Chapter: V

Critique of Gender and Normative Gage: Sculpture, Photo
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The present chapter is to discuss about Pushpamala N who created a new space for representing womanhood by formulating a unique language of visual art through her installation, sculpture, photography and videography.

5.1 Pushpamala N and Her New Visual Language
Pushpamala N was born in Bangalore in the year 1956. She had attended Bangalore University from 1976-77, where she studied Bachelor Degree of Arts with Economics, English and Psychology under Balan Nambiar. Later she studied Sculpture at the Faculty of Fine Arts, MS University, Baroda. She completed her Bachelors and then her Masters degree in 1985. Pushpamala N began her career as a professional artist early in her art college days. She started to exhibit her works in different art galleries in both group and solo shows, when she was a student of Fine Arts at Baroda. She has also participated in the major national and international art exhibitions in India and abroad between the decades of 80’s and 90’s. In 1983-84 she was a participant of National Exhibition of Lalit Kala Akademi and in 1986 she also got the opportunity to be a participant in the 6th Triennial held in New Delhi, India. In between 1986 to 1989 Pushpamala had done many major shows in Delhi, Mumbai and other parts of India.

Her first solo show mainly concentrated on the art like installation, video performance, and photography which flourished in the regions of Baroda, Mumbai, and Delhi and to some extent Kolkata. Though Pushpamala graduated and Post Graduated in the discipline of sculpture but she immediately adopted the new kind of visual language, in the nomenclature of photo performance in 90’s decade. In the 90’s Pushpamala arrived with a new dimension of artistic approach. She started to build a different kind of art based upon non-conventional visual language, photo performance which she used to execute in the Installation view. Her first major installation show
was arranged at Chemould Art Gallery, Mumbai in the year 1994 under the title “Excavations, sculpture/ Installation”. In the latter half of 90’s Pushpamala had chosen her favourite medium, Photo performance to deliver an actual view of real life, with the tactile appropriation of Identity.

Pushpamala N was influenced by two Baroda based Indian Artists, K.G. Subramaniam and Bhupen Khakkar. She had made a dialectic position in her works through the collaboration of dark humor and serious conceptual practice by multi dimensional research works and technological experimentations. She has always tried to incorporate some new challenges into her works by the critical view of power politics of gender and colonial normative. Her journey of art deals with continuous experimentation of visual language and complex communication. Her complex communication leads toward an interactive identity, where she provokes the viewer to repulse within or across her identity. Pushpamala had taken her own images as the subject of her work and consciously separated them from her own identity. Therefore she tried to shift her images in other identity to extract the plurality of self discourses.

Since the mid 1990s she has primarily worked in photo-performance and video art to explore issues of gender, place and history. South Asia has a long history of sophisticated work in the medium like photography and filmmaking since the days of colony. British power had chosen the media, photography (which apparently produces the so called truth through assured technologies and scientific reproduction) to propagate South Asian culture as typically marginal and among them those who belong to the privileged society. The four photographic series of Pushpamala including ‘Phantom Lady or Kismet’, ‘Dard-e-Dil’, ‘Sunhere Sapne’ and "Bombay Photo Studio", have links with South Asian cinematic performance. Each series of work presents the artist’s portrait in multiple roles i.e. as an actress, as a director, and as an architect, who plays with her own body and intellect.

She had also represented her image in her films. Pushpamala made a video film named Rashtriya Kheer and Desi Salad (pl. 75). She also made a film known as Paris Autumn in the year 2006. The 35 mins film “Paris Autumn”
was first showed in Galerie Zurcher in Paris in 2006. Afterward this film is shown in different galleries in India and abroad. In India it was first shown at Nature Morte, New Delhi in 2008. This film was based upon the past life of Parisian history in black and white picturesque, where Pushpamala was both actor and director. She had rented a house in Paris and her land lord told her that this was the stable quarters of Gabrielle d’Estraces, the mistress of King Henry IV. This information inspired her to search out the past and at the end she decided to make a film on that time. In this film Pushpamala was a protagonist who has two different appearances i.e. the mistress and the ghost. The first shot of the film was taken from the Eiffel tower in a panoramic view of an overcast day of Paris. There she also used a professional trolley in a shot at Pushpamala’s own apartment. She has also used the Indian music, Kaliya Ka Chaman in the night club. She had no written script for this film and she tried to develop a text in conversational manner. The 35 minute film was made of near about 700 frames of still photographs with text and sound to shape the 16th century’s frame in today’s context.

