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Post-colonial Theatre of Sense The Art of Chila Kumari Burman

Meena Alexander

'It was like this world's pleasure
and the way to the other
both walking towards me.'
Akkamahadevi (12th century)

Chila and I met in Ithaca, New York at a conference called 'Nations and Genders' where her art was exhibited, and where I read my poetry. Now we live quite far from each other, on two separate continents, she in London, I in Manhattan. The literal distances, the ghostly maps limit our lives, yet the unfurling of national borders, street signs, subway maps, none of this could hold without the sharpness of locality, the dailiness of the living breathing world in which we make our art. And our art, visual images for Chila, written words for me, has a task to fulfill, it must make up a theatre of sense.

Through the mail Chila has sent me a large brown packet filled with images. They tumble out, sonorous colours, I see the brilliant red of two cups, the turquoise shimmer of others, apsara women, flattened out, swimming, a density of desire that makes for an eternal present. These images will form part of the *Hello Girls!* exhibit in London.

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Chila Burman *Hello Girls!* Courtesy of Artist
and Andrew Mummery Gallery London

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I lay out the images on my dining table and keep sorting through them, looking at them, almost as if they were snapshots of a place I have not yet entered. Through the open window, for its summer time now, come the sounds of the New York City street, voices in English, Spanish, a child crying out after his ball, the seller of icecreams, candy floss. The trees are green, huge almost as if midsummer were on us, and we, at the edge of an imaginary India.

There is a way in which the subcontinent underwrites us both. A subcontinent, colonized, torn apart by Partition, yet remaking itself and us in this late twentieth century so that memories and fantasies that pour through our skins, some memories that we cannot even name, become, in their very exigency the route we take to our own bodies.

When I speak about Partition to Chila, she, with ancestral memories of the Punjab, says to me:

‘Yes, that’s why my dad left, isn’t it?’

And I nod, though of course the phone line only gives us murmurs, edits, vocal scrawls, and I force myself to lay out unfinished thought and I blurt out:

‘In the South we weren’t really touched by Partition.’

Yet of course that isn’t quite true, in as much as India exists, the Partition made a very different kind of sense in the south.

And Chila continues, in this back and forth: ‘and so I was born here.’



Chila Burman *Portrait of My Mother* (1995) black and white image of colour original. Cibachrome print. Courtesy of the Artist.

Here for her, is Britain, and she is by rights a British artist, Black British in the complex minoritization of selves that allows us rich affiliations, markers of belonging in these countries of the North where our bodies can never be taken for granted. Here for me is the United States, where I am Asian American, as a multiethnic taxonomy permits me. But Chila and I are both Indian women, and that allows for an immediacy of connection, a frisson of knowledge.

I think of Chila’s *Portrait of My Mother*, the gentle, sad straightforward face of a young Indian woman facing the camera. What lies in the world beyond that seeing eye? The daughter reads the mother with all the tenderness incipient in the clarity

of that first connection and then shows us the British pound note, mark of sovereignty, as light as lace, as fierce as a metallic brand, over that beloved face. Chila was born in England, and her parents raised her in Liverpool in a Punjabi speaking home. Her mother must have regularly touched, folded those pound notes with the monarch's face on them.

My own mother raised in a nationalist family in India, refused to let her lips part when they had to sing 'Rule Britannia' in college. She imparted to me her own proud, edgy animus towards the English language and then when I was six watched from a hazy distance as I was taught to curtsy to the Queen who was visiting the British school where I studied, in a small North African town on the banks of the Nile where we spent years of my childhood.

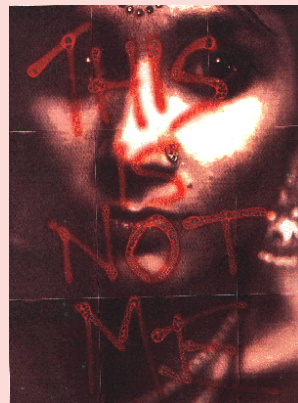
What does it mean to write over a mother's face, layer over a mother with the imprimatur of a colonial state? And of course part of the poignancy and indeed subtle tension of the image comes from the imagined maternal qualities of the royal face.

