

NAKED

AND

KNIFE-

SHARP

ANITA DUBE

By Jyoti Dhar



I. Love and Politics

Noor Mohammed, a lower-class Muslim businessman—the alter-ego of Anita Dube, who could be identified as a middle-class Hindu woman artist, but whose life and practice seeks to blur such boundaries—tells us that it's his lucky day; he's been given 15 minutes of fame. "What can I say about myself?" he asks, looking quizzically at the camera, deciding how best to introduce himself. "Noor is a loving human being, who places a great onus on friendship," he begins. "Love is the highest form of worship. This is my religion." Over the next 15 minutes, Dube-as-Noor addresses a mix of personal, political and philosophical thoughts to two of her/his closest friends, artists Anita Dube and CK Rajan. Confessing to these unseen figures in flowing Urdu enriched with Sufi poetry, Dube's alter-ego weaves the fictional with the factual, telling them about his love of literature, his childhood in Lucknow, and his male and female lovers in Delhi. In these dark times, he laments, power has become a religion, politics is practiced like an art form, and love transformed into a commodity.

The impromptu script contains profound and candid lines, such as, "If you had understood me, if your desire was not double, it may not have come to this." Throughout her performance on camera, Dube appears amused, heartfelt and forlorn, in what is a rare insertion of herself in her work. Shot over the course of one evening, *Kissa-e-Noor Mohammed (Garam Hawa)* (2004) is the only film-work Dube has ever made, and reveals much about her instinctual and intellectual approach. The queering of subjectivities we see on screen confronts nationalist and patriarchal rhetoric, simultaneously rupturing traditional notions of gender, class, religion and sexuality. This is particularly significant given the film's fraught context, coming in the aftermath of the 2002 communal riots in Gujarat and amid the temporarily successful campaign in the 2000s to amend the law (Section 377) to decriminalize homosexual activity in India.

Dube's film also connects to other seminal cultural works in important ways. Its title echoes *Garam Hawa* (1973), a critically acclaimed film about Hindu-Muslim relations after Partition, lost loves and being split by two worlds, and its subtext of forbidden desire and heartbreak resonates with *Fire* (1996), a film that became a key moment in galvanizing the LGBTQ movement in India after protests by right-wing Hindu groups. Though these cross-

connections point to the contemporary relevance of Dube's work, her own suggestion in the film that "the values I stand on are old" reminds us that her concerns are not reactionary but are rooted in deep preoccupations with syncretism and pluralism, the fluidity of gender and sexuality, pathos and eros. The latter of these, particularly eros and politics, or "love as a way of thinking through politics" (as activist Ponni Arasu spoke about in a recent discussion on "Histories of Queer Feminisms in South Asia: Love and Resistance," in Sri Lanka), or the radical potential of love, forms a central thread through Dube's work.

II. Culture in Currency

Dube's own path to art, love and politics was prefaced, originally, by a desire to escape what she called "the provincial, middle-class way of life" that she experienced in the relatively conservative social landscape in Lucknow. "I knew that the only way to get out of this place was to do well," she said. Her parents, who were both doctors, suggested that she prepare for the Indian Administrative Service exams. Rather than follow that path, she surprised everyone when she achieved the highest results in the state in the field of arts. This, she said, paved the way for her to move to the capital, where she first enrolled in a history degree at the University of Delhi (1975–79). Within a year she found herself immersed in a rich cultural scene, where she was part of a poetry circle with artist Jatin Das and writer Aman Nath, and this led her to decide to apply for further studies in art history.

Dube still remembers her interview with the eminent painter and professor Gulam Mohammed Sheikh—who was impressed with her reading of what were considered to be "poets in currency" at the time, such as Anna Akhmatova and Aimé Césaire—and offered her a place on the art criticism Master's course at the Maharaja Sayajirao University of Baroda. Here, from 1979 to 1982, she was part of an intimate and inspiring class of just five students taught by Sheikh. Ever the keen thinker, Dube chose to extend her Master's by a year, so that she could attend every theory course available, on subjects ranging from the European Renaissance to the Indian miniaturists. Tellingly, outside of class she was happiest among artists, observing them making work. On one of her trips back to Baroda after she had graduated, she encountered artist Alex Mathew, whom she would go on to briefly



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SILENCE (BLOOD WEDDING), 1997, human bones covered in red velvet, dimensions variable. Courtesy the artist and Devi Art Foundation, Gurugram.

