

# Too Rich a Soil

Arpita Shah, Maryam Wahid, Nilupa Yasmin

15 November 2019 — 19 April 2020



Exhibition guide

*Too Rich a Soil* brings together photographers Arpita Shah, Maryam Wahid and Nilupa Yasmin whose practices are rooted in the exploration of cultural identity. Through making work both about and in collaboration with their families and communities, these artists celebrate the rich and varied roles of women in society. This exhibition provides an opportunity to expand upon narratives around the Asian diaspora and in particular the roles and identities of women.

An exhibition developed in collaboration with GRAIN



Arpita Shah, 'Dastar', *Purdah – The Sacred Cloth*, © Arpita Shah

Cover Image ~ Arpita Shah, 'Chunni' *Purdah – The Sacred Cloth*, © Arpita Shah

# Arpita Shah

## *Purdah – The Sacred Cloth, 2013*

A selection of portraits from Arpita Shah's series *Purdah – The Sacred Cloth* presents contemporary women based in Scotland from a variety of South Asian backgrounds, who choose to practice the tradition of head covering or veiling. From the Persian word 'پرده', meaning 'to curtain', the term *Purdah* varies in use and meanings; it can refer literally to a piece of cloth, but is also used traditionally to signify the veiling, seclusion and privacy of women.

Created in 2013 whilst artist in residence on the Albert Drive Project at Tramway, Glasgow, Shah invited women living in the Pollokshields community to share items they considered important to them. With many women from across faiths choosing fabrics and headscarves as their significant belonging, Shah arranged to make portraits of the women wearing them.

The women in these portraits present a variety of head coverings, which they wear day to day, during worship, or at particular religious occasions. They range from Sikh women in *dastar* and *chunni*, to Hindu women in their *sarees* and Muslim women wearing the *niqab* and personal variations of the *hijab*.

The series seeks to enrich our understanding of the practice of *purdah* and redress common misconceptions around traditions of head covering and veiling. The portraits are accompanied by statements provided by each woman and transcribed in English, Punjabi, Hindi,

Urdu and Arabic, reflecting the varied identities of the women photographed. They provide further insight into the individual relationship each woman has with their sacred cloth and the varied practices of head covering and veiling.

Ramizah expresses how wearing the *tudong* makes her feel "comfortable and confident", whilst Kulvinder describes the *dastar*, as worn by both men and women in the Sikh faith, as "the crown on my head that empowers me to be a strong and confident woman". For Reshma, the *sari* provides links to her motherland which when she wears it "wraps me up and transports me back to India". Samina, explains how the *niqab* allows dialogue to be the focus enabling "people to really listen to what I have to say and for them not to judge me and my words, by the way I look."

*Purdah slowly unfolds the complex and intimate relationships that these women have with their sacred cloths, offering us a glimpse into its varied uses and interpretations across diverse cultural and spiritual worlds. (Arpita Shah, 2013)*

*Purdah – The Sacred Cloth* was commissioned by Tramway and Glas(s) Performance as part of the Albert Drive Project 2013, and first exhibited at Tramway in Glasgow in 2013.

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### Acknowledgements

Special thanks to all the women who contributed and were involved in the project and to Street Level Photoworks, Creative Scotland and Autograph ABP.



Maryam Wahid, 'Qamar, Photographer, Karachi', Ek Aurat Ka Safar, 2019 © Maryam Wahid

# Maryam Wahid

## *Ek Aurat Ka Safar, 2019*

*Ek Aurat Ka Safar* is a new body of work by Birmingham based photographer Maryam Wahid created in 2019 following the artist's first visit to her familial home of Pakistan. Titled in Urdu, the country's national language and used by the artist to interact with many of the women she met, the literal translation is *A Woman's Journey*.

The visit was facilitated by *Transforming Narratives*, a Culture Central initiative to support artistic exchange and develop creative dialogue between Birmingham, Pakistan and Bangladesh. Wahid's application to be included in the programme detailed her desire to carry out a research and development project focusing on women in Pakistan. She would aim to meet with and photograph as wide a range of women as possible from across generations, ethnic backgrounds and social classes.

The portraits selected by Wahid for inclusion in this series include women with diverse occupations such as teacher, artisan, police officer, architect, conservation scientist, maid, lawyer, as well as school children. The group of portraits are displayed as a scatter hang in the gallery space in an attempt to prevent a hierarchical structure. This strategy to provide equal representation is crucially important to the artist, who, having spent time with each of the women

to learn about their different journeys wishes to champion each of them and their contributions. As she explains:

*These women, like many women all over the world, are iconic for their determination and humility and emphasise that what women bring to the world can positively influence many generations.* (Maryam Wahid, 2019)

*Ek Aurat Ka Safar – A Woman's Journey* was created with support from The New Art Gallery Walsall

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### Acknowledgements

The artist would like to thank the organisations and individuals who made the visit to Pakistan and her research possible:

Many thanks to Transforming Narratives for allowing me to carry out a Research and Development project on women's identity in Pakistan and for giving me the opportunity to go to the country for the very first time which has allowed me to create this project. Thank you British Council (UK & Pakistan); Arts Council England; DG Kamran Lashari and Aisha Khan from Walled City of Lahore Authority; Wajahat Ali and his team at Agha Khan Trust for Culture; Shining Star School Lahore; Olomopolo Media; Faiz Foundation; Saira Lodhi; Sumbhal Mazhar from Punjab Police; Orangi Pilot Project; Qamar Bana; Atteqa Malik and her team at Karachi Biennale; Yasmeen Lari and her team at Pakistan Heritage Foundation in Makli. (Maryam Wahid, 2019)

