

Dr. Alice Correia

A.Correia2@salford.ac.uk

Diasporic Returns: Three Perspectives on Partition

We seek to return to the beginnings, no longer our own¹

At the start of his essay, ‘Imaginary Homelands’, Salman Rushdie described an old photograph taken in 1946 of a three-storey house, built in an unusual architectural style, with “round towers in two corners, each wearing a pointy tiled hat”.² It is a very particular house in Bombay, and the very existence of the photograph and its placement within Rushdie’s London office, point to a myriad of memories and histories, both personal and communal. The photograph of his former family home, taken before he was born, caused Rushdie to reflect that migrants from South Asia –whether their journeys were forced or voluntary- ‘are haunted by some sense of loss, some urge to reclaim, to look back’, even though ‘our physical alienation from India almost inevitably means that we will not be capable of reclaiming precisely the thing that was lost’.³ He concluded that the photograph ‘reminds me that it’s my present that is foreign, and that the past is home albeit a lost home in a lost city in the mists of lost time’.⁴

Revealing a sense of loss that is rooted in a history in which he did not partake, and routed through multiple relocations, Rushdie’s meditation on the talismanic photograph of a home that was present, absent, and imagined, is a useful starting point for considering the ways in which global South Asian diaspora artists have engaged with the specificities of their cultural inheritance and the causes of their current geographical locations. Contemporary visual artists Nilofar Akmut, Zarina Bhimji and Navin Rawanchaikul have each explored issues of displacement, rootedness, and the emotional pull of an imagined home. While these themes may be familiar within the frame of a diasporic aesthetic as described by Rushdie, for the purposes of this study, I suggest that the pull of home discernable in the work of these artists is inflected with the specific and continuing legacy of the 1947 Partition of India. In selected artworks, created at a distance from their ancestral, familial homelands, and exhibited in Britain, Akmut, Bhimji and Rawanchaikul variously address the intertwined histories of colonial British India and the independent nationalisms of India and Pakistan, and the geo-

politics of living in the diaspora. Collectively, their diasporic narratives highlight the global ramifications of the 1947 Partition of the Indian subcontinent. Indeed, it is noteworthy that Rushdie identified his photograph as dating to 1946, locating his family in Bombay at a moment prior to the Partition of British India, the formation of India and Pakistan, and his family's migration "to the unmentionable country across the border".⁵ His photograph is thus redolent of a moment before – denoting a time and place prior to cataclysmic migrations and the relocation of South Asian diasporas across the globe, when 'home' was both a tangible object and stable concept. As such, Rushdie's photograph reminds us that traces of the traumatic legacies of Partition may be found in, and on, the most seemingly prosaic of images.

The concept of diaspora has been subject to much debate within the fields of cultural studies, anthropology and, indeed, art history, and confusingly, it holds an unstable position of being a verb, noun and adjective. As an action, diaspora is the physical act of dispersal or scattering of people from one place to another. Diaspora has also become the name of communities created by that act of dispersal. To be diasporic, or to live in a diasporic condition is to have experienced trans-national movement and retain some form of attachment to an original home (through language, religion, cultural practices, for example). It is also to share an experience of being positioned as an 'outsider' within the place of relocation. To complicate matters, children within diasporic communities need not necessarily have undergone the act diaspora, but may have inherited diasporic memories from their family and community.⁶ Put succinctly, diaspora can describe "any population that is considered 'deterritorialized' or 'transnational' – that is, which has originated in a land other than which it currently resides in, and whose social, economic, and political networks cross borders of nation-states or, indeed, span the globe".⁷

Nilofar Akmut was born in Britain in 1956, while Zarina Bhimji was born in Uganda, a former British colony, in 1963; at various times they have been identified as Pakistani and Indian respectively. Navin Rawanchaikul is of Hindu-Punjabi origin and his parents settled in Chiang Mai, Thailand, after the 1947 Partition. Since the early 1990s, these second-generation diasporic artists have exhibited Partition-related work in Britain, and considered together retrospectively, those displays prompt a re-evaluation of the placement of Partition narratives within, and importance to, both British history and the histories of South Asia. Although academically Partition has "often be treated as a disciplinary divide",⁸ marking the

end of British colonialism and the starting point of new nationalist histories, arguably Britain's relationship with the subcontinent did not neatly end at the conclusion of Imperial rule. It is thus the contention of this paper that diasporic testimonies of Partition given by Akmut, Bhimji and Rawanchaikul should be understood as constitutive of multiple, overlapping global histories. This is not to enact a form of neo-imperialism and claim ownership of Partition history for British history, but rather to acknowledge that Partition also changed British culture and society. Although Britain remains largely estranged from the intricacies of its colonial past, the creation of South Asian diasporas is undeniably a colonial legacy; As the Sri Lankan scholar Ambalavaner Sivanandan reminded us, "we came to Britain (and not to Germany for instance) because we were occupied by Britain. Colonialism and immigration are part of the same continuum – we are here because you were there".⁹ As such, the presentation of Partition narratives within British exhibition spaces denoted the continued interaction between, and interdependency of, British and South Asian identities, and should be regarded as interventions in exclusionary conceptions of nationhood, whether in Britain or South Asia.

