

GWYNETH TAMBE-GREEN

Self-Actualisation, Kitsch Freedom and Indian Matriarchs

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*"We second generation immigrants have the privilege of self-actualisation. We make sculptures, direct films, write plays, novels, memoirs and poems about not having a home, of trying to find a home, of being between two types of home, what is home, of how we all feel ugly, of the mixed relationships we enter into with white people, losing our language from a culture we had a tenuous hold of in the first place, we tell the story of being acted upon, we speak from the position of the victim." - Sheena Patel, I'm A Fan*

There are many reasons why people migrate to "Great" Britain. Opportunity is one of those big vague words, its meaning very much in focus to the migrant, but to the rest of us is a little less tangible.

Across oceans, black and brown people find themselves both roaming and running. Some seek out education, work or new experiences, whilst others flee from danger to rebuild for themselves and their children a life where safety is guaranteed. Facing assimilation, stop and search, and the threat of deportation are only a few in the endless list of challenges that these parents must work to overcome, and hopefully minimise the risks for their children upon leaving the nest that was meticulously built for them.

So you can imagine the relief, when – as a second or third generation (im)migrant – your parents and/or grandparents and/or aunts and uncles eventually came around to your brilliant idea: *I'm going to be an artist!*

Sheena Patel (slay) assigns a certain privilege to second generation (im)migrants, those whose parents work tirelessly to ensure the "lower" levels of Maslow's hierarchy of needs (physiological, safety, love and belonging, esteem) are guaranteed within the bedrock of the home, leaving room for children to explore the pleasures of self-actualisation. This notion concerns the acknowledgement and ambitious follow-through of one's creative potentialities, an attempt to reach one's true self. Fandom both intersects with and transcends this logic. Characteristic of fan culture, escapism encapsulates the same visualisation necessary for self-actualisation, although conversely finds itself disinterested in the praxes of the everyday and devoid of the realism of earthly ambition. The quixotic nature of fandom meeting the privilege of self-actualisation from a vantage point of British-South-Asian-T(w)eendom, is the mood with which Athen and Nina's bedroom-scapes are set.

Self-actualisation, explored through aesthetic ambition, regards Athen and Nina as both artists and fans respectively. They present themselves as fans of Bollywood actresses like Aishwarya Rai Bachchan, their mothers and grandmothers, each other, and legends like Fergie [a note to *my* mother, that's not Sarah Ferguson].

Pertaining to *their* mothers, Athen and Nina inherit the legacy of Indian homemaking, recontextualising notions of migration, matriarchs, and the diasporic experience. These themes are manifested through the kitsch freedom of fan girls and British teens coming of age in the noughties. Their practice interrogates belonging and legitimacy through a playful disruption of the gallery space. Athen and Nina traverse the bounds of white cube-dom through cheeky motifs and embedded intimacy: an artwork "labelled" £4.99 like an off-licence chocolate bar, postcards hung precariously on rows of nail varnish, and secret biro scrawled notes hidden behind frames. In one show, a pair of flip-flops were found neatly tucked under a wall. To me a sweet though largely aesthetic experience, to South Asians an intricate level of coded intimacy.

It is a particularly powerful gesture, to make oneself at home in a gallery, and to make oneself at home, period. The intentional act of decoration, one an inherited practice from the migrant's journey, is integral to the way in which Athen and Nina make homemaking in the gallery space possible. Indeed, any space the pair approach, be it a white cube gallery, an artist-led group show, exterior notice board commission or the artists' own bedrooms, is thought of with an anti-hierarchical aesthetic and critical rigour. Likewise, all materials with which the artists adorn - whether lent, gifted,

bought, borrowed or found in a puddle outside the Marquis of Granby - are treated as equally precious and equally humble. Art materials, sure, but *decor*, absolutely.

At its heart, their practice is the exploration of humility, homage and heritage, encrusted with diamantes, temporary tattoos and naff badges that dream of New York City. Glamour, a key term in the pair's visual vocabulary, encapsulates both nostalgia and ambition, referring to Y2K baroque and the ornamentation of 1960s and 1970s Bollywood. Interwoven in this aesthetic conversation are notions of sacrality and worship, as objects and arrangements exist as traces of both religious and fan practices. Appearing throughout their work, shrine assemblages imitate that of their grandmothers and their former teenage selves, in turn forming an act of threefold idolisation towards the former, the latter and the images of women across Indian and British-Indian identities. Athen and Nina consolidate a profuse collection of cross-cultural references and ephemera in order to position girl[hood] as curator and hone an aesthetic goal of ambition. Their practice exists as a visual legacy honouring their mothers and grandmothers, Indian matriarchs and arbiters of the domestic space. A beautiful homage to the women who have made their artistry possible. Notions of legacy intersect with the artists' ephemeral language as reference constitutes both a material and conceptual throughline. DVD cases, CD sleeves, and badges situate the fan and their icon in conversation with each other. This dialogue concerns the production of culture interwoven with notions of worship. Through portraiture – Jesminda Bharna (portrayed by Parminder Nagra), Rekha, Konnie Huq, Charlie XCX – the gesture of reference emerges.

Love and labour are central to this homage. In *Princess and Off-Licence* (2023), Huq is etched around, and adorned with stickers and their peeling edges. Used keyrings proclaiming their love for big cities are dangled, and tenderly placed is the youthful curiosity of a glittery pink lipgloss. In *Off-Licence*, Huq's image is secured with four bindis, one on each corner, she opens a fluffy pink jacket to reveal a white vest with a graphic logo that reads "OFFLicence", a nod to Bossmen up and down the country, a cultural icon, a national treasure. Likewise, Huq, a national treasure in her own right, is an all too familiar face in British childhoods throughout the 1990s and 2000s. The presence of such icons serve to remind us that British South Asians are so often the subject of our teary nostalgia.

Forgot how much you loved Konnie Huq? Me too.