But to return to my question and try to respond. It is an act that the postcolonial daughter has to undertake, in her art, her writing. What other genealogy can we have, we who are cast outside the borders of the taken for granted? We whose bodies are scrawled over by the borders we have crossed, scrubbed out in the high glare of the streets? There is an iconic quality to another face that Chila has printed over, her own image of 1992 intricately decked in traditional Indian jewellery, then spray painted with the large gawky letters THIS IS NOT ME!

It's an image that haunts me. The gleam of dark eyes through vermilion spray paint, pallor of cheekbone, jut of jaw, the bodily self disowned. After all being female is not something added to race but comes fused with it, as part of my inalienable bodily being. Perhaps the most devastating effect of racism, is to render one homeless in one's own body. So that as I walk the street or enter the building with great stone pillars, I absent myself from my body, become a fly in the blue air watching, seemingly free of threat.

Indeed the flip side, dark chromatic lining to the fly-in-the-air-scenario would be to walk down main street or enter that building intricately dressed in sari and blouse having scrawled on one's forehead and eyelids and cheeks, in crimson, the letters: THIS IS NOT ME! And such forcible, almost automatic absenting of 'I' from my body is something that survivors of trauma understand, if only mutely, and something that racism in its multiple forms is able to enforce.

So that even as from inside ourselves, a voice comes, searching for sense, we must step out of our



Chila Burman *This is Not Me*
(1992) laser print and car spray
paint. Courtesy of the Artist.

skins. They are written up, scrawled over, marked too terribly to be part of what we are. Yet we cannot live as skinless things. How shall we figure ourselves afresh, make up our lives in a diasporic world?

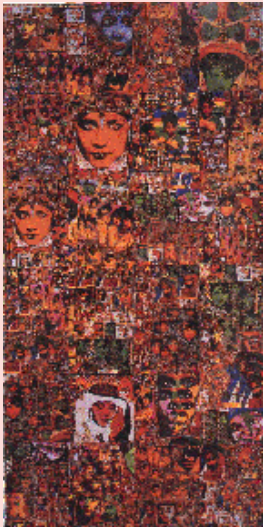
In Chila's work, I see her unique way of addressing this question, and elements laid out, one possible aesthetic for a postcolonial theatre of sense.

Think of the race thing, the body scrawled over. If we step back a little we sense that its all a bit of flim-flam, this "race" thing, something baseless, ready to dissolve. After all, what could be more absurd?

And the self that is crossed out so painfully becomes flighty, multiple, caught in the shifting strands that make up the unmoored consciousness, delighted in its fortuitous nature, free. Now of course this transition is a provisional thing, but necessary counterpart to the torment of self, part of the shift to the swelling delight in the world of the senses.

Hence the transition we see in Chila's work from *This is Not Me* to the sheer exuberance of the multiple figures of self-fashioning in *28 Positions in 34 Years* (1992) the daughter's face split into so many, gazing out at the world, a species of sorcery, fantastic play. Or in the richly textured, jewel like surface of *Auto-Portrait, Fly Girl Series* (1993).

Chila Burman *Auto-Portrait, Fly Girl Series* (1993) mixed media and laser print.
Courtesy of Artist.



There too, is the element of riposte: You scrawled over me with your gaze, made me into a flat surface, so I shall take the power that is mine, become these shifting gorgeous surfaces, thrust the images back into your face. You can't touch me! You can't catch me!

Indeed the 'Don't Touch Me' element is crucial here. The task of flight, necessary, seductive, a charged evasion of having been rendered powerless. The power is in making images, images of my own body, dark, female, which I can render on flat surfaces, deploy as I wish. To argue which is not to deny of course the coruscating surfaces of a postmodernist artifact, one that could only come into being in the late twentieth century.

When I communicate with Chila by fax about the provenance of *Hello Girls!* she says:

'I was running a workshop for Asian girls.' This was during a residency in Glasgow. She asked the young women to bring in personal objects for use in their art work, and she herself, in the evening turned to whatever personal items lay at hand:

'As I hadn't brought in many objects with me, or family snaps, I decided to use my clothes and whatever I

had in my suitcase... I had bras with me, bikini, shalwar kameez and Indian shawls... so I started playing with the colors, changing the colors for the background and something was happening...'