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KISSA-E-NOOR MOHAMMED (GARAM HAWA), 2004, stills from video with color and sound: 15 min. Courtesy Nature Morte, New Delhi.



marry. “I saw some of his wood carvings and I liked him because of his sculpture,” she said.

Unbeknownst to her, this meeting with Mathew and several other artists originally from Trivandrum studying at Baroda, including KP Krishnakumar, NN Rimzon and KM Madhusudhanan, would spark a pivotal moment in her own critical trajectory as well as within Indian contemporary art. “We were reading Kafka and Dostoevsky, discussing Marxism and egalitarianism, all in a very bohemian milieu,” she said. “It was a wonderful world that had not been opened up to me before.” By the time the group graduated in 1984, Dube, who was lecturing at an architecture college in the nearby city of Ahmedabad at the time, suggested that they apply to the newly opened postgraduate studio Kanoria Centre for Arts there. This, she explained, was to be one of the origins of the Indian Radical Painters and Sculptors Association (IRPSA, or better known as the Radicals). Yet their residency didn’t last long. There was a dispute with management at the center, with Dube tasked as the group’s spokesperson, and they collectively resigned.

III. A Radical Medium

The edginess of the Radicals captured the attention of artists such as Nalini Malani and Vivan Sundaram. “Coming from Kerala, they were leftists of a certain kind,” Malani told me. “As they were the next generation, I admired their ideology, energy and dynamism.” Sundaram invited them to take part in an artists’ camp at Kasauli Art Centre, led by German sculptor Siegfried Neuenhausen, in North India. Dube was invited as a critic and recalls how the work produced there by the group broke away from traditions of Indian sculpture, which was then dominated by totemic forms in bronze, stone and wood. The Radicals saw German Expressionism as closer to the “language of the underclass” than, say, miniature painting from the subcontinent, which they felt did not carry the same emotionality, contemporaneity or charge. Dube recalled her impressions when she encountered the Radicals’ works: “They were using wire, cloth, plaster, aluminum tubes and constructing an installation-like language. It had a spatiality, rawness and spontaneity that was forward-looking.”

These innovative works were shown at the exhibition titled “Seven Young Sculptors” (1985) in New Delhi, curated by Sundaram, who subsequently offered Krishnakumar a studio workspace in Kasauli. “But Krishnakumar was a rebel,” Dube recounted. “And he never felt equal.” This feeling of inequality, stemming from ideological and class differences between artists notionally divided along a north/south axis within India, was to manifest in potent ways. Sundaram, along with his critic-partner Geeta Kapur and artists such as Sheikh and Malani, were part of the so-called Baroda School, a narrative movement of painting that sought to address more localized and grounded concerns than their predecessors, the Progressives. “The narrative group were speaking for people, but they were not the people,” Dube said. “The Radicals felt that this was top-down; that *they* were from the working classes, and that people should speak for themselves.” Krishnakumar and his peers decided to band together and “fight the hegemony.”

On March 25, 1987, a group of 13 artists—KP Krishnakumar, Alex Mathew, CK Rajan, VN Jyothi Basu, K. Prabhakaran, K. Madhusudhanan, Pushkin EH, TK Hareendran, C. Pradeep, K. Raghunandan, Anoop B., D. Alexander, KR Karunakaran and Dube herself—staged an exhibition at the Faculty of Fine Arts, Baroda, called “Questions and Dialogue.” Dube’s sharp and incisive catalog text channeled the Radical’s critique of the Baroda narrative movement, calling out their “pseudo historical depth,” “false-humanism,” “colonized consciousness,” “bourgeois aesthetic” and all kinds of kitsch perceived in their works. “This critical act turns the compound questioning eye onto everything, seizes the present moment, stands crude, naked and knife-sharp and will not allow anyone to pass,” she wrote. While immediate responses to this



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Archival image of Anita Dube and Ranjana Thapleyal working at the Kasauli Art Centre Sculpture Workshop, 1984. Photo by Vivan Sundaram. Courtesy Vivan Sundaram and Asia Art Archive, Hong Kong.

