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**Volume 1**

**Root and Stem**

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Art Education Discourses

Volume 1 Root and Stem

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# The Sound of a Dancing Image

Zahid Dar

## Abstract

The conference presentation included a dance performance with a projection, *Dancin' Image* (DI) and a short reading from a radio play, *Duty Free* (DF). The paper reveals how and why I use autobiographical details of my own creative work to deal with issues of ethnicity, sexuality and gender. In the three pieces I use very different strategies. The film, *Destiny Desire Devotion* (DDD) deliberately uses a narrative structure in order to make it as accessible as possible to the widest audience. In DI a performance-live art, open-ended, non-narrative structure is used. This was originally part of one of my plays, *Paki Boy*, but since performing it out of its dramatic context, it has taken on different feelings and meanings for me and the audiences. I began learning Kathak dance at thirty, film-making at thirty five, and at forty, story-telling as an art form. Other strategies are not ruled out for the future.

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This article is about a journey in two senses of the word. In the first sense it is about a tour I made of India in 1985 and in another sense it is about embarking on a creative journey that the trip enabled. The journey was a going back to my roots, a concept often used to imply a cultural, physical, linguistic or spatial empathy back through time. Simone Weil has written that 'to be rooted is perhaps the most important and least recognised need of the human soul'. [1] I can remember, even as a child, that I felt that I belonged to more than one world. The effect of the trip to India on my identification as a second generation Indian migrant, was like that of a surrealist collage, where what you see is 'an illusion of true recognition where former lives, actual lives, future lives melt together in one life'. [2] It was the working through the experience of migration as the visual recognition of images of my family name juxtaposed in different scenes, or, the realisation that I had a connection to different space-times. It was this link with history and geography that was so strong and that was so far from the history I had been taught at school, both in Kenya and in Britain.

In the second sense, the trip had also set me on another journey, one which I am still venturing on, that is one of becoming a performer (Kathak dancer), writer and director of film and theatre. This creative journey has resulted in as many challenges as it has served to quench. The primary concern it raised for me was: what is the postcolonial writer or artist representing in the West if not the social context of the Other? Is the writer artist an ethnographer rather than a producer? [3] If anthropology is the writing of the Other, i.e., it precludes the voice and the pen of the Other, it maintains the Other in silence, then what is the writing or imagery of the Other



FIGURE 1

I went to India in the mid Eighties. I hadn't gone to do India or be a tourist it was more of a going back to my roots journey

about, particularly in a country which is his or her ancestral land? Or, as in my case, an artist writing about an imagined homeland. This is what links diasporic communities and allows them to imagine communities that stretch back to ancestral lands as homelands, hence the notion of going back to one's roots. [4] This refers to the notion of diasporic identity that Stuart Hall uses.

*It's connected with the Derridean notion of dissemination, so it's connected with the idea of movement...with the notion of hybridity...and I think of ethnicity in the*

*same way. I don't mean by ethnicity some kind of collective home, which you then police. I use ethnicity to signal something specific in positionality, the particular histories inscribed in the position: what makes your difference different from my difference. That is our ethnicity. And because it is disseminated, it is constantly open to repositioning. That's the logic of difference which I am using to think the question of positionality, the question of ethnicity, and the question of diaspora...Ethnicity is the only terminology we have to describe cultural specificity, so one has to go back to it, if one doesn't want to land up with an empty cosmopolitanism - 'citizen of the world' as the only identity. [5]*



FIGURE 2

As a child, my grandmother would tell me tales of Kashmir, of our past. I never believed them as an adult and never thought I would find such visible signs of our history

One specific aspect of cultural identity is movement, as in dance. My conference paper was also in part presented as a Kathak dance piece with a video projection and music. My use of this dance style was to invoke an articulation of ethnicity through performance, which was the presentation of a read text, a projected image, music played and live dancer. Their synergistic effect being the sound of a dancing image. Dance and music play an important part in our daily diversions - the quotidian (the everyday singing in the bath or shower or the dancing in front of the mirror while getting ready in the morning); partly because they are so strongly inscribed in our culture within the realms of feeling and emotion. We dance with joy when we are happy and sing or empathise with sad mournful ballads when a romance has soured. In this written piece the movement is represented in the photographs of a Kathak dance performance (see images below) and the journey is represented by the photographs of the trip to India interspersed through the text. Homi Bhabha asserts that:

*Our characteristic mode then is not a narrative in which scenes take place seriatim, but rather broken narratives, fragmentary compositions, and self-consciously staged testimonials, in which the narrative voice keeps stumbling over itself, its obligations and its limitations. [6]*

The performance was structured in this vein. At the time I had not realised that it was meant to be deliberately evoking these themes, but on reflection this sums up my approach to storytelling in writing films and plays, and my style of performance or the delivery of text and dance. The subject of my work is representative of the shift in much critical theory and practice nowadays, from the previously

sociological categories of class, gender and race to the performative dynamics of lifestyle, sexual difference and ethnicity.

My work deals with all these issues, that of being Asian, gay and coming from a working class background. The ideas for this paper have also been developing from another journey, one which involves Jacquie Swift who originally asked me to write a proposal for a publication and caused me to think about the relationship of autobiographical detail and creativity. The creative journey has involved making friendships, building networks and other ways of working which have led to encounters that have been enriching, extending and at times exerting.

My own journey of discovering my roots was made when I went to Kashmir as part of a three month tour of India in 1985. But there are countless examples in literature which give testament to the fundamental need in us to find roots in a homeland. Among the most well known and popularly accessible must be Alex Haley's *Roots* or Salman Rushdie's *Midnight's Children*. [7]

In Kashmir the display of many shop signs with my family name, Dar Motors, Dar Palace Hotel and so on, began to place me both temporally and spatially, but in travelling through the country I was made aware that I was not treated like a native, someone who belonged, but as a visitor, a tourist. To the inhabitants I was someone from another place. The yearning to belong to that place of my origin, the origin of my family name, my ancestors vanished. With it went the desire to hold on to notions of authenticity, which had in turn derived from feelings of belonging to a homeland. Instead I

began to warm to the idea of being a visitor, or Other, wherever I was, either in Britain or in India, and it was hard to accept that I could never be an Indian in India or be treated as an equal British citizen in Britain.

This trip not only made me acknowledge my roots but also made me aware of the possibility of creating my own space - of being different. Our own notion of our identity is always an ongoing process and never static, but we are constantly producing and reproducing ourselves anew, through transformation and difference. [8] Positioning oneself as the Other is a difficult decision to make, as being the Other is not something we strive for, on the contrary, we struggle to be the Same. Artists have used this process to be reflexive in the discursive practices of writing, film-making and television production and the different strategies they employed may be linked to a political spectrum with the more 'right wing' work trying to show how the artist or group is the same as the dominant one, and the progressive and 'left wing' work depicting how the minority or artist is positioned as Other in the host culture.

Michel Foucault argues that scientific discourses are fictions that function as facts. [9] I would see my own work as part of a discursive practice where facts function as fictions. This of course is not a unique process as I indicated earlier. Artists often use their own autobiographical narrative to make their work distinctive, whereas the discursive practices of writing, film and television define work into genres that are factual or fictional. I use autobiographical detail and work it into a fictional drama as in the case of my first short film, *Destiny Desire Devotion* and the stage play, *Paki Boy*. [10] There are

categories within film and television production where fiction and non-fiction are clearly defined; there are however other categories, for example, docu-drama, or films based on autobiographical and biographical details where they appear to merge. Where one finishes and the other starts is not hard and fast which creates an overlapping area where a large section of work may be placed. The point I am making is that the use of autobiographical material is not in any way new, radical or transgressive, but is one of many sources of inspiration for artists. Moreover, in television drama authorship is usually credited to the writer rather than the director, even though their collaboration may have been close and creative, but it is a general reflection of how the English literary tradition is linked with serious theatre where the writer is seen as the sole creator.