Exhibited in Leeds and Birmingham in the early 1990s, Akmut's work conveyed Partition memories inherited from family members, or found within the historical archival; she considered the place and role of women in the subcontinent, while also challenging stereotypes of South Asian womanhood in Britain. Akmut and Bhimji both attended art colleges in London during the early 1980s, and their early works were similarly informed by British feminism and Black identity politics. As the centrepiece of her solo show at the Whitechapel Gallery, London, in 2012, Bhimji's filmic work *Yellow Patch* was punctuated by fragments of archival Partition testimony and indirect meditations on its legacies which splintered and fractured the film's superficially calm tenor; reminiscent of Rushdie's lament, Bhimji explored the impossibility of returning to a homeland that is both temporally and psychically distant.¹⁰ In contrast, Rawanchaikul's work presented Partition as a positive and productive experience. His two works exhibited in Tate Britain's 2009 exhibition *Altermodern* directly and indirectly addressed the legacies of Partition and, within the context of that gallery space, obliquely prompted a consideration of the global reach and repercussions of Britain's colonial intervention in (South) Asia. While I do not wish to suggest that Akmut, Bhimji and Rawanchaikul address Partition equally, or that it is necessarily a motivating thematic found throughout of their work, but in considering specific

artworks through their variously overt and elliptical references to Partition, it becomes evident how diaspora artists can reframe national histories as transnational.

When considering the legacies of Partition from diasporic South Asian perspectives it is perhaps useful to identify that Indian engagement with its diasporas is both complicated and sometimes contradictory.¹¹ Identified as foreign in their relocated homes, diasporas and their histories are inherently at odds with the formulation of homogenous national identities. But while diasporas are often understood as constituted through processes of exclusion in their site of relocation, is it possible that diaspora memories and experiences are also excluded from the narratives of the ordinary home? As N. Jayaram has identified, “for those who left ‘India’ before Partition (in 1947) and their descendants, the reference point is ‘the subcontinental India’ (which included the present-day Pakistan and Bangladesh); whereas for those who left ‘India’ after Partition, it is the political state of India as it exists now. For many who experienced Partition, the reference point is often ambivalent”.¹²

If diasporic allegiances to South Asia are uncertain, it is also arguable that in the field of Partition studies, engagement with the experiences of global South Asian diasporas has been limited, mirroring perhaps, the post-Independence drive to geo-political coherence. For example, following Independence, Prime Minister Nehru asserted that Indians abroad should either take Indian citizenship (and accept the consequences if that decision impacted negatively on their treatment abroad) or renounce it,¹³ and Partition scholarship developed according to nationalist agendas which excluded overseas communities from the articulation of national histories. Indeed, in 2003, Mahbubur Rahman and Willem van Schendel observed that the study of Partition and its legacies has been hindered by blinkered nationalist narratives, with scholars in the region focusing on the experiences of their own home nation, so that ‘Over the past half-century, three rival nationalisms have fashioned and refined their own interpretations of Partition, and these are not compatible’.¹⁴ This “three country perspective” has persisted in Partition scholarship, even in studies seeking to decentre nationalist narratives and prioritize previously excluded testimonies.¹⁵ For although the parameters of Partition studies have broadened considerably since the early 1990s, to include “subaltern, feminist, literary and psycho-social readings”,¹⁶ and has undergone temporal reconceptualization - Bhaskar Sarkar has argued for an “elastic conceptualisation of Partition, extending backward and forward in time”, in order to highlight “the way in which seeming disparate historical moments congeal in the popular imagination around the fulcrum of

1947”¹⁷, while Vazira Fazila-Yacoobali Zamindar has posited Partition not as a singular event, but as process¹⁸ - engagement with the experiences of Partition amongst globally dispersed diasporas remains scarce.

Where Partition and the creation of diasporas has been discussed in recent scholarship, it is mainly in relation to the movement of people in the immediate aftermath of Independence, across the newly established borders of India and East and West Pakistan; these diasporas may be understood as locally situated, internal to the subcontinent.¹⁹ For example, in her study of Partition literary fiction, Rosemary Marangoly George argues for an understanding of Partition through diaspora narratives, noting that themes of “loss, homesickness, trauma, travel, the longing for return”, which are central to Partition fictions, are also “habitually identified with diasporic aesthetics”.²⁰ Nonetheless, despite her call to expand the scope of Partition studies to include, for example, gendered accounts of 1947, her thesis remains reliant on the notion that Partition and its legacies are located within the subcontinent: “the birth of the two nations in this case cannot be separated from the birth of the two diasporas, which were wrenched from one home to a more ‘fitting’ home”.²¹ Even as she utilised theories of diaspora, Marangoly George was bounded by an understanding of Partition as occurring in, and affecting (only) two nations. It is the proposition here that not only did Partition establish many more than two sets of diasporas, which are dispersed globally, but that these global South Asian diasporas are necessarily constitutive of Partition narratives. Thus, the work of diasporic artists necessarily demands a reconsideration of the geographical limitations of Partition studies. The work of Akmut, Bhimji and Rawanchaikul demonstrate that the wounds inflicted by Partition traverse the geographical constraints commonly found in Partition scholarship, which has been preoccupied with the cartographic borderlines.²² we must therefore think of its aftereffects on people beyond the geo-political territories of India, Pakistan and Bangladesh, and consider the experiences of those who had left the region prior to 1947 and were subsequently unable to return home; to those who left the region in 1947; and, as in the case of this paper, those second (and subsequent) generation diasporas who were born outside the region and who may, in fact, have never lived in South Asia.

