly rigged against her like the game of dice, as the court claims the ownership of her and her body, complete with further sexual harassment from Duryodhana. In resistance to her new enslavement to the Kauravas, facing disrobing in court, while menstruating, she Draupadi prays to Krishna for protection and divine intervention. In the event, her orange sari extends into an infinite textile, forever being unwrapped to maintain what is left of her modesty. Draupadi responds by lambasting the court and the familial onlookers of both sides of the epic battle between the Pandavas and the Kauravas. She emphasises the shame in permitting such an act of sexual harassment and gendered harm to have occurred in their witness, while no-one present (beyond the divine) would intervene.

The significant of resistance and intervention – of challenging the familial, patriarchal, gendered, material and caste-based systems that allow for gendered violence to be enacted directly in public – continues to speak volumes in the contemporary. Such interventions in the everyday have been active in the responses of abolitionist feminists here in the UK, such as the organising that has occurred in responses to the killings by the police of Sarah Everard and (in prison) of Sarah Reed. At the time of writing in August 2024 – alongside an extra-legal xenophobic fascist resurgence in the UK — Kolkata and Eastern India is galvanized by a grassroots feminist movement, *Reclaim the Night / Reclaim the Rights*, following the rape and murder of a 31-year-old woman doctor while she was at work at the R.G. Kar hospital in Kolkata on 9th August 2024, in an event that has highlighted institutional failures and been beset by misinformation and cover-ups, including from the Police.[7] Animated by grief and grievances, where women, queer and trans people are not even safe from gender-based violence while at work, the movement is currently calling for the resignation of West Bengal's Chief Minister; highlighting how existing hate crime protections for gender-based violence are ineffective for preventing femicide; and has emphasised the need for different structures and practices of safety for women, queer and trans people. This is even more pronounced for people from lower castes.

While the political present glistens with rage, sweat and torches burning up the darkness of Kolkata's streets, Banerjee's work speaks to this contemporary through raising the timeliness of seemingly timeless stories. *Jalsaghar* holds space for the complex emotions and dreams that emerge from her meditations journing into the sur/real, from deep set fears where mythical figures are encountered in the real, from the trials faced by goddesses who become women that become goddesses. There is nonetheless space for pleasure — for the glamour of the living to be adorned and appliquéd across garments as fabrics become art and art finds it form from fashion; for dreaming upon the hookah pipe, for reclining in the vibrancy of colour and sound. Esē basõ, śuẏē paṛa [এসে বসো, শুয়ে পড়], dream with your senses open.

[7] See @reclaim.the.rights on Instagram for the latest information.

Nat Raha
August — 9th September 2024.