# Nilupa Yasmin

## ফুলদানি – Phuldhani, 2019

Nilupa Yasmin uses self-portraiture in her new series ফুলদানি – Phuldhani, a Bengali phrase which translates into English as *Flowers in a Vase*. Engaging with the historical tendency for women to be compared to flowers, Yasmin was particularly influenced by the 1792 essay 'A vindication of the rights of women', by English writer, philosopher and advocate of women's rights, Mary Wollstonecraft;

*'The conduct and manners of women, in fact, evidently prove, that their minds are not in a healthy state; for, like the flowers that are planted in too rich a soil, strength and usefulness are sacrificed to beauty; and the flaunting leaves, after having pleased a fastidious eye, fade, disregarded on the stalk, long before the season when they ought to have arrived at maturity.'* (Wollstonecraft, 1792)

Using soil as the metaphor for society and examining women's cultivation within this during 18th century England, Wollstonecraft concludes the existing conditions are detrimental to women achieving their potential.

With *Phuldhani* Yasmin explores this notion of the cultivation of women within society, but brings it into the 21st century, with herself, a young British Bangladeshi female as the subject. Employing contemporary technology, the photographs were taken as selfies

on her mobile phone; a departure from Yasmin's usual photographic studio set-up, which she found was unable to replicate the intimacy and immediacy created through use of a phone.

The images of flowers that Yasmin has overlaid onto her portraits, are photographs that she took in 2018 at the home of her grandparents and aunt, who live in America. Densely layered and carefully composed by Yasmin, her features become intertwined with the flora and fauna, often to such a degree that the artist and her distinctive head scarves and floral shirts become camouflaged. There is a rich heritage of craft in the artist's family which Yasmin utilises in her artistic practice and so she cannot resist manipulating the images further. Cutting into them around the curves of petals and leaves in order to lift these from the surface therefore making the hand of the artist visible. The resulting images present the viewer with a challenge to navigate her self-portraits, the artist thereby maintaining a level of control as to how she, as the subject, may be viewed.

ফুলদানি – Phuldhani was created with support from The New Art Gallery Walsall



Nilupa Yasmin, ফুলদানি - Phuldhani (detail), 2019. © Nilupa Yasmin

## Biographies

**Arpita Shah** (b. 1983, Ahmedabad, India) is a photographic artist and educator based in Edinburgh, Scotland. She works between photography and film, exploring the intersections of culture and identity. Shah spent the earlier part of her life living between India, Ireland and the Middle East before settling in the UK. This migratory experience is reflected in her practice, which often focuses on the notion of home, belonging and shifting cultural identities.

Shah received her BA in Photography & Film from Napier University in Edinburgh. Selected exhibitions include: (2019) Street Level Photoworks, Glasgow; (2018) Autograph APB, London; (2017) Chobi Mela IX, Dhaka, Bangladesh; (2015) Focus Festival in Mumbai, India; (2014) Tramway, Glasgow; (2013) Detroit Center of Contemporary Photography

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**Maryam Wahid** (b. 1995, Birmingham, UK) is a photographer based in Birmingham, West Midlands. Her identity as a South Asian Muslim is central to her practice which she engages with alongside her profound interest in multiculturalism to make work which explores concepts of cultural diversity.

Wahid received her BA in Photography from Birmingham City University in 2018. Selected exhibitions include: (2019-20) 62 Gladstone Street, Peterborough; (2019) National Museum Gdańsk, Poland; Format Festival, Derby; Open Eye Gallery, Liverpool; Argentea Gallery, Birmingham; Portcullis House London; (2018) Inspired Festival, London; Free Range, London.

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**Nilupa Yasmin** (b. 1995, Birmingham, UK) is a photographic artist based in Birmingham, West Midlands. Yasmin has a keen interest in the notion of culture, self-identity and anthropology, which she combines with her love for handcraft and photographic explorations, to repeatedly draw upon her own South Asian culture and heritage.

Yasmin received her BA in Photography (2014-2017), and, Post Compulsory Education and Training Specialising in Art, Media and Performance (2018-2019) from Coventry University. Selected exhibitions include: (2020) Ort Gallery, Birmingham Hippodrome; (2019) Photofusion, London; Coventry Biennial, Weavers house; Herbert Art Gallery, Coventry; Format Fringe, Derby; Blast Festival, West Bromwich; (2018) Aston Hall, Birmingham; Argentea Gallery, Birmingham; Impact Hub, Birmingham; (2017) Fargo Village, Coventry.

## EVENTS

### Decolonising the Gaze

Friday 27 March 2020, 2-5pm, £3  
The New Art Gallery Walsall

Book via: Gallery Reception Desk  
or Eventbrite (see Gallery website)

GRAIN Projects & The New Art Gallery Walsall will host an afternoon of talks and a panel discussion with artists Arpita Shah, Maryam Wahid and Nilupa Yasmin. The artists will speak about their practices and shared themes that surround their work such as identity, culture and heritage. The day will be chaired by artist, academic and writer Caroline Malloy.

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