If globally situated South Asian diasporas are deterritorialized and transnational, is also possible to deterritorialize Partition? What is at stake here is the possibility that diasporic narratives and perspectives, although geographically distant from Partition’s foci, may nonetheless be recognised as not only authentic expressions of Partition, but integral to our

understanding of it. If this proposition is deemed challenging, it may be because diasporas rebuke notions of essential or absolute identities and are therefore incompatible with nationalistic and deterministic approaches to history.²³ If, as is generally agreed, diasporas upturn or contest the possibility of a homogenous identity, arguably, they also disrupt the linear and coherent constructions of the past that are so imperative to the construction of national histories. It is the contention here that diasporas, whether they are recognised as doing so or not, shape and inform the histories of not only the new home, but also the one left behind. As such, for the purposes of this discussion, the work of artists Akmut, Bhimji and Rawanchaikul insist that not only can Partition stories can be articulated from beyond the region, they impact and inform our understanding of histories of the region, in addition to supplementing understandings of histories of British colonialism. Thus we should perhaps think of Partition histories as comprised of constellations of overlapping experiences and interpretations, whereby the presentation and interpretation of Partition by artists living, working or exhibiting, in Britain, for example, will be substantively similar and different from those who have been raised within a nationalist milieu.

“How do we embark on a feminist reading of Partition?”²⁴

In 1947, members of Nilofar Akmut’s family were, as she puts it, “thrown into turmoil and conflict regarding migration” because they were Muslim.²⁵ Akmut’s maternal family were originally from Delhi, her father’s family from Uttar Pradesh. At the time of Partition some of her family opted for Pakistan immediately, while others “refused to leave until forcibly ejected”.²⁶ Her mother’s family were held in the Red Fort in Delhi and then herded on to cattle trains destined for Pakistan. Chance and good fortune meant that they evaded much of the violence that was perpetrated, although she has recalled one female cousin bore the bodily scars of the journey for the rest of her life.²⁷ Over the course of her career, Akmut has sought to gain greater understanding of the experiences endured by not only her family, but all those who were violently dislocated, and who suffered from conflicted loyalties as they moved from one side of the newly established border to the other. Indeed, having been forced into exile, on arrival in Pakistan Akmut’s family were officially identified as migrants, so that “instead of nationality and identity, her inheritance is statelessness and provisionality as she is denied the official right to belong to either her ancestral land, India, or the new land to which her family was forced to move”.²⁸ She studied at the National College of Arts in Lahore and then in London during the 1980s, at Byam Shaw School of Art, and later the

Slade. It was during her time in London that she was exposed to feminist theory, and although she trained as a sculptor at the Slade, she became interested in the possibilities of photography, while working as an assistant to Jo Spence.

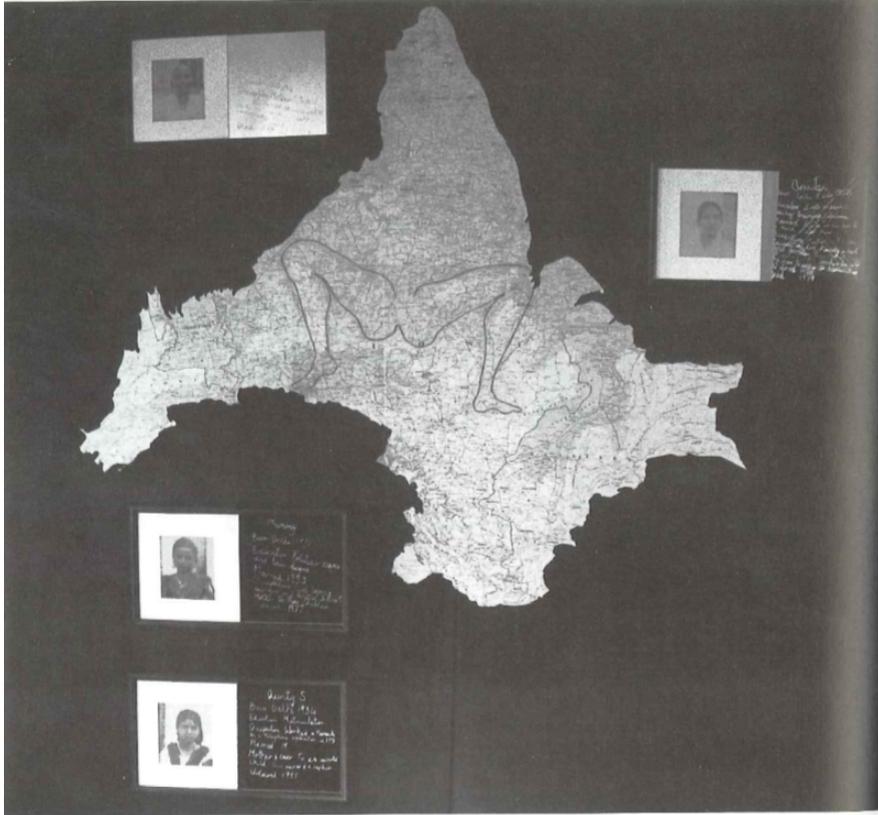


Fig.1

Nilofar Akmut, *Mapping Ourselves*, 1993, mixed media installation,

In 1993, Nilofar Akmut was included in the exhibition *Keepin' it Together*, staged at The Pavilion Women's Visual Arts Centre, Leeds. The exhibition was organised by Chila Kumari Burman and Vi Hendrickson, and sought to celebrate and “reinforce the strength and diversity of Black women's creativity”.²⁹ Many of the exhibiting artists, who included Caroline Jariwala, Samena Rana and Veena Stephenson, presented work that addressed the role of the matriarch within the family; as Vi Hendrickson noted in the exhibition catalogue, “Our mothers and grandmothers pass on values and ideas, nurture and sustain us and are charged with defending and keeping families and culture alive”.³⁰ Akmut's contribution to the exhibition was *Mapping Ourselves* (fig1.), a multifaceted wall-mounted mixed media work that comprised an inverted map of the Indian subcontinent; to the visible political borderlines of the map, Akmut added a pair of disembodied female legs. This inscribed map

was accompanied by a set of photographs presenting female family members, and texts recounting their biographies. The portrait photographs of her great-grandmother, grandmother, mother and aunt were cropped and enlarged from a family photograph showing the women together on the occasion of her mother's wedding. But like Rushdie's photograph of home, Akmut's family photograph concealed deeper, more painful, memories. This was the first photograph taken of the family after they had settled in Pakistan and Akmut has recalled that the image had become significant because older family photographs taken before this moment had been lost: abandoned with other possessions during the traumatic expulsion from their homes in India.