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Archival image of Anita Dube (front, center) at an evening gathering with the participating artists of Kasauli Art Centre Sculpture Workshop, 1984. The artists included K. Madhusudhan, KP Krishnakumar, Alex Mathew, Khushbash Shehrawat, Ashokan Poduval, NN Rimzon, Prithpal Singh Sehdev Ladi, Siegfried Neuenhausen, Vivan Sundaram, N. Pushpamala and Ranjana Thapleyal. Photo by Vivan Sundaram. Courtesy Vivan Sundaram and Asia Art Archive, Hong Kong.





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SILENCE (BLOOD WEDDING), 1997,
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 dimensions variable. Courtesy the artist
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“anarchist bomb”—as Kapur referred to the exhibition then—were personal and passionate, this moment of “ideological unrest,” as Kapur refers to it now, arguably generated important debates among artists in Baroda.

IV. Porous Architecture

“I think it certainly had an impact on my practice,” Malani recalled. “Around this time I looked for new tools and materials, like wall drawings and theater, to extend my work to a larger public . . . But sadly the movement had a very short breath.” While the “Questions and Dialogue” moment fueled certain shifts, whether in artists’ practices (namely Malani’s and Sundaram’s) or in “creating a hegemonic dent” as Dube puts it, it also lost its support structure, and many of the Radicals had to retreat back to Kerala in the years after the show. Alluding to why the group were unable to sustain their position of challenge, Dube said: “Hegemonic battles can only be fought on firm and equal ground.” Though some of the Radicals went on to exhibit artworks, and run village art camps, Krishnakumar in particular found that he could no longer identify with the values or positions of the bourgeoisie or proletariat. During this moment, complicated by several other personal and health factors, Krishnakumar’s existential crisis began to intensify, and in December 1989, he committed suicide.

The group dispersed. Dube went home to Lucknow. Here, still in shock, she went back to wood carving, which she had experimented with previously, this time more intensely, making sculptures as a way of working through the trauma of what had taken place. “Art is amazingly therapeutic, and after this episode, I gave it that value,” she said. “Coming from a family of doctors, I think that’s what the role of the artist is—to heal yourself and heal the wounds of the social system.” As Dube was emerging from this period of grief and vulnerability, she set herself a test. In 1991, she made a set of 20 single-line, anatomical drawings in pencil depicting women—to see if she was indeed an artist. “I felt I had a sense of form and anatomy despite having no training. That gave me confidence, and there was no looking back.”

Art-making turned out to be a restorative, gratifying and liberating experience for Dube. A year later, she decided to stage a solo show called “Desire Garden” (1992) of her drawings and sculptures. “Her earliest sculptural works started with a carved wooden element, then usually added more elements in other materials,” said Peter Nagy, founder of Nature Morte gallery who has worked with Dube for two decades. “[They] were continuing a language she had inherited from the Kerala Radicals and trying to bring the found object to that.” As the show was not in a formal gallery, but in a semi-outdoor space within a Charles Correa apartment building, it is said to have captivated the audience, including art-world peers Sundaram and Kapur. An exhibition she later curated in the lobby and forecourt of the Kamani Auditorium in 1996—which Nagy attended and said he found “very impressive”—also disrupted conventional curatorial architectures, this time foregrounding the processual, visceral and material. “I juxtaposed contemporary art with objects from the street, like a pyramid of oranges or a large broom,” Dube said of the show.

V. Between Language and Art

Whether in writing, curating or art, there is an edge of criticality that has stayed with Dube from her experience with the Radicals, which she has since expanded upon in multiple ways. Along with an interest in contemporaneous critics like John Berger, Dube was similarly interested in the ideas of postmodern scholars such as Jacques Derrida, Slavoj Žižek and Noam Chomsky, all of whom came to speak in Delhi in the 1990s. While making art, she began writing a series of robust critiques in the relatively progressive newspaper, the *Economic Times*, then under the editorship of Sadanand Menon.

“There was a softness in the cultural scene [at the time], where they never examined economies or class positions,” Dube remarked. Her review of Raja Ravi Varma’s retrospective, at the National Museum in 1993, not only sought to address such blind spots but also boldly positioned Varma’s upper-caste, male, Hindu construction of nationhood and women within a dangerous lineage of right-wing cultural propaganda.

