

FRICTIVE FAMILIARITIES

By Diana Kaur

Globalisation has changed the basis for international connections and the startling reality of human interdependence stands clear. It is a condition simultaneously old and new, one, which Homi K Bhabha terms as quasi-colonial. He picks up postcolonial studies where Edward Said left it—at the point where the oriental other is not only spoken of, but actually starts to speak. “No name is yours until you speak it; somebody returns your call and suddenly, the circuit of signs, gestures, gesticulations is established and you enter the territory of the right to narrate. You are part of a dialogue that may not, at first, be heard or heralded—you may be ignored—but your personhood cannot be denied. In another’s country that is also your own, your person divides, and in following the forked path you encounter yourself in a double movement... once as stranger, and then as friend.” (Bhabha, Homi K. *The location of culture*, p. XXV in the preface to the 2010 edition)

As people travel more, dispossession and displacement are facts of life, and there are vast first, second and third generation migrant populations—not to forget all the combinations and crossovers, all over the world. The challenge, according to Said, is to try to locate oneself within this diaspora; and to find some kind of political and ethnical identity that can co-exist with others, and to imagine an identity not in conflict with any other identity, but an amalgamation of it all. He concludes that in our world no one is purely one thing and that labels such as Indian, women, Muslim, gay or middle-aged are only starting points and quickly left behind. Identity is mixed, not fixed. Imperialism consolidated the global mixture of cultures and identities. This mixture is our collective inheritance and despite differences our cultures and identities have always overlapped with each other, through conflict, negotiations, incorporation and forgetfulness.

Bhabha shares this outlook, but in order to link today’s globalism with yesterday’s colonialism he develops a theory of radical cultural hybridity. It represents an uncomfortable questioning of the images and presence of authority, and reveals the intricate mechanisms of discrimination between dominant discourse and denied knowledge—or mother-culture and its bastards. Hybridity is also a key to understanding the related strategy of colonial mimicry, which corrupts the rules of recognition of the dominant culture and discourse by imitating it, often in an ambivalent fashion bordering on mockery; and the notion of social liminality, which incorporates Said’s notion of the unhomed exilic or the place in-between. For Bhabha, hybridity becomes an epistemological category, which plays a political, and potentially a revolutionary role in its mediation between the old colonised and coloniser, or between the globalised oriental other and the globalising occidental self. Today’s art world is a good example of how transnational and translational notions of hybridity are articulated and circulated. “Frictive Familiarities” is a gathering of video works around this notion. This does not mean that the aim is to inscribe these artists and works as belonging to a glorified periphery or expressions of rootless cosmopolitanism. “However”—to speak with Bhabha—“I do want to make graphic what it means to survive, to produce, to labour and to create, within a world system whose major economic impulses and cultural investments are pointed in a direction away from you, your country or your people. Such neglect can be a deeply negating experience, oppressive and exclusionary, and it spurs you to resist the polarities of power and prejudice, to reach beyond and behind the invidious narratives of center and periphery.” (Bhabha, Homi K. *ibid.*, p. XI)

Without losing sight of the above maxim, the video works are explorations in mixed forms and renditions of unhomed exilic experiences, which perform a crossing—a crossbreeding if you will, between places, domesticities and personal histories, cultural identification and political affect, issues of feminism, gender, sexuality and race. The unhomeliness—that is the condition of extra-territorial and cross-cultural initiatives—not to be taken for homelessness, is articulated in different ways, language and tone in the works in this screening event. For instance in Nidhi Jalan’s “Bangalored” an American and an Indian woman are having ceremonial tea. The American woman alternates between being instructional and reproachful, while the Indian woman

resists and mocks her attempts at subjugation. Even though the conversation takes a sympathetic turn, it is brought to an abrupt halt at the slightest sign of criticality or questioning of patrimonial structures.

Said Adrus’ film “Lost Pavilion” is the story of a Muslim burial ground in Woking, South East England, which is told by an elderly Englishman, reminiscing about the wartime and growing up in the area. His modest account of life and loss circumvents exoticism and homogenising of the past, yet instead provides a testimony to the importance of safeguarding sites and histories of cultural heritage.

In “Kanku Raga” Hetain Patel reaches back, beyond his parent’s generation, to grasp and bring forth a tangible notion of heritage, a totem even, in the red pigment “kanku”. Traditionally used in Hindu ceremonies to mark a red dot on the forehead, Patel uses kanku to mark and erase each stroke from the tabla drum language on his chest. In a performance that draws heavily on the ritualistic, he evokes, dissects and erases a fetishism of identity. It is an act in which something from the past, or from heritage, is captured and brought to the present, estranging it from its original symbolic purpose.

In a related way, the two weddings unfolding side by side in “Untitled (The End)” are as synchronised as they are displaced—as divided as they are disorienting. By denying audio and slowing down the pace, Kiran Kaur Brar isolates and distils elements of the Punjabi wedding ritual, which culminates in the bride parting with her family to start married life in the care of her husband.

Tejal Shah’s “Untitled II” presents us with a soundtrack in which voice and void speak of transoceanic longing between a mother and daughter. Projected from either side of the sea, their bond is reiterated over the vast liminal space. In “There is a spider living between us” the estrangement is instead exercised on parental proxemics, and in doing so, she renegotiates the domestic as a space of normalising and individuating processes. Placing the personal in the political, the borders between home and world become confused, and the private and the public become part of each other.

Indeed some works are set within a familiar framework or construct, like the two films by Gautam Kansara where the camera eye registers detailed scenarios in the lives of his grandparents, capturing their mundanities and idiosyncracies, and in doing so rendering visible the world in their home, the familiar and the frictive.

In a world calling for criticality and commitment to independence, human justice and dignity, these works help us to think concretely and sympathetically about our global neighbours, wherever we are.

Edward Wadie Said (born 1935 in Jerusalem, British Mandate of Palestine—died 2003 in New York City) was a Palestinian-American literary theorist and advocate for Palestinian rights. He was University Professor of English and Comparative Literature at Columbia University and a founding figure in postcolonialism. He is perhaps best known for his book *Orientalism* (Vintage Book Edition, 1979), which presented his influential ideas on the Western study of Eastern cultures. Said contended that Orientalist scholarship was and continues to be inextricably tied to the imperialist societies that produced it, making much of the work inherently politicized, servile to power, and therefore suspect.

Homi K. Bhabha (born 1949 in Mumbai) is the Anne F. Rothenberg Professor of English and American Literature and Language, and the Director of the Humanities Center, at Harvard University. He is one of the most important figures in contemporary postcolonial studies, and has coined a number of the field’s neologisms and key concepts, such as hybridity, mimicry, difference, ambivalence and liminality. Such terms describe ways in which colonised peoples have resisted the power of the coloniser, according to Bhabha’s theory presented in *The location of culture* (Routledge, 2005) and elsewhere.