'Why bras?' I ask her.

And Chila replies in terms of her characteristic concern with a visuality that exists in a tension with the matter of fact reality of the world:

'I've always been interested in content and form' she tells me, 'so it's not just about a critique of the Wonderbra advert.' And she continues: 'I was initially interested in abstracting the BRA SHAPE so that you couldn't tell it was a bra, I was left with color and form and the content so that the Bra wasn't easily visible, because I'm very interested in color/form/abstraction. I wanted it to look flat from a distance ... I'm not so much interested in the fact of representing a bra, it's more the vulnerability, the bra straps and shape it has and the power of the bra shape or form/object. Also bras are like EYES -- eyes are crucial in our culture.'

Eyes, windows of the soul, site of desire, turned to the postcolonial riposte, a coruscating feminist tack, a sail on rough waters. My mind moves to lines by Kamala Das I read as a young poet, the exuberant travail of an Indian woman acknowledging her own body, breasts, thighs, pubis all marked in the coming to knowledge of what it might mean to refuse to be a dark continent:

'I am today a creature turned inside
Out. To spread myself across wide highways
Of your thoughts, stranger, like a loud poster
Was always my desire, but all I
Do is lurk in shadows of cul de sacs,
Just two eyes showing ... oh never mind, I've
Spent long years trying to locate my mind
Beneath skin, beneath flesh and underneath
The bone.'¹



Above: Chila Burman
Hello Girls! Courtesy
of Artist and Andrew
Mummery Gallery
London

What does it mean to search under the bone? It means to touch the ghostly body, what one might even call the soul.

Indeed there is a ghostly emptiness in the bras, right through the sheer sonorous delight of color. The images that bounce off the walls, multiply in a dizzying phosphorescence, each detail crystalline, marking out the boundaries of shifting scenes, bodily unselfings.

Our conversation turns to bras, what it meant to learn to wear them as girls, the discomfort of wearing illfitting bras, the odd ways the points stuck out in wrongly shaped bras. 'They are always designed by men, aren't they,' Chila muses. And I think of when I returned to India in the early seventies after my student days in England, how a friend in the women's movement in India who had given up on bras, took to knotting her choli under her breasts in the way that peasant women did and encouraged me to do the same; and I think of Chila's vivid, phantasmagoria of bras against the backdrop of the Breast Cloth controversy in India, well before either of us was born, when the British colonial rulers found themselves taking sides in what was to become the 'Woman Question', ruling on whether lower caste women had the right to wear bodices, cover their breasts.

I muse on the sheer delight of color in Chila's billboard sized poster, the delicate textures we could bury our faces in, the two-ness of the cups, echoing all the couplings that makes for the bodily self, right breast and left breast, right hand and left hand, right thigh and left thigh, right eye and left eye, but also the *via negativa* of our social imaginaries, *neti-neti*, not this, not that, I am not this nor that, quintessential being, unnameable, a succour, a vanishing.

In our conversations Chila and I speak at length on how we were raised as Indian girls and subject of clothing. When Chila says to me 'I wasn't even allowed to wear a skirt till I was sixteen' her words have an immediate resonance for me. I had to cover my arms and legs when visiting my father's village in a remote part of Kerala. Wear longer skirts in a Kerala town than I had to when visiting England. The constant taking off and putting on of garments, skirts, blouses, saris, cholis, kurtas, salwars, pants, coats and in the distance, bikinis, mini skirts, foisted on the bodily self a great fragility. Yet one that could lead to exuberant strategies, the casting off of one identity for another and yet another, fluid selves, porous boundaries.

After all to survive with one's integrity could oddly enough mean taking apart and putting together any possible self, given a present in which one was forced on stage with parts one had not picked to play, lines that crossed each other out, sighs, exhalations, coughs, grunts, sentences that refused translation, syntaxes that made for such a cacophonous cross hatch of memory, that merely to think them, would turn one into the equivalent of a loud poster.

A blatant, burnished thing. And under it, the tender soul, the 'I', cryptic, illegible.