The biographic texts included in the installation recounted the birth and marriage dates, as well as the educational and professional achievements, of each of the women. These texts were inscribed onto blackened mirrors so that on reading, fragments of the audience were reflected back in the lettering. In these texts Akmut sought to capture both public and private personas of her subjects in order to demonstrate the remarkable and yet prosaic experiences of women in mid-twentieth century India. Positioned alongside the map, which literally presented the world turned upside-down, the women provide orientating anchors against a geo-political space that was disorientated. Although the map made visible the borderlines of Pakistan, India, and Bangladesh, Akmut discombobulated its authority and its modes of control and separation; she proposed that the construct of the nation state was introduced to the subcontinent via colonial interventions, and is at odds with indigenous constructions of identity that start with the family, the village, the region.

Positioning ordinary women within and without the frame of the upside-down arena of colonial partition and Indo-Pakistani post-colonial relations is to challenge official narratives of Partition that prioritized nationalist projections and their male agents- the great men of history. In their 1998 publication *Borders and Boundaries: Women in India's Partition* Kamla Bhasin and Ritu Menon noted that women's stories had hitherto been marginal to mainstream narratives of the Independence movement and partition, and were nominally told as supplements to male-centred histories. Tai Yong Tan and Gyanesh Kudaisya have similarly noted that historiographies of 1947 have focused on themes regarding the intentions of the British at the end of empire, and the respective narratives of independence and the Birth of Nations, focusing on the actions of male politicians.³¹ As such, the voices and stories of women on whom partition was inflicted have been (until recently) subsumed; and although

some women, and particularly violence against women are included in official narratives, they are also invisible: “their experience of this historical event has neither been properly examined nor assigned historical value”.³² Central to the difficulty of assigning historical import to the experiences of women has been the denials of those traumas³³ and Akmut herself recognised the difficulty of fully knowing the truth of her family’s partition story. She has stated, “I can never claim to have a complete knowledge of my family’s history. Apart from the complexity, deep painful silences surrounded the fearful traumas inflicted on their lived reality”.³⁴

Nonetheless, Akmut’s use of the female image and the inscription of the disembodied legs onto the map, may be contextualised through the practice in Indian visual culture of deploying the female body as a personified visualisation of the geo-political nation. Sumathi Ramaswamy has outlined the tradition of eliding the geographical entity of the national landscape with that of the female body, in the form of Mother India, identifying how the cartographic map was humanised, and as such, was better able to solicit loyalty and love for the national ‘motherland’.³⁵ This nationalist visual culture took root at a time when, as Marangoly George has noted, “violence against women (in the form of sexual assault, mutilation, murder, and abduction) rose to unprecedented levels”, while also noting that “this gendered violence has mostly been read as metonymic of the violation of the land”.³⁶ As such, cartographic contour lines rearticulated as bodily forms may be symbolic of different aspects of the female experience of Partition, from the rape and degradation suffered; to the strong, self-reliant women who survived physically challenging dangers; to the personification of Mother India, symbolically ‘birthing’ the nation. This being the case, Akmut’s the ‘bodyscape’ not only addressed the visual tradition of Mother India, but subverted it by assigning value to personal stories that contested the strict limits of womanhood within the national imaginary, and insisted upon the articulation of violence endured by women during, and in the years after, Partition. Each component of the installation, the photographs, the biographies, and the splayed female legs inscribed onto the map, insisted upon the importance of quotidian female experience of Partition. Indeed, Akmut has explained, “These legs represent not only the rape and pillage of the Indian subcontinent, but also the protection offered to the womanfolk escaping from possible execution. In spite of being permanently cut off from their roots, the woman continued a history of unending struggle, politically and intellectually”.³⁷

In Britain, from a temporal and geographic distance, Akmut re-orientated the locus of diasporic feminist South Asian identity formation. By focusing on the women in her family and their life stories, she questioned how we make sense of the fragmented nature of history and the remnants of identities and subjectivities that are scattered geographically. Her work notes the deficit of cultural memory and the exclusion of female voices from Independence narratives and creatively redeploys the remains of familial memory to highlight the paucity of (what she has called) *herstories* in narratives of Partition. These themes were to preoccupy Akmut throughout the 1990s, and she reused the inverted map in her installation for the group exhibition *Transition of Riches*. Staged at Birmingham Museum and Art Gallery, the exhibition was part of the South Asian Visual Arts Festival, which ran from September to December 1993, and which showcased the work of over fifty artists of South Asian descent, in eighteen venues throughout the West Midlands.³⁸ *Transition of Riches* included the work of Said Adrus, Nilofar Akmut, Chila Burman, Jagjit Chuhan, Amal Ghosh, Sarbjit Natt, Anuradha Patel and Symrath Patti; the works in the exhibition were not necessarily linked stylistically, but rather sought to present a cross section of art created by British artists of South Asian origin.³⁹



Fig.2, Nilofar Akmut, *Partition*, 1993, mixed media installation (detail)



Fig.3, Nilofar Akmut, *Partition*, 1993, mixed media installation (detail)