5.1 Critique of gender in Pushpamala’s Art

Pushpamala N introduced her works through the diagram of a critical resistance in the gendered issues and gender politics. Her works could be seen through the spectacle of a critique of all kinds of construction and hegemony. She made resistance against colonial oppression upon subalterns/natives, against the outsidered occupation on endangered ethnography, against the mainstream practices of art, against the gaze of gender politics, through her unique and unconventional medium. Pushpamala had attacked the objectives of science as a subject, which was legitimated by the colonial ruler as a weapon of their constructed truth. Thus Pushpamala's critique entered into the theory of cultural left, to believe nothing is ultimate or definite, even science should be justified with the relative knowledge of other subjects. As observed by Shahane:

‘As Pushpamala records, natural science was frequently used in the colonial period as a tool for legitimizing racist and sexist ideas. In the 1960's, left-leaning political philosophers expanded upon this fact and
argued that science is no more objective than any other; it is just as susceptible to ideological manipulation. The cultural left developed, in other words, a belief in the relativism of knowledge. Closely linked to this was a belief in the relativism of values. Just as colonizers had imposed their brand of science, they had also sought to show their own culture to be the superior of the cultures of colonized nations.' (Shahane, 2004, p. 25)

Pushpamala N had experimented with numerous visual mediums, one of which was photographic performance. In 1996-98 she made a photographic performance show titled 'Phantom Lady, or Kismet, a Photo Romance' at the gallery Chemould, Mumbai and Bangalore, artist's studio. "Phantom Lady, or Kismet" (pl.76) is a takeoff on Indian pop films about the exploits of a super heroine named Nadia, who here wears Zorro-Esque attire to rescue a vampy younger sister from underworld embroilment. Shot mostly in night time Mumbai, the series has a rich, film-noir atmosphere, which has a surreal Bollywood-style narrative structure that can be reshuffled for different showings. As in all her work, Pushpamala N is the chief actor as well as director, and she has a charismatic on-camera presence. She plays both the sisters in "Phantom Lady" with aplomb, and brings the same qualities to "Golden Dreams" (1998), a kind of woman-having-a-nervous-breakdown tale of romance and entrapment that concludes with the heroine holding an invisible opponent at gunpoint. Here the original black-and-white prints have been hand colored, giving them a slightly antique look.

One of the striking photographs from this series was snapped in black and white with an arrangement of indoor light settings. In this snap of ‘Golden Dreams,(sunehere Swapne) 1998’ (pl.77) a lady is focused from her back and her frontal image was focused through the mirror placed in front of her. The lady is dressing her hair, but looking straight to the lens of camera which may be metaphorically placed as the peeping eye of a stranger.

After this photo performance show she had consecutively arranged different shows on photo performance such as Golden Dreams 2001 (Chemould, Mumbai), Golden Dreams 2002 (Gallery Sumukha, Bangalore), Phantom
*Lady and Sunhere Sapne, 2003* (Walsh Gallery, Chicago, USA) etc. The photographic installation was taken by Pushpamala as a prime medium of her work to show the ethnography of the ancient data which are near extinction. She exploits this medium to explore her identical appearance in the naive and ethnographic context. For the last six to seven years she was in a journey to build an ethnographic language through photo and video installation in collaboration with the photographer like Munal Agarwal and Clare Arni. She had done plenty of photographic projects with Clare Arni. She tried to search the anthropological aspects of the people of colonial period of India, when colonial rulers were engaged with different types of experimental practices upon the marginal people or so called natives of India in the name of study of the ‘Anthropology’ and ‘Anthropometry’.