It is common practice in television and radio drama to commission writers who are from the communities they are writing about. David Rose, the head of Channel Four drama department in the Eighties (previously commissioning drama editor at the BBC), argued that authenticity was only guaranteed by writers who had roots or an extensive portfolio of research in the area they were working. [11] Alternatively, the writers are sent to research those communities for months before writing about them. This is perhaps justified if one assumes that these writers will present authentic stories - i.e., authenticity guaranteed by their background or their research, and while I have no problem with this commissioning process, it is irritating when criticism of the work focuses solely on the writer's background, rather than the content or quality of writing. This is particularly true for Black or Asian artists and it is very rare for an Asian or Black writer or artist to be offered work that deals with a

non-black story line or topic. [12] There is still a lot of pressure from funding and commissioning bodies to promote work from ethnic minority artists that deals with their social and political situation in Britain rather than issues of form or aesthetics. Consequently, British Asian art has not yet been received as an art form to be situated within critical theory, but is still interpreted as migrant art or in relation to the social experience of the artist as defined by the art establishment. [13]

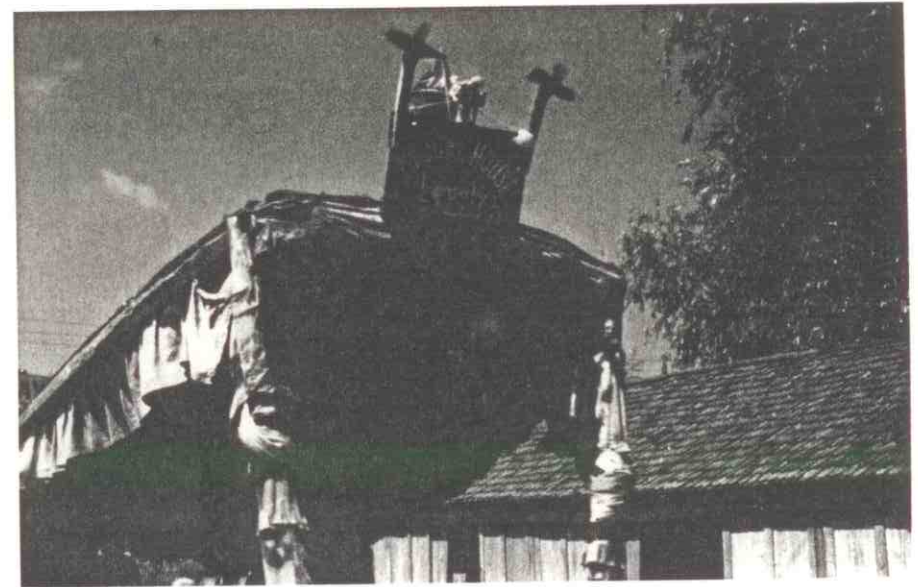


FIGURE 3

I hadn't gone to India to locate my ancestors, yet I was always looking for someone, something, not knowing what sign would appear. Dar Palace houseboat, the first sign of a connection with my heritage - the long long journey now all seemed worthwhile

With hindsight, I realise that I had been searching for something and somewhere to which I belonged, a site of origin, a homeland, or home space for many years without knowing it. I had no idea why this was so important to me, and until that journey to India all I knew was a story, a story about my grandfather's family coming from Srinigar, related to me by my grandmother in a rare moment of intimacy. I had never dreamed of finding such visible signs of our history. The first glimpse of 'Dar Palace' houseboat made for 'a ghostly intimation of simultaneity across homogenous empty time - an intimation' of ancestral Indianness. [14] The importance of my grandmother's story is no longer that it is a fiction, but that it is a memory from our history. It is that atonal voice of exile, migration, diaspora disrupting the powerful oratory of the harmonious and concordant which brings me once more to the earlier questions that I raised about the representations of the Other.

*How do we read the representation of a people who, in their response to domination and dissemination, must invent a sense of themselves, must create the shadow of the past to throw upon a future that is fragile and unfulfillable?* [15]

It is this condition of being disseminated that attuned my experiences of India - my journey had allowed me to see that I was someone who had a history and a link with a past that was more than the economic relationship to Britain which I believed to be the case. My grandfather had migrated as indentured labour from India in the Thirties and my parents had migrated to Britain for economic and political reasons.