In *Transition of Riches* Akmut presented a multi-part, multi-sensory installation, titled *Partition*, that included photography, sculpture, light and sound, and which explored the histories of the Indian Independence Movement and the subsequent Partition of the subcontinent in 1947 from a feminist perspective. Positioned in a corridor-like area within the Birmingham Gallery called The Bridge, Akmut made use of the transitory space by creating oppositions: on one wall was a documentary image of Mohandas Karamchand Gandhi on the Salt March of April 1930, together with black and white photographs of the sea near Karachi (fig.2). Tubes of salt mounted on the wall traversed the space between the photographs, while sacks of salt were positioned on the ground in front. On the opposite wall was a light-box showing an inverted map of the subcontinent, positioned above three large colour photographs of fire, taken during a performance by the artist in Germany (fig.3). Sculptural elements also accompanied these images: two cylindrical columns, capped with illuminated duratrans (transparencies) were inscribed with the testimonies of women who had experienced Partition (discussed below); and an open vitrine contained hessian bags, each inscribed with the name of an important female participant in the Independence movement.



Fig.4, Nilofar Akmut, *Partition*, 1993, mixed media installation (detail)

Adjacent to these oppositional groupings of photographs and sculptures were two sets of polaroid photographs, positioned on either side of the dividing corridor. Arranged in rectangular grids, one set showed the faces of seventy-two women, while the other showed the women from the rear (fig.4). Akmut took these portrait photographs while undertaking an oral history project, for which she spoke to women of different ages, all of whom had experienced, or had inherited memories of, Partition; testimonies were relayed textually on the sculptural elements of the installation. Within each of the photographic grids was a column of burnt squares, which on closer inspection were recognisable as thick stacks of archival newspaper clippings reporting Partition. The juxtaposition of documented histories and Akmut's oral testimony project forced a reconsideration of who and what is included in the archive, and as Sonali Fernando argued, the installation as a whole presented "visceral memories that live in the interstices of official history".⁴⁰

As a whole, *Partition* was concerned with the ways in which women's stories have been omitted from history, and consequently, how South Asian women are perceived in Britain. As Tania Guha noted, Akmut's work:

“pays tribute to the heroic and important contributions made by South Asian women during the struggle for Independence. Bags of salt and documentary photographs of Gandhi's Salt March in 1930 allude to the systematic obliteration of women freedom fighters from textbook versions of Indian history. Scrawled on hessian parcels are the names of some forgotten protagonists — amongst them Kalama Nehru, Kal Pana Dutt, Sardjini Naldu, Rani Lakshmi Bai of Jhansi, Jahanara Shahnawal and Vijaya Lakshmi Pandit. In a British society that still portrays Asian women as voiceless puppets, afflicted by extreme shyness and overbearing fathers and husbands, the parcels become a potent metaphor for the establishment's unwillingness to recognise the achievements of women who clearly exploded these stereotypes”.⁴¹

Each of the named hessian parcels contained an object that Akmut imagined could have belonged to the identified women. The possible wrapping and unwrapping of the parcels indicates her interest in the ways stories may be hidden and revealed; if the role of women in the Independence movement is under-acknowledged or excluded from official narratives, then Akmut's installation replicated that opacity in order to criticise it. In highlighting the existence and agency of those women, and indeed all of the photographed women affected by Partition, the installation not only challenged the omissions of women from patriarchal (nationalist) histories, but also confounded orientalisng stereotypes of Asian femininity in Britain. In her essay of 1984 for the *Feminist Review*, Parita Trivedi had challenged her reader to “conjure up a picture of an Asian woman”. She asked “Have the words ‘passive, submissive’, been part of your portrayal?” Trivedi argued that British-Asians needed to critically enact “new imaginings” of South Asian womanhood.⁴² Akmut was part of a generation of artists who took up this challenge, refusing to conform to visual discourses in Britain, which, as Pratibha Parmar observed, stereotyped Asian women as “meek and passive victims”.⁴³

“Is the loss mine as well as theirs?”⁴⁴

Zarina Bhimji's film and photographic works similarly raise questions regarding the nature of diasporic trauma and the contested nature of female identity post-Partition. Like Akmut, Bhimji came to prominence in the mid-1980s as one of a number of diasporic British artists engaging with issues of identity politics and belonging through photography and installation.⁴⁵ Born into an Indian, Muslim family in Uganda, Bhimji's locational identity has

undergone multiple displacements. At once at home in Britain, but exiled from the place of her birth, and separated from her ancestral homeland, Bhimji's film and photographic works consider the diasporic condition, of negotiating the simultaneity of plural identities and addressing the contingency of home. In her first film *Out of Blue*, 2002, recorded in Uganda, Bhimji constructed a narrative of distant homelands, denoting an attachment to a past home that like Rushdie's, was lost to her.⁴⁶

When it was exhibited at the Whitechapel Gallery, London, in 2012, *Yellow Patch*, 2011, was presented as the second in a then-incomplete trilogy of films in which Bhimji utilised her own migratory experiences, and those of her parents and grandparents, as a starting point.⁴⁷ In returning to her birth-country in *Out of Blue*, and to what might be described as her Indian mother-country, in *Yellow Patch*, Bhimji took imaginative returns to homelands that were both remembered and inherited. In the catalogue accompanying her Whitechapel exhibition, the art historian TJ Demos explained that Bhimji's father was born in Gujarat, India, and at the age of eleven had travelled with his parents to East Africa. Filmed in four locations in India, *Yellow Patch* nominally traces that journey, but I suggest, places that migration within the context of India's Independence movement, and the final days of the British Empire. The film comprises three sections, broadly encompassing an opening sequence filmed in a series of empty offices; an abandoned and crumbling palace apparently located in or near a desert; and culminating in a sequence depicting Mandiv Port, Gujarat, and concludes with a wistful view of the sea. Throughout the film Bhimji intersperses slow panning sequences with static moments, while hybrid soundtracks combine archival audio clips, local sounds, and ambient music, to create a palimpsest of referents.