‘Responses to the Image of Women in Police Custody’ (pl.78) is a photograph taken by Pushpamala N and Clare Arni in 2003. Pushpamala was inspired by a news photograph of arrested chain snatchers, in 2002. In old colonial system, police used to release the photographs of the victim or the arrested, with full personal details in an identification-slate. This practice is still often practiced in this country where colonial rule had ended more than sixty years ago, but the shadow of the colonial hegemony is still controlling the laws and disciplines of this country. Pushpamala N had encountered the photograph published by the state administration in the name of law in 2003, by making another photograph of the same composition with a self image and an image of Clare Arni in 2004. Here she and Arni is holding the identification-slates in their hand like the Imprisoned women images published by the police for the identities of the victims known as Gowramma and Yoshoda (pl.79). In both the pictures the identification-slates are holding following words,

‘GOWRAMMA
w/o THIMME GOWDA
604E, S.B.PURA
P.S.
2.2.02’
Pushpamala had relocated her identical position as arrested women, who are oppressed by the rule of the power of justice. These women are not only exposed but also their identity has been constructed by the state law and administration to make a public exposure of the personal space of women. Pushpamala projected this image as a direct threat to the women who are already cornered in patriarchal society and she empathetically overlapped her own image upon the portraits of the arrested women. This identical photograph of Pushpamala N became a challenge against the law and order of the social rules and normative and arrived with the premeditated resistance against the gender gaze.

Pushpamala is highly critical of the practice of patriarchal norms since it is solely responsible for the making of the gender discrimination. She expresses her resistance through her various personal images in miscellaneous representations. These personal images become a threat against the hegemonized practice of law and order which is the accepted name for the social/patriarchal norms.

5.3 Critique of Normative Gaze: Pushpamala N in Post Colonial Identity

Pushpamala N scratches the diagram of stereotyped identity of the subaltern inhabitants of India through her prolonged journey in new media art. She chooses a language which is not popular in mainstream visual art. She used her skill of academic training of painting and sculptures in a distinct way, i.e. the execution of photographic arrangement which focuses them in installation view. Her works are imbued with the world of women and their oppressed position in the shadow of colonial power. She has taken some different issues of women oppression, where she showed women’s
position in subaltern and colonized place. She tried to trace the fatal condition of the Indian natives, especially the women, at the colonial time. Also she has taken the remote and marginal areas for her performative works and tried to sink into the deep of the substantial sequence to remove the layers of the civilization that covered up the real position of the oppressed communities. This direct invention upon colonial space became a threat to the power of colony (now to the neo-colonial power); thus these continuous chases showed by her works, and her questions and critiques against those normative gazes of colonial rules had helped to build up a post colonial identity in Pushpamala N’s work.

Pushpamala had started to make some photographic projects from the beginning of the year 2003/2004 funded by the Indian foundation for Arts, Karnataka. For those projects she was collaborated with the photographer Clare Arni and shaped her self portrait to merge them into the sequential images of different popular film and news media. After the project of Fantom Lady and the Kismet, both Clare and she decided to recreate representations in different mediums such as newspaper, photograph, advertisement, film stills, and iconic images of popular art like calendars. Pushpamala was interested in the form of tableaux and she initiated upon the perfection of each photo-shoot. Pushpamala emphasized that each and every photo-shoot should be different from the previous in terms of image representation, set, lighting, costume, even in expression.

Pushpamala N has recently done a project upon South Indian Natives, titled, ‘Native Women of South India’ in the form of photographic arrangement. With the fragmented view of self images she tried to behold different moments which had happened in long past but still have their painful resonance in the present world. She has used a set decoration with a huge background panel painted in black and white square blocks. Also, here she used the planned arrangement of light. This had organized with synchronization of camera position and also used relevant designed costumes that could match with the particular sequence. This total project made a theatrical ambience which deliberately and purposively had shifted from the ‘real’. This theatrical ambience has been compared as ‘mock’ by
Girish Shahane, who says, ‘These are mocking images, in the double sense of the word’ mock’; it means to mimic; but also to ‘ridicule’. (Shahane, 2004, p. 24)