The impetus for such writing is revealed in her column “A Show of Closed Gestures,” from 1994, where she reviewed an exhibition curated by her long-standing interlocutor Kapur and questioned the conceptual and dialectical pairing of works, inconsistencies and tokenism of certain inclusions, as well as the premise and expectations of the entire endeavor. This rigorous reading was bookended by a call to “shed off our intellectual sloth” toward a healthier culture of critique. “It is with this hope, that many such questions and counter questions, from multiple directions will dance, on all our forums, to internally enliven and deepen our ‘making’ and ‘thinking,’ and toward more fearless and open practices, that I write.” However, it was in her passionate piece for the *Economic Times* on Francis Bacon, in 1995, that her flair for the literary met her deep interest in the body—and in this evocation of flesh, desire, blood, violence, beauty and banality we see a glimpse of what is yet to come. She wrote, “Nothing could be abandoned here and this was the anxiety, the struggle, among others, this was the violence and horror, and not any other as seen in the most ‘real’ eyes, and the most tender lips, almost living, and perhaps the best flesh, painted in this century, even as the desire was too much to remain on the surface, and so then broke through to lie amongst the ruins, in the gore, as was possible only in painting.”

Despite her facility as a critic, Dube thought a lot about the constraints of writing as a medium, and felt that art may have a better way of reaching people and cutting across social strata. “One of the reasons I started to make art was to get away from the limitations of language,” she explained. In 1995, after a hiatus of productivity, and feeling that wood carving was reaching its limits, she went on a residency to Namibia. It was her first trip abroad, and she carried with her some blue velvet and silver thread. “I fell in love with the material. Velvet has a body to it, it has little hairs, it’s human-skin-like, the way it absorbs light. It’s lush and has this exaggerated beauty that counters the terrible things we see every day.” Made on her trip, *Desert Queen* (1996) combines the sumptuous and the cadaverous, with its headless, female, animal hide stitched in silver and blue. It was strung up with black rope for Nature Morte gallery’s first exhibition in Delhi, “Nirguna/Saguna,” held in 1997. “People thought it was quite macabre,” Nagy said. “But *Desert Queen* was the beginning of something new for her—certainly a condensation of multiple elements into a single, unified whole that clicked.”

VI. Embodied Performance

Feminist scholar Peggy Phelan, in her essay in the anthology *Art and Feminism* (2001), reminds us that “rationality gives us ways to make categories, while art gives us ways to resist them.” For Dube, *Desert Queen* not only allowed for a breakthrough in formal language, but it also unraveled a new set of creative and conceptual possibilities. During another traumatic period, when her father was terminally ill with cancer, she happened upon a sack of bones that her brother was using to study anatomy in their Lucknow family home. Disturbed and in despair, Dube was also contemplating “the collapse of romantic idealism toward relationships as an ideal.” In this frame of mind, Dube began to soak the bones in formaldehyde and cover them in velvet. The theatrical installation *Silence (Blood Wedding)* (1997)—consisting of a bright-red velvet-covered, stone-studded and lace-dripping pelvic bone, rib cage and spinal cord set of “wedding jewelry”—conjures up fantastical realities, and battles against the impossibility of permanence, in her love and life.

Beyond eros and death, this work also employs motifs of the *medico-erótico* to reflect upon ills within the social corpus.

Dube's pull toward the body and its politics might seem inevitable in retrospect, as a feminist engagement with ideas of embodiment allows for many social categories to be played with and simultaneously destabilized. "Women have always been asking whether something feels real or not, and this often comes to them through the body," she said. One of Dube's most critically celebrated works, *Keywords* (2005), acts as a triangulation of her core concepts, connecting up language and art; art and the body; and the body and language. Performed in front of a small audience at Khoj International Artists' Association in Delhi (and with her alter-ego being that of a Muslim man) the artist took huge slabs of bloody beef and painstakingly carved out phrases using her father's scalpel. With each letter taking up to 15 minutes to carve, she surgically sculpted the words "Permanent Revolution," "Avant-Garde," "Sexual Love" and "About Ethics," over a few hours, in a bid to reveal their inherent instability and mutability.