Yellow Patch begins with a trumpeting fan-faire that is more commonly associated with the start of a military or ceremonial pageant, but what is presented visually does not meet those imaginative associations; the formal aural commencement of *Yellow Patch* is contrasted with the slow movement of the camera, and a scene of unusually stilled rotary fans in an unpopulated office. A panning shot tracing the length of a counter-top is overlain with sounds of typewriters, dogs barking, rainfall, music, bell chimes and car horns. Administrative offices filled with stacks of paper bundles, tied with faded red cord are punctuated by the crackle of a radio and the sound of an upper-class, male, English voice. Fragments of an address given by Lord Mountbatten, the last Viceroy of India, to the Constituent Assembly in Karachi on 14 August 1947 are heard; he announces the creation of the two new states,

claiming these are ‘not young nations, but heirs of old and proud civilisations’. Later, accompanying scenes of slowly rotating ceiling fans, Mountbatten’s voice can be heard saying, ‘Tomorrow two new sovereign states’ ... ‘Each a part of our history’ ... ‘no time to look back, only a time to look forward’. In paring these aural fragments and visual moments Bhimji re-articulates the historical archive with postcolonial testimony: in re-framing Mountbatten’s voice within the visual context of mounting administration, frayed paperwork and abandoned offices, she suggests the failure of those words, spoken at the time with apparent conviction. Together the words and images point to traumatic consequences of Independence/Partition, without the need for explicitly visualising those tragic events; the echo of the English voice reverberates with melancholy, of promises never fulfilled. Later, accompanying a sequence in what appears to be a boardroom, furnished with a table and chairs, fragments of a speech given by Gandhi on 2 April 1947 in New Delhi can be heard: ‘I was an insignificant “coolie” lawyer ... You know perhaps what is meant by the word “coolie”’.⁴⁸ In choosing these words by Gandhi, in which he recalled his experiences of being a British trained lawyer in South Africa, Bhimji gestures towards the intertwined histories of multiple nations and cultures; the histories of British colonisation and decolonisation and the ways in which racist identities are both ascribed and challenged.



Fig.5. Zarina Bhimji, *Yellow Patch*, 2011, thirty-five millimetre colour film and transfer to DVD, courtesy the artist and DACS, London

In the mid-section of *Yellow Patch* the location switches to the exterior façade of a crumbling Indian palace and the sound of the Westminster Quarters, the notes struck by Big Ben on the quarter hour; aurally the audience is located in London, while visually Bhimji relocates her viewer to Kutch, a remote desert region of Gujarat near the Pakistan border. Geographical

location and female agency are intertwined, while past and present come together in scenes of the once magnificent palace, now ruined. Inside, an elderly woman, seen from behind, sits gently rocking forward and back, as though waiting. Bhimji has stated that she was not interested in the woman as such, but rather, the shape of her hair: the way that her white hair, pulled back in a braid, tapered to a curled tip at the small of her back (fig.5).⁴⁹ The whiteness of her hair contrasts with her brown skin, and she is also dressed in white, the traditional Hindu colour of mourning. Although *Yellow Patch* has been explained through her father's departure from India and his journey to East Africa, it is perhaps significant that this woman is the sole person who appears in the film. The details of her dress and age, together with her position in a decaying house, suggest an emotional inertia: an inability to leave despite the deterioration that surrounds her, as though determined to remain in order to welcome back those long departed.

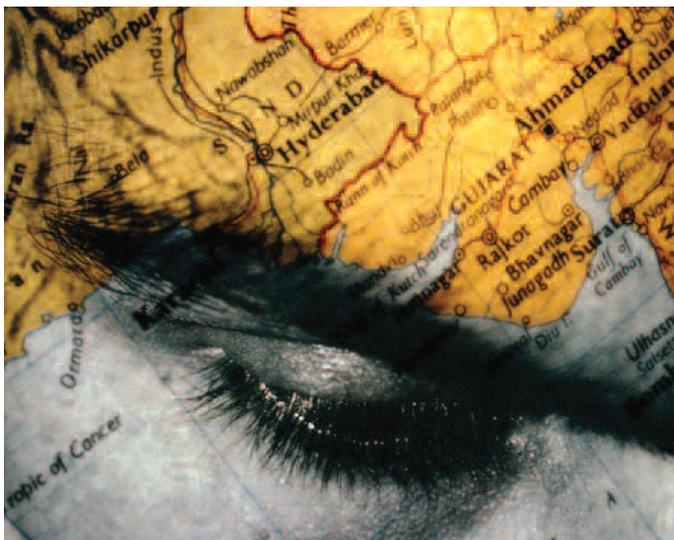


Fig.6, Zarina Bhimji, *Untitled*, 1990,

In her depiction of the old women, and in the film's associative rendering of landscape, home, and the female body – its metonymic rendering of mother as home- *Yellow Patch* has a precedent in an earlier work of 1990 (fig.6). In an untitled 35mm transparency, Bhimji elided the female body and a map of the India-Pakistan border.⁵⁰ The map, charting the regions of Sind and Gujarat located on either side of the red line separating India from Pakistan, is overlain with the image of a woman's downcast face. Kobena Mercer observed that in this work, Bhimji presented a self portrait “that created a palimpsest of cartographic fragments of the Indian/Pakistan border... to evoke the ‘worlding’ of post-colonial subjectivity on the part of a voyager already twice removed from her familial origins of *patria* in the sub-

