

**Contextual introduction to *Visual Justice: Pratibha Parmar in conversation with Shamira***

***Meghani* by Alina Khakoo**

University of Cambridge Faculty of English Postcolonial and Related Literatures & Queer

Cultures Graduate Seminar

Thursday 25 November 2021

Chaired by Evelyn Whorrall-Campbell

AK: Hi everyone! I'm going to provide an introduction to Pratibha's body of work, to foreground the discussion which Shamira and Pratibha are going to follow on with. As a disclaimer, this is a very condensed picture of Pratibha's oeuvre, which stretches back forty years, and spans so many different contexts, from filmmaking to activism to academic discourse, and indeed troubles the boundaries between these sites. So rather than presenting something comprehensive, I'm going to talk about some of Pratibha's works from across these sites, so we have some landmarks for our discussion. Hopefully this is also a chance for us to immerse ourselves in some visual material.

So if you know her work – which you really should – you'll know that Pratibha has always had simultaneous commitments as an activist and creative practitioner. In the early 1980s, she was an interlocutor in the Cultural Studies discourse emerging from the Centre for Cultural Studies at Birmingham University. This includes her chapter in the 1982 anthology *The Empire Strikes Back*. Like others in that circle, Parmar recognised the importance of representation in reflecting and shaping social realities, and so she came to film – or rather, first to video – to intervene in the cultural field which was understood as a political battleground. In 1988 she made *Sari Red* in response to the death of Kalbinder Kaur

Hayre by white supremacists in Dartford in 1985. She was given a Hi8 camera by a video collective in Brighton.

The result was a work which exposes racist murder, demanding justice, while also offering an alternative to the mainstream media that had barely acknowledged the crime, and had been complicit in creating a racist culture. The film develops its own visual language to express this, for instance drawing on cultures of protest and South Asian textiles, colours and iconographies, all montaged together using the recently available video technique of mixing and dissolving.

Around the same time Pratibha was making interventions in feminist circles, including the community of readers and contributors around *Feminist Review*. In 1983 *Feminist Review* approached Valerie Amos, Gail Lewis, Amina Mama and Pratibha Parmar to co-edit a special issue on Black women in Britain. They agreed because they wanted to seize the chance to publish Black women's writings, in the hope of catalysing more Black women's anthologies, and they wanted the predominantly white feminist community around *Feminist Review* to take note of Black feminist critiques. Their condition for taking on the project was full editorial autonomy, enabling them to comment in the editors' note that *Feminist Review* did not pay them for six months of labour. Here they also point out the tokenistic nature of commissioning a special issue on Black women. The issue was titled 'Many Voices One Chant', published in 1984, and it is now celebrated as a showcase of poetry, photography, academic discourses and interviews, including Parmar's and Amos' piece 'Challenging Imperial Feminism', which I think Shamira is going to speak more about. I particularly like the piece 'Becoming Visible: Black Lesbian Discussions', which is presented like a chorus of four voices which reflect on Black lesbian identities. Pratibha's intervention in independent feminist publishing also included her work with Sheba Feminist Press, which

came out of the women's liberation movement and played a huge part in disseminating feminist ideas and building feminist communities. Pratibha joined Sheba in 1984, when it was already a diverse collective – it would eventually go on to be majority women of colour – before leaving in early 1987. Sheba was focusing on publishing new writers, Black and Third World women and working-class women, including in the anthology Pratibha co-edited, *Charting the Journey*. Sheba also had other activities like workshops to make accessible the process of book production.

Through Sheba, and also through her film *A Place of Rage* from 1991, Pratibha was partly responsible for conveying the ideas of Black feminist thinkers from the US to a UK audience. I think of *A Place of Rage* as a group portrait of Angela Davis, June Jordan and Alice Walker, who are a crucial part of Pratibha's political heritage. She has said that reading Angela Davis' *If They Come in the Morning* aged 15, having migrated from Kenya to Britain with her parents aged 12, 'planted and catalysed seeds of understanding'. *A Place of Rage* was commissioned by Channel 4, which emerged to address diversity issues in mainstream TV, and had an independent film and video department led by Alan Fountain and Caroline Spry which nurtured people like Pratibha and the Black Audio Film Collective. The film is partly an homage to the figures who brought Pratibha to political consciousness through their writings. It is also a highly tender portrait of women who Pratibha came to be in kinship with, after interviewing June Jordan for *Spare Rib* in London, and later going with June to Paris where they met with Angela Davis. Let's watch the trailer for *A Place of Rage* now, which is available on the Kali Films Vimeo site, where Pratibha's films are also available to rent. I'll put a link to this in the Zoom chat. [Shows *A Place of Rage* trailer].

I'm going to accelerate slightly because I don't want to take time away from Shamira's and Pratibha's conversation, but I do want to give space to Pratibha's films. So

Pratibha is also well known for her activism during the AIDS epidemic, including her 1987 film *Reframing AIDS* which intervened in the homophobic representation of the LGBT community in the late 1980s. [Shows *Reframing AIDS* trailer]. This was followed up by the publication *Lesbians Talk Safer Sex* which Pratibha co-edited as part of Scarlet Press' *Lesbians Talk* series in 1992. It resonates with *Many Voices One Chant* because it's a chorus of voices talking about the AIDS crisis within the lesbian community, including the place of lesbians in discourses around the epidemic, how to practice safe sex, how to access further information and resources.

Finally, I want to point out that Pratibha was part of transnational queer networks: she co-founded the London-based South Asian diasporic LGBT organisation Shakti, which had close links with the organisation Khush in Toronto. Here is an image of her and an interview in the 1990 issue of their newsletter *Khush Khayal*. Let's end by watching the trailer to her 1991 film *Khush*, which represents gay and lesbian South Asians in Britain, North America and in the subcontinent. [Shows *Khush* trailer]. I'll now hand over to Shamira for the discussion with Pratibha.