So by phone and by fax, Chila and I speak and write some more about the images in the show. We share thoughts, impressions. I muse on what a poet's version of a body print might be, the immediacy of language bordering on babble, the raw textures of touch.

There are body prints done when Chila was in India, during an international workshop in Modinagar near Delhi. I see the dark red color of breasts and belly raised and rimmed with the tiny bits of mica that decorate skirts, blouses, embroideries. Other body prints laid out in mandala style, the whole tracing a line of descent from work she started in the late seventies and eighties, *Body in Sugar* (1978) mixed media on canvas, *My Breasts* of 1984 done with Sugar and Indian ink monoprint or *Body Print* of 1987 with Acrylic and glitter monoprint. The rotund anonymous shapes are essentially female, primitive, headless. There is no 'I' there, only the flesh that makes up the subject.

Then there are figures of women some with heads draped, anonymous, nude, haunting figures each alone, against a wall. Naked women in blue. Blue figures against a blue wall. They are posing for the camera, for themselves turned camera. What are these postures that they take in this theatre of sense, consciousness split into two, lighting up the melancholic body. Who are they these ghostly women, where do they come from? And what connection do they bear to the fragment of text from the Amar Chitra Katha comic entitled *TALES OF VALIANT QUEENS*? After all they reappear within those complex multicoloured figurations. Are they split off parts of the valiant queens, restless roaming others I need to acknowledge, selves unhooded?

The Amar Chitra Katha comics are familiar in the rooms of Indian children. A sure fire way to learn of figures from history, the Rani of Jhansi set side by side with Draupadi, the literal past and the mythological past commingled as it enters into the child's imagination.

'Talk to me,' I fax Chila, 'about *The Tales of the Valiant Queens*. I think of it as an Amar Chitra Katha comic? Often that's how children learn of the Rani of Jhansi and others. And these images become so crucial to us as we step out of our skins.'

And Chila replies in the way of an artist, laying out the palimpsest of self-fashioning. So that in a world without ready anchorage what one has made - and this is a process I see in my own responses - turns into the thread of sense, guiding one through the labyrinth of what has already been: 'I think we are all *QUEENS* because of how much we have survived and achieved, so I'm saying here are the *Tales of Us Valiant Queens*. I've done another piece in my monograph (p. 57) called *Dad on Ship Coming to England* and like the three Queens which are the Queen of England I've deliberately put a wall over her face and the other Queen is my mum and the other my Grandmother!'

Chila goes onto speak of the erotic flow of sense between women, the way in which the swimming girls, apsaras blue as the water they swim in, become a trope of freedom. 'I'm mad about these girls because they're active and gentle and blue,' says

Chila. 'Also I go swimming nearly everyday and have done so for years, I used to swim in the school swimming club team.'

In one of the images I see a girl, blue and active swimming away from a heavy seated figure, nude and masked, bound by gravity. Surely both figures are parts of a self, female, rendered fleshly. The heavy seated figure has a black cloth slipping off her shoulders, revealing her body. We witness a posture of power, yet there is something in there of the abject, a heavy body seated on the floor in a white room, not moving.

And in another frame, next to the sign 'TALES OF VALIANT QUEENS', there is she again masked and seated, in a realm of collage, a theatre of bit and pieces, and others by her, one a dark nude body, female; the other her head covered, saturated in brilliant red and green. And Chila tells me that she wanted the masked nude figure 'to look like a CHIEF... too weighted down with all the pressure of the world, but still very sharp and alert and content but vigilant.'

Yet the counterpoint is insistent: there she is, a blue swimming girl, slipping out of the flounces, swimming away from the heavy seated figure with mask, the one who cannot move, who cannot show her face. And the other swims, swims away. Below her Lord Krishna, on an agarbati cover, plays his flute.

I think of how the swimming girls live in the fluidity of water. They can cross borders with the flick of an arm or thigh and not worry. Their breasts are uncovered. No Breast Cloth controversy has touched them, nor Victorian prudery.

While here we are in the late twentieth century with bras straps that hurt our bodies, writing, making images. And the bra stands in as simulacrum. The skins we slip from in order to be what we are. I muse on the double mimicry of a spotted bra (tiger skin markings) against paisley. OOO pure designs that have us I write to Chila.