Continent”.⁵¹ Although Mercer used the term *patria* (fatherland), in 2012 Bhimji explained that this borderland, known as the Rann of Kutch, “is a place I associate with my mother”, going on to describe that the region as overwhelmingly beautiful despite its “desolate and barren appearance”.⁵² Significantly, she explained that during her research for *Yellow Patch* this space “helped me to think of the Partition of the sub-continent in 1947 which separated Kutch from its close neighbour Sind, severing age-old ties between hitherto closely connected regions”.⁵³



Fig.7. Zarina Bhimji, *Yellow Patch*, 2011, thirty-five millimetre colour film and transfer to DVD, courtesy the artist and DACS, London

The figure of the woman in the home is later contrasted in *Yellow Patch* with a white marble statue of Queen Victoria, Empress of India (fig.7). Slowly, the camera pans from a carved foot, up an elaborately decorated robe to the vandalised face of the Queen. This unfolding scene of violence is contrasted by the spatial imaginings of the soundscape; the sound of a cricket match, of willow striking leather, and the appreciative claps and calls of the players conjures mental images of an English village green, of men in white uniforms bound by a gentlemanly code of fair play. But Bhimji jolts the viewer from the bucolic imaginary with a presentation of iconoclasm and reminds us, as Salman Rushdie noted, ‘the problem for the English was that their history had essentially taken place overseas and so they could not understand its importance’.⁵⁴

Bhimji’s utilisation of archival sound recordings, visual signifiers of the British Empire, and locations on the borderzone, produces what David Company has called a series “of ongoing

moments”,⁵⁵ where each fragmentary detail adds to a composite that is never entirely whole. This unresolved sensibility was echoed by Bhimji in an interview about her work; discussing her preliminary research for *Yellow Patch* she asked “if the effects of Partition were ever forgiven? Many people died in the name of independence, hundreds of thousands of screams have been uttered and much has been lost. We have spoken before about the idea of belatedness: is the loss mine as well as theirs? These are the types of questions I ask myself during the making of the work”.⁵⁶ In preparing for her film, Bhimji undertook extensive historical research, much of which was presented at the Whitechapel exhibition; a vitrine contained her research notes, photographs, architectural plans. However, although underpinned by research and historical specificity, Demos has identified Bhimji’s approach to filmmaking as “a post documentary”, in that she “relinquishes information and factual presentation in order to probe the poetic and aesthetic elements of colour, texture and rhythm”.⁵⁷ For Demos, this form of “affective cinema” induces feelings that are both symptomatic and productive, concluding *Yellow Patch* is “a belated affective response informed by retrospective comprehension”.⁵⁸

Demos concluded his catalogue essay on *Yellow Patch* by suggesting that her film is “not a fatalistic condemnation of colonial tragedy, a pitiful expression of multigenerational grief... rather it is a celebration of the overcoming of difficult historical circumstances”.⁵⁹ Whether it is possible to regard *Yellow Patch* as a celebration is perhaps questionable; although there is indeed strength in Bhimji’s assembled fragments, which retell stories of British imperial histories and question post-Independence certainties, rather than be understood as a celebration, I suggest that the film conveys more a sense of reconciliation. Constructing her own fictive India, ‘Indias of the mind’,⁶⁰ Bhimji was able to “make explicit and speak of that which has been left unsaid”⁶¹ and move towards restorative understanding.

“many Thais and Indians have fallen in love”

In contrast, Navin Rawanchaikul’s work does seemingly contain a celebratory perspective, presenting Partition migrations as productive journeys that ultimately provided a safe home in an albeit distant land. Although best known for his collaborative, community based projects, which seek to negotiate “local circumstances and trends of globalisation”,⁶² an important strand of Rawanchaikul’s work is concerned with family history, identities and belonging; his mother’s family originated from Gujranwala, in what is now Pakistan, and his film *Hong Rub*

Khaek, 2008, and the large-scale mural painting, *Places of Rebirth*, 2009, exhibited in *Altermodern* at Tate Britain both dealt specifically with family, the construction of diasporic identities, and the ramifications of Partition.

Nicholas Bourriaud's curatorial project, *Altermodern* staged at Tate Britain in 2009 was the third iteration of the gallery's triennial exhibition of contemporary British art. Dispensing with a selection criteria based on nationality or geographic location, the exhibition provocatively posited the figure of the nomad as a useful way of understanding the contemporary artist, engaged in the extrapolation and interpretation of contemporary culture that was explicitly global, and therefore beyond national classification.⁶³ For Bourriaud, the altermodern, nomadic artist established connections between geographically distant places and diverse cultures, and travelled through time; they existed above and outside of nationalist agendas, essentialising narratives, or regressive localisms; the nomad was presented as always mobile, always at home everywhere. As Demos put it in the exhibition's catalogue, "nomadism embraces dislocation as a permanent home with lightness and joy".⁶⁴ However, Rawanchaikul's contributions to the exhibition arguably undermined this notion of the artist as periphrastic wanderer, being anchored as they are in very definite locations and diasporic experiences.