The journey awakened a need in me to express my experiences first



FIGURE 4

When I returned back home to England it made me question my motives for doing everything I did. The trip had totally stunned me, it had me doubting my lifestyle, my politics and my work.

through dance, and then later through film, theatre and writing, all in terms of specifically validating my ethnicity and sexuality. In many instances the trend in contemporary art has been to turn to the abject, the surface, the multi-disciplinary and multi-media or mixed media, the performative (live art, performance art and visual theatre) and the Other (feminist art, Black art, diasporic art and queer art). All these types of art form deal with the issues that are, to the artists



at one and the same time, alien and personal. In abject art the issues and form are both repulsive and attractive and/or dangerous and pleasurable. These are expressions of the division between the subject and its body and a unification of the self and Other, the condition of being social. The processes of abjection are crucial to the construction of subjectivity even though it may be racist, homophobic or otherwise inclined.

In using the term subjectivity I refer to individuality and self awareness, i.e., the condition of being a subject, but also as the subject being dynamic and multiple, always positioned in relation to particular discourses and practices and being itself also produced by these. I find the term preferable to the psychological terms of identity and self as they better indicate a duality, a representation of the social and psychological spheres as being separate territories, one internal and one external to the person. It is my opinion that by referring to subjectivity rather than self or identity it is possible to envisage the individual as being continuously constituted and reconstituted in a recursive relationship of mutually advancing production and change. This production and change is a constant within the process of discourse, a process which takes place each time we think or speak.

These again are the performative themes (i.e., of ethnicity, sexual difference and of lifestyle) that I referred to earlier and are the focus of discussion and consideration by critical artists and theorists. This shift in academia and in the art market may have been happening since the mid-Fifties, but the problems that face artists who want to speak from these positions are the same. They argue that 'they struggle to find and maintain a genuine voice in a (dominant) culture

which can often seem suffocating'. [16]

The journey is a learning experience in itself. In my own case it made me realise that I was struggling to find my own voice - a struggle I was eventually able to express in terms of being strangled by the dominant culture. Though it has taken time to find this voice in writing and performing it has begun to happen with the help of a supportive group of critical thinkers and friends which I have gradually built around me. One such friendship has been with the sociologist Chetan Bhatt, who has not only given support during the making of certain pieces of work, but helped me to understand their relation to social and personal problems.

My first short film, *Destiny Desire Devotion*, deals with the subjectivity of an Asian woman who has a gay son and Chetan Bhatt has written that this film represents:

*The troubled meeting place between race, religion and homosexuality has preoccupied many political and cultural debates in recent years. This bold and innovative film provides a different gaze upon these difficult issues through exploring the meditations of a Muslim mother coming to terms with her gay son. Dar stages the drama and ritual of acceptance, conformity and transgression within a British Asian household. The family is one site of tension within which the unspoken presence of homosexuality recovers ideas of honour and shame. However, the family, in the shape of the mother, is also the site of dreams, other utopian places, where a different way of being, a different loving can exist. Using both narrative, dream sequences and memory, Dar skilfully addresses the complicated territories of desire that disrupt ideas of certainty, conformity and community. The result is a moving, humanistic testimony to the existence and joy*

*of gay Asian lives.* [17]

The film ends with an image of young people dancing around a male couple to the sound of Bhangra fusion with pop - a filmic representation of the sound of a dancing image. The music is represented diegetically, i.e., as if heard by the mother in shot, from another room in the house, the visual representation of the young people is of them dancing in the other room, the image of the male couple is the mother's fantasy of her son and his lover. The combined synergistic effect is a representation that is a *sound of a dancing image*, which produces a meaning that suggests much more than the sum of the different parts. It was my intention to have such an open ending which would be a link to another film; a hook that leaves the audience expectantly waiting for the next part of the story.

The young people dancing to an Eurasian dance melody, is a metaphor for the different world views that the mother and son possess, as it is superimposed with the image of mother praying. It is also a foreboding - that of the dangers which might erupt from a cathartic confrontation between mother and son in the future.