And when she writes back she tells me that the tiger bra is really a bikini top and that the Hello Girls piece will be very big 10 metres by 4 metres THIS SHAPE and she encloses the words in a rectangle so I can see what the shape will be.

For me the art of Chila Kumari Burman is about the freedom of the subject, the rights of the female body, intricate self-fashioning. We see this all the way from her overtly political mural work, *Southall Black Resistance Mural* of 1986 done in collaboration with Keith Piper, through the Shotokan images of 1993, her own body, sari clad, superb, trained in the martial arts, filled with motion, resistant.

Can the notion of corps vecu, body embedded in the flesh of the world, Merleau-Ponty outlined work for us? It is a notion I first came across as a young university student in England, sifting through phenomenology to find a way in which my history as a young woman from India and Africa could be real for me. Can we race the corps vecu all the way to the edge of the twenty first century? Can it be useful to us, women artists of the South Asian diaspora? A dark corps vecu I think, with stretch marks... And why not? After all what could make more sense when one is searching out rites

of passage for the bodily self, searching out a mind under skin and bone?

But perhaps Fanon is closer. Frantz Fanon translated for feminist use. In a crucial section of *Black Skins, White Masks* he imagines people crying out 'Look, a negro!' So we might find the fingers pointing - 'Look, a brown woman!' The shame, the torment, the turning, beseeching others. Stumbling, falling, the body splintering into a thousand shards. The body split open.

'I burst apart,' Fanon writes. 'Now the fragments have been put together again by another self.'²

What is this other self? What might this putting together of a racialised body mean? A body not male, but female, haunted by its femaleness, earth it cannot shed.

Who will put together a body torn by border crossings, skin marked by barbed wires, bandages hastily knotted, the body of a pariah woman?

Who will put together a dark body delighting in its own shadows, the multiplicity of its selves, making for a freedom from the prison house of history.

Why do I conceive of the female artist like this? Perhaps because I think that she needs to slip her flesh in order to sing, yet it is only by being drawn back into a larger, more spiritual body, the mouths of many others, the hands that labor in the sweat shops, on the street corners, in the market places and yes, in the academies, that she can truly be.

This world is filled with unquiet borders. It would be a terrible error - too grave to be borne - to think that our capacity for art can lose us our bodies. Bodies banned, beaten, jailed, twisted in childbirth, bodies that are the sites of pleasure, of ecstasy. Female bodies that can babble, break into prophetic speech, rant, whisper, sing. And slowly but surely this leads to what I have called elsewhere, 'a back against the wall aesthetic.'³

For the woman artist who confronts the borders her body must cross, racial, sexual borders, is forced to invent a form that springs out without canonical support, a rough and ready thing, its order crude, its necessity beyond the purchase of self-invention. And there is something in this species of imagemaking, the body in pain or pleasure, crying out in its theatre of sense, that a postcolonial thought at the brink of the twenty first century, must seek out, learn from.

Meena Alexander is Professor of English and Women's Studies, Hunter College and the Graduate Centre, City University of New York. Meena Alexander is a poet and writer of prose. Her new volume of poems *Illiterate Heart* will be published in Spring 2002 by Triquarterly Books.

Notes

The concluding section (IV) of this essay first took shape in a different context: remarks I made at a plenary session: 'Poetry, Feminism and the Difficult World' for a conference on 'Poetry and the Public Sphere' April, 1997, Rutgers University. These remarks were later printed as a brief prose reflection where I imagine the poet Mirabai crossing into present day New York City. ('Unquiet Borders') Crab Orchard Review: Special issue on Asian American Literature Spring/ Summer 1998).

1. Kamala Das 'Loud Posters' *The Old Playhouse and Other Poems* (New Delhi: Orient Longman, 1973) p.47
2. Frantz Fanon *Black Skins, White Masks* (New York: Grove Press, 1967) p.109
3. Meena Alexander 'Skin with Fire Inside: Indian Women Writers' *The Shock of Arrival: Reflections on Postcolonial Experience* (Boston: Southend Press, 1996) p.170

For more information on Chila Kumari Burman see Lynda Nead *Chila Kumari Burman: Beyond Two Cultures* (London: Kala press, 1995).

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