This photographic project was inspired from the nineteenth century photograph of an ‘Andamanese Native Woman’ (pl.80). This woman image of Andaman Islander is an anthropometric photograph from a notorious British study comparing measurements of primitives, criminals, prostitutes, and natives deemed insane. The photograph of the woman is taken against a black and white square patterned background panel and her left hand is resting upon a measuring stand. Beside this photograph, another photograph of ‘Self-image of Pushpamala’ (pl.81) is placed, where her self-portrait is kept in the position of the Andamanese woman with some changes of delicate signs. Here, in her self-image, she has used a ‘Toda’ dress to carry an ethnographic feeling with the past. Pushpamala also stretched her right hand instead of the left hand (Andamanese woman raised her left hand). If both photographs are arranged side by side the opposite hands of two images could create a fellow feeling, dependence on each other and also a empathetic bond between each other. Whether Pushpamala has stretched her hand in a friendship to the lady of hundred years past, whose oppressions are still alive in the marginal position of the women of present world? In this context Pushpamala wrote a note about the Native woman of South India, which is as follows:

‘While we started the project as a sort of feminist exploration, as well as exploration of South Indian women’s images in the media, one of the very important areas we got into was that of ethnography. We began seeing the images as types and linking it to representative of ‘native types’ from the colonial era to the present. This refers also to the history of photography as a tool for ethnographic documentation which continues till today. This had led us to touch anthropology, anthropometry or the science of measuring humans (an outdated discipline which we learnt has come back into fashion because of the Human Genome Project), ideas of race and caste. For example, one of our key images is a mid 19th century photograph of an Andaman Islander (which we change to a Toda woman as the original woman was shown naked). We found later that the original
photograph was from a now notorious British colonial study. Whose object was to compare the skulls of aboriginals, criminals, prostitutes and the insane as primitive and under-developed types?’ (Shahane, 2004, p. 25)

British made some colonial subjects in ethnicity. Colonial practice had constructed different identities of different races and cultures according to their knowledge, their history and their language. Stuart Hall’s discussion about black as ethnic subject would be inspiring in this context. He says: If the black subject and black experience are not stabilized by nature or by some other essential guarantee, then it must be the case that they are constructed historically, culturally, politically – and the concept which refers to this is ‘ethnicity’, the term ethnicity acknowledges the place of history, language and culture in the construction of subjectivity and identity, as well as the fact that all discourse is placed, positioned, situated, and all knowledge is contextual.’ (Hall, 1995, p. 226)

He adds further: ‘I am familiar with all dangers of ethnicity as a concept and have written myself about the fact that ethnicity, in the form of a culturally constructed sense of Englishness and a particularly closed, exclusive regressive form of English national identity, is one of the core characteristics of British racism today. I am also well aware that the politics of anti racism has often constructed itself in terms of a contestation of ‘multi-ethnicity’ or ‘multiculturalism’. (Hall, 1995, p. 226)

The cultural politics of making the ethnic construction could be resisted through the concept of new ethnicity⁴, which Stuart Hall derives as follows: ‘This marks a real shift in the point of contestation since it is no longer only between antiracism and multiculturalism but inside the notion of ethnicity itself. What is involved in the splitting of the notion between, on the one hand the dominant notion which connects it to notion and ‘race’ and on the other hand what I think is the beginning of a positive conception of the ethnicity of the margins, of the periphery.’ (Hall, 1995, p. 227)
Through the representation of self images, Pushpamala opens up a new way to enter into the ethnic identity, where colonial rule has no accession to construct any cultural notion. The new ethnicity of her photo performed images directly resists the constructed norms of science, anthropology, anthropometry, history and culture. Pushpamala showed herself in the position of marginalized women in contemporary context to relocate the oppression of the colonized and so called native women. Her self images becomes an identity against all stereo types and she snapped several photographs for her project 'Native Women of South India' (pl. 82). In an interesting interview Pushpamala says, ‘In this show of over 200 photographs, each picture extends into a narrative with different histories and image making. There’s a vamp, a rustic woman, a marginal Toda woman, a criminal woman, a mother goddess, a seductress – typical image of women as seen by the male hierarchy or patriarchy. By enacting them, I comment on the world and society. I transform the stereotypical with my persona. When Clair’s in the picture, its own narrative.’ (http://www.hinduonnet.com).