Fig.8, Navin Rawanchaikul, *Hong Rub Khaek*, 2008

Rawanchaikul's film *Hong Rub Khaek* (fig.8) meditated upon notions of belonging and, implicitly, the question of whether it is possible to ever be at home in a place that is not your

homeland. Translated from Thai, the title of the film means ‘visitor, or guest’s living room’, but the word ‘khaek’ also refers to the condition of being an ‘outsider’, and is used in Thailand to denote those of Indian origin. The film comprises interviews with seven Indian migrants living in Chiang Mai, who were of the same generation as Rawanchaikul’s parents; each speaker describes their experiences of leaving one home and establishing another.⁶⁵ The film is only eighteen minutes in duration, but each of his protagonists is given time to reflect on their identities and their own sense of belonging as Indians in Thailand. What becomes clear is that each speaker is aware of their status as a foreigner, and yet there is little sense of grief or melancholy, but rather an appreciation of the welcome they received from their Thai neighbours. Their places of origin are discussed, and the routes they took to Chiang Mai are identified, but all say they are happy in their adopted home. Indeed, one of the interviewees observes that, “many Thais and Indians have fallen in love and got married”. Significantly, Partition seeps into these narratives without being the driving force of the work. One man says “I came to Thailand in 1947”. Without elaborating, the words are redolent of what must have been a difficult journey, made amidst traumatic upheaval. The complexities of geographic and national affiliations post-Partition are also alluded to in the title frames providing biographical information about each speaker. The names of the interviewees are given, along with their place of birth, their nationality and religion: “Name: Amrik Lal Chugh, born: 1944, Peshawar, Pakistan (Formerly India), Nationality: Indian, Religion: Hindu”. The legacies of Partition mean that while some speakers are identified as Indian, their homeland is in Pakistan. A woman states, “There was no Pakistan or Hindustan back then”; the homelands that Rawanchaikul’s protagonists left as children are no longer the same, and they cannot return to the places they remember, as they are remembered.



Fig.9, Navin Rawanchaikul, *Places of Rebirth*, 2009, Acrylic on canvas, 219.7 x 720.1 cm, Solomon R. Guggenheim Museum, New York Guggenheim UBS MAP Purchase Fund, 2012

In 2008 Rawanchaikul made his first visit to Pakistan, and the place of his mother's birth. The highly coloured mural painting, *Places of Rebirth* (fig.9), narrates not only Rawanchaikul's overland journey from Thailand to Pakistan, but also that of his mother and great-grandfather, who travelled by train, ship, and foot, from Gujranwala, through India to Chiang Mai in the aftermath of Partition. Presented in the style of a Bollywood billboard poster, the painting presents a melange of imagery, while across the top of the painting, text reads, "A Journey to Border with Cheerful Celebration of Brotherhood... An Odyssey of Life... From remote villages of Punjab to Northern Thailand... Then a return after sixty years of wonder". In the centre of the painting Rawanchaikul is presented in a tuk-tuk passing through the gate at the India-Pakistan border at Wagah. He is flanked on one side by a Pakistan Ranger making hand gestures, and on the other side, a member of India's Border Security Force in the midst of a high-kick, part of the elaborate daily military ceremony that occurs at the border. Below this central image, Rawanchaikul is described as "a lonesome son of Hindu-Punjabi diaspora and product of cross-cultural negotiation", while on either side, the canvas is populated with reproductions of archival family photographs and identity cards, scenes of Rawanchaikul's journey, and vignettes more commonly associated with Partition migrations: a gaunt man crouched on a stone wall, his head in his hands; a procession of people and animals; a military presence protecting a steam engine.⁶⁶

Places of Rebirth could superficially be regarded as a manifestation of South Asian kitsch, with its lurid colours and textual hyperbole. But if Akmut installations pointed to a recovery of feminist Partition histories, which also challenged British preconceptions of South Asian femininity, and Bhimji's film gestured towards British complicity in the violent consequences of Partition, within the institutional framing of Tate Britain, Rawanchaikul's work encouraged (local) audiences to consider Partition beyond the territorial confines of South Asia, and to acknowledge the geographical reach and on-going legacies of British imperialism. Tracing his family's migratory routes, necessitated by the territorial allocations of the Radcliffe Line in 1947, and highlighting the presence of a South Asian diaspora in Thailand, Rawanchaikul's artworks went some way towards articulating Partition as comprising interdependent stories; we cannot consider these works without thinking across global geographies, historical temporalities and personal subjectivities, that include British colonialism, contemporary Thai identities, and the evocative pull of a South Asian homeland.

"overlapping territories, intertwined histories"⁶⁷

In his landmark study, *Culture and Imperialism*, Edward Said argued that cultures were neither “unitary or monolithic or autonomous”.⁶⁸ By considering the work of three diasporic South Asian artists and their engagements with the 1947 Partition of India, this paper has sought to broaden the composition of Partition studies beyond nationalist, historic and geographic specificities to include articulations from a deterritorialised diaspora. From a position of transnationalism, geographical and generational distance, the works of art by Akmut, Bhimji and Rawanchaikul resist carefully constructed (often) antagonistic, and partial nationalist narratives of Partition. Instead they point to hitherto sublimated stories regarding family, female agency, loss and survival; tell stories of borders and borderlands; highlighting the emotional pull of lost homelands while simultaneously acknowledging that it is impossible to return to an inherited memory of place. In trying to negotiate a space in which the South Asian diaspora can act creatively, Rushdie observed that, “Our identity is at once plural and partial”.⁶⁹ The Partition stories told by Akmut, Bhimji and Rawanchaikul may indeed, encapsulate this irresolute ambivalence; they variously utilise South Asian visual referents, depicting particular places, and quotidian Partition experiences, while simultaneously placing those stories within a global, historical context, participating in larger conversations about British colonialism and the continuing inheritances of British imperialism. Rather than quarantine cultures, these artworks by Akmut, Bhimji and Rawanchaikul instead acknowledge the contingency and interdependency of migrations, histories and identities. They highlight the importance of not only articulating diasporic narratives of Partition, but recognising their constitutive role in the narratives of South Asian, British, and indeed, global histories.

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