Frantz Fanon describes how dissemination, dislocation and disruption are all experiences that allow us to experience a need to be looking for a past and ancestors, but he also suggests that this may be troubling as well as enabling:

*It is not enough to try to get back to the people in that past out of which they have already emerged, rather we must join them in fluctuating movement which they are just giving shape to, and which, as soon as it has started will be the signal for*



FIGURE 5  
Photomontage of press stills from *Destiny Desire Devotion*. Original photography by Gordon Rainsford, 1994

*everything to be called into question. Let there be no mistake about it; it is to this zone of instability that we must come.* [18]

The rhythm and flow of my final dance movements were signifying this disturbance, and my performance in the short dance film *Gunghroo* (Figure 7) investigates the possibility of celebrating difference through recognising it rather than excluding it or making it Other. The changes that are taking place within dance, as different cultures begin to recognise the richness each has to offer the other, can point



FIGURE 6

In India I had not been treated as an Indian and here in the UK I was a Paki - an outsider in both countries that I thought of as home. I learnt that I had to accept being different, that was the key, it really didn't matter where I was

a way to future possibilities, however fragile and tentative.

The music was a haunting melody composed specifically for the film by David Muddyman, of the group Loop Guru and was released as a track on one their albums in 1997.

The following images are taken from performances and preparations

for performances and conclude the paper.

Zahid Dar



FIGURE 7  
Gunghroo Jameela.  
Opening dance  
sequence includes  
thât, amad and  
salami (technical  
Kathak dance terms  
for standing posture,  
introduction and  
salutation  
respectively)

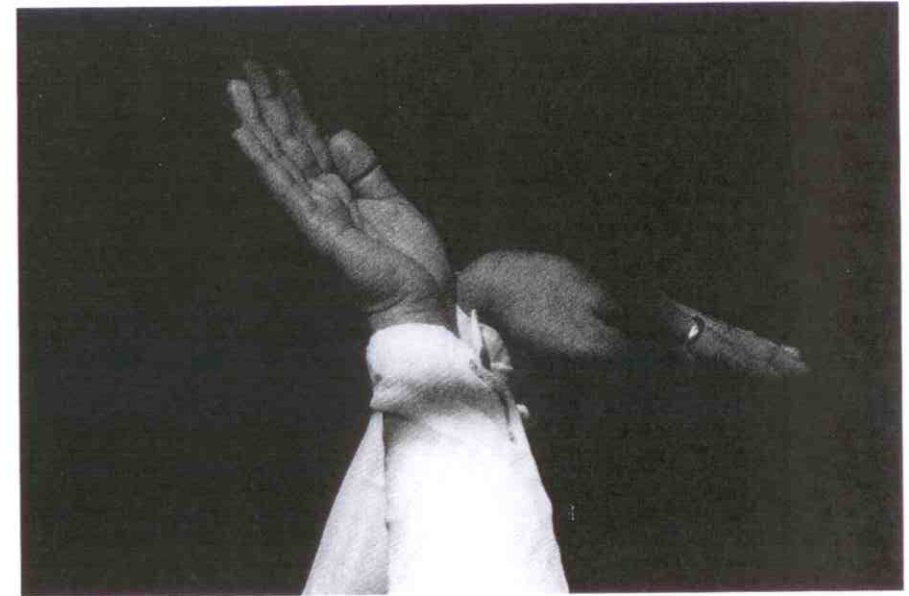


FIGURE 8  
I was a disco diva on the London club scene before I went to Kashmir.  
On my return, I realised that I needed to dance a dance that spoke of  
my cultural heritage, the journey, my history - a tangible source of  
movement.



FIGURE 9  
On my return to London, I learnt Kathak dance, at the Academy of Indian Dance, as this is the classical dance style of Northern India and one that the Muslim moghul rulers of India adopted into their courts. I wanted to fill the room with the janak janak of a Kathak dancer.



FIGURE 10  
Tha thei thei tat / aa thei thei tat /  
tat tat ta / dig tha dig dig thei / tat tat ta / dig tha dig dig thei / tat  
tat dig tha that  
dig tha dig dig thei / dig tha dig dig thei / dig tha dig dig thei  
dig tha dig dig thei / dig tha dig dig thei / dig tha dig dig thei  
dig tha dig dig thei / dig tha dig dig thei / dig tha dig dig thei



FIGURE 11  
There is always the hope that in the future differences will be accepted and not used to instigate struggles of power. Like subjectivity the future is constructed and must involve us all from different backgrounds and locations.



FIGURE 12

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