Pushpamala’s spontaneity in performance photography, however, provokes alternate ways of seeing and art-making. In her recent work, "Native Women of South India: Manners and Customs", collaborated with photographer Clare Arni and extracted the dramatic results in photo performance. Pushpamala, a South Indian artist, and Clare Arni, a British photographer, (notable contrast here is that one is black, and the other is white) had played as the protagonists in a project exploring the history of photography as a tool of ethnographic documentation. Playing with the notions of subject and object, the photographer and the photographed, white and black, real and fake, it is hinted at that the baroque exaggeration of the images subverts and overturns each other.

Native Women of South India: Manners and Customs, a photo-performance exhibition by Pushpamala and Clare Arni, performed in November 2006 in New York at Bose Pacia Gallery, originally conceptualized through an arts collaboration grant from the India Foundation for the Arts in Bangalore.
Pushpamala meticulously reconstructed existing portraits of South Indian women in order to deconstruct their generic and stereotypical associations. In assuming the role of archetypal female characters derived from both contemporary and historical sources, Pushpamala questions the accuracy of photography as ethnographic documentation. Accepted concepts of ethnicity, enumeration and classification are challenged by recreations steeped in artifice which ultimately subverts the normative or expected anthropological gaze.

The exhibition is divided into four different series. The Native Types consists of ten tableaus replicating found imagery drawn from an array of sources, including painting, film, calendars and advertising. Each portrait represents an archetypal woman, such as the vamp, the great mother, and the outsider and is exhibited slanting and hung high on the wall as religious and ancestral photographs are often displayed in Indian homes. The Ethnographic Series has borrowed the Native characters and rendered them into the specimens of a mock anthropological study. The Popular Series is comprised of images based on bazaar photographs.

The final product is a pseudo-archive of different images of South Indian women and each series is coupled with Pushpamala’s emphasis on artifice with complex sets, costumes, props, make-up and lighting, which rendered this installation uniquely compelling. Although this performance made a critical examination on the notions of archetypes and authenticity, it is as Pushpamala herself states, ‘As a performance work, it is a manic and obsessive exploration of different kinds of characters, crazy and liberating in its sheer excessiveness and exuberance’.

In the Series of Native women she has painted large panels for her subject of photo performance. Pushpamala’s works resulted a shift of identity of Ravi Varma’s heroine in other appropriation. The paintings are “Lady in Moonlight” (pl.83), “Lakshmi” (pl.84), and “Returning from the Tank” (pl.85) etc. She tried to re-appropriate those paintings in personal context to shift or modify the Identify of the central character of native women of south India. She had taken her self photograph in the same and perfect representation of Ravi Varma’s works. She used the costume, jewelry and hair styles
perfectly as same as the women images of those paintings. Even she was highly meticulous about the colour of the dresses and accessories of *Native Women of South India: Manners and Customs*, Pushpamala had taken some important works of Ravi Varma and modified them into her personal images.

In the work *Returning from the Tank* (pl.11), from the photographic series of *Native Women of South India: Manners and Customs*, she used a copy of Ravi Varma’s painting without the woman figure and placed her self-photographic tableaux just in front of the placed canvas over the sandy ground. Pushpamala dressed herself just like the woman figure of Ravi Varma’s painting and posed in the same way the woman was returning from the tank in front of Clare Arni’s lens.