From initially writing about objects and ideas, she physically turned words into objects and doubted their fixity of meaning. (She would explore this abstraction of language further in subsequent works such as *Three Texts*, 2009, in which she takes white velvet and uses black ink to write three texts over one another, leaving us to seek alternative and new meanings from them.) In addition to this, Dube assumed multiple roles in *Keywords*, as an agent of criticality, the daughter of a surgeon and her performative alter-ego. In the book *South Asian Feminisms* (2012), scholar Ratna Kapur talks about the agency of such mixed subjectivities as being located "in the relationship of these identities and performances with the subject's interior disposition." Aptly, Kapur cites the idea of "revolution" as ultimately being "within the subject." Dube continued her exploration of performing many parts in *A Touch of Moon* (2012), this time more overtly as a blind mendicant, dapper dandy and social medium. Wearing silver contact lenses and a gray suit, and holding out a silver begging bowl, she walked the streets—stopping to connect with individuals who held her hands and saw their reflections in her eyes. With these gestures, she sought to privilege intimacy, embody ethical questions and overcome cultural boundaries.



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KEYWORDS, 2005, documentation of performance at Khoj Studios, New Delhi, 2005. Courtesy Khoj International Artists' Association.

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THREE TEXTS, 2009, Ink on velvet, 401.32 x 518.16 cm. Courtesy Nature Morte, New Delhi.

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VII. The Artist-Critic-Curator

This idea of remaining fluid, between genders and roles, is extremely important to Dube. “With curating, working, everything, I hate being trapped or fixed,” she told me. “I’m very comfortable in my body but I like exploring different modes. It’s all about attitude and identification in terms of eros.” In many conversations and artworks, Dube circles back to the notion of eros and the erotic as a source of revelation and knowledge. For example, she cites the installation, *Erotics/Politics* (2014) in which we see the word “politics” written in elongated black capitals on the wall underneath the word “erotics,” slanting as if it were its shadow, as one of her most important works. “I’ve always thought that both these things are motors or engines that drive this world. Eroticism drives us as human beings, our individual subjectivity, while politics drives us collectively. Both fascinate me as a duo in which either erotics is dominant and politics is its shadow or vice versa. Like wrestlers or conjoined twins.” The twinning of these concepts also reminds us that pleasure, love and desire are often left out of the discourse of feminist politics. Dube’s foregrounding of feminism was rather organic, however, and developed over time, as oddly enough the otherwise liberal Radicals viewed feminism as an import. “How can you be truly radical without feminism?” she asks now.

In her recent critique of the group, and the ideas that they tried to live by, she said that some of them still ring true, but not all of it stands the test of time. “As you get older you realize these ideas are all great, but revolution is far away—that’s the slow, painful part of growing up,” she explained. “Now I see it as a moment, like when you light a firecracker; an action or radical burst. It shakes up a few things . . . ‘Questions and Dialogue’ was essentially a set of propositions. Some of these questions can still be addressed and are still alive.” As Dube approaches her next critical challenge, as curator of the fourth edition of the Kochi-Muziris Biennale, she said that she will employ many of these concepts, from the initial questions set by the Radicals in the 1980s, to her early curatorial endeavors in the 1990s, within the exhibition.

For example, she told me there will be an open pavilion at the Biennale where she hopes for “people and ideas to float through, like wind flows through space,” in a very similar way to her “Desire Garden” exhibition. Another aspect where she returns to the notion of letting people, or the subaltern, speak for themselves comes with the Biennale’s focus on inclusivity—particularly Dalit, tribal, queer and older woman artists. She reiterated her hope for “those pushed to the margins of dominant narratives” to speak, “not as victims, but as futurisms’ cunning and sentient sentinels” in her curatorial note for the exhibition, incidentally published a day after the historical judgment in which the Supreme Court finally overturned Section 377 decriminalizing homosexual activity.

Given India’s current political positions, the evocation of Dube’s continuous and prescient themes, including the politics of friendship, love, dialogue, social action and even the ideas of solidarity and equality that Krishnakumar tried to promote, remind us of what makes her work “ahistorical,” or always relevant, as curator and long-standing friend Arshiya Lokhandwala said when we spoke. Whether a focus on the sensory, sociological or sensual, what we can expect is that Dube will construct narratives via objects and allow forms to communicate freely for themselves. “The Biennale will be a reflection of her and the way she looks at the world,” explained Lokhandwala. “She’s really committed to what art means, reproduces and says. It will be intense, like her.” 🌐

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EROTICS/POLITICS, 2014, Steel wire
covered in black velvet, 167.64 x 233.68 cm.
Courtesy Nature Morte, New Delhi.