In the work of ‘Lakshmi’ (pl.10) and “Lady in Moonlight (pl.9), Pushpamala used same style to create a narrative space between the native and contemporary women of south India (here Pushpamala herself carries a contemporary image of south Indian women). She has appropriated Ravi Varma’s women images in contemporary context without changing their outer look (costume, hairstyle, ornaments and manners). She only freed those images from the background of the picture and placed them away from the painting without changing the visual effects of the composition. Through these works, an interactive space has been originated between the painting and the tableaux pl.ure by the artist. She had purposively used the term ‘native women’ to focus them from colonial angle and to celebrate their position in post colonial arena. Through the subtle and fragmented self images Pushpamala has subverted the British made colonial normative to construct the native women identity of India. These works unmark the essentiality of colony through the representation of the real images of women who were not represented as real but as stereotype in colonial period. Pushpamala has deconstructed the notions of ‘native’ of colonial practice and built a critique against the making of natives and women (native women) by the oppressive constructions of the colonial ruler’s patriarchal gaze.
Notes: Chapter V

1. Major Exhibitions and Shows of Pushpamala N
1998: Phantom Lady or Kismet, a photo romance, Gallery Chemould, Mumbai,
And at the artist’s studio, Bangalore
2002: Golden Dreams, Gallery Sumukha, Bangalore.
2003: Phantom Lady and Sunhere Sapne, Walsh Gallery, Chicago, USA
The Anguished Heart, photo performance work, Nature Morte and Gallery
Chemould, at British Council, Delhi
2004: Native Women of South India – Manners and Customs, collaborative
photo performance project with Clare Arni at Sumukha Gallery, Bangalore,
Gallery Chemould, Mumbai & Seagull Arts and Media Centre, Kolkata
Indian Lady, photo and video performance work, Bose Pacia, New York, USA
2005: Native Women of South India-at Nature Morte, Delhi
2006: Pushpamala N, photo performance work, Nature Morte and Bose
Pacia, Milan
Pushpamala N, photo and video performance work, Espace Croise, Roubai,
France
Paris Autumn, video and photo installation, Galerie Zurcher, Paris, France
Native Women of South India- at Bose Pacia Gallery, New York, USA
2007 Streetside Theatre, Theater Utsav 2007, National School of Drama, Delhi
2008 Paris Autumn, video and photo installation, Nature Morte, Delhi
Paris Autumn, video and photo installation, Wada Fine Arts, Tokyo, Japan

International Group Exhibitions
2005: Indian Summer, ENSBA, Paris, France
Edge of Desire, Asia Society, New York, USA & Museo Tamayo, Mexico
Yokohama Triennale, Open Circle, Japan
Kovideo, 1st Durban Video festival, South Africa
2007: Fotofluss, Vienna, Austria
Post Object, Doris McCarthy Gallery, University of Toronto, Canada
Private/ Corporate IV, DaimlerChrysler Contemporary, Berlin, Germany
Public Places/ Private Spaces: Contemporary Photography and Video Art in
India, The Newark Museum, USA
New Narratives: Contemporary Art from India, Chicago Cultural Centre, USA
‘Tiger by the Tail- Women Artists of India transforming Culture’ Brandeis
University, USA
House Of Mirrors, Grosvenor Vadehra Gallery, London, Uk

Major Film and video:
1988: performed in Kumar Shahani’s film Khayal Gatha
2004: Rashtriy Kheer and Desiy Salad [National Pudding and Indigenous
Salad
11 min. film:
2. Social construction of Gender is a Politics: ‘It is widely held that while one’s sex as a man or woman is determined by anatomy, the prevailing concepts of gender—of the traits that are conceived to constitute what is masculine what is feminine in temperament and behavior—are largely, if not entirely, social constructs that were generated by the pervasive patriarchal biases of our civilization.’ (Abrams, 2009, p. 101)

3. About her photo performance Pushpamala told in an Interview with Aditi De: ‘I've been doing performance photography, instead of sculpture, since the 1997 Phantom Lady series, which Clare saw in the United Kingdom. As a photojournalist, she's interested in images of South Indian women. That captured my imagination. We decided to collaborate and applied for an IFA grant for our ambitious work, a departure from the performative photo-romances or studio portraiture I'd earlier directed.’ (De, 2004, p. 2)

4. Other feminists argue that we should see ethnicity not as a cultural problem but in the broader context of state harassment and the double oppression of black women. See Amos and Parmar (1984).’ (Humm, 2003, p. 82)