

Meet the artist: Arpita Shah

Film Transcript

Produced by Street Level Photoworks

Running time: 8 minutes

I am Arpita Shah and I'm a photographer based in Scotland. I work between photography and film, and my work explores the intersections of culture, identity and heritage. As an Indian-born artist, I spent an earlier part of my life living between India, Ireland and the Middle East before settling in the UK. So, this migratory experience is often reflected in my practice, which centres on exploring the notion of home, belonging and shifting cultural identities.

I studied photography at Napier University in Edinburgh, and as part of my photographic practice I often collaborate with communities and individuals, and make work that explores the complex narratives around identity for individuals who like myself feel culturally displaced between lands.

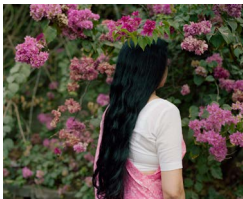
Having been based in Scotland for 17 years, I have worked on a variety of projects collaborating with women and families from diverse communities. *Nalini* is a long-term project that I have been developing since 2015, that has been produced across India, Kenya and the UK, and centres on my maternal lineage, exploring migration, memory and loss. Combining photography, found objects and installation, *Nalini* explores the personal and cultural issues around displacement, migration and heritage found within the South Asian diaspora. Looking into my own family history, *Nalini* centres on my mother, my grandmother and me, and explores the intimacy, distance and tensions between generations of India-born women that have grown up and lived across various continents and cultures.

'Nalini' is my Grandmother's name, so the project begins with her and was inspired by her. She was born in India but spent her childhood in East Africa before returning to India. Although I visit her in India every couple of years, I started this project because I realised how little I really knew about what she was like as a young woman, her memories, experiences and relationships. Every time I see her she gets a little frailer and more forgetful. So, I felt this really important urge to document her stories before they got lost.

As well as being my grandmother's name, 'Nalini' is also the Sanskrit word for lotus flower, which in Hindu mythology symbolises fertility, the womb and rebirth. My work often references lotus flowers and particularly flora from Indian mythology, to

evoke experiences of displacement and the female life cycle. In Hinduism, flowers are very sacred and often used as offerings to ancestors, so I wanted to explore all these elements in the series using flowers not only as homage to my ancestors but also as metaphors for our female experiences.

Nalini has been a personal journey of discovery for me, one that has let me connect with my maternal lineage through photography. The series and exhibition comprises of photographs of my mother's and grandmother's bodies, as well as photographs of objects and landscapes that hold special significance for the women in my family. Some of the objects are presented in physical form such as an old Taj Mahal sweet tin, opal stones from East Africa and crumbling studio family portraits from the '20s and '60s from India and Kenya. These objects have travelled across continents through time and through generations as artefacts of my family's journey, so it was really important to include them because they bear little scratches, scars and creases. Like the body, they have aged with time, full of stories and full of secrets.



This is a portrait of my mother in Ahmedabad, India, she is entering wild bougainvilleas that lead to where her childhood home once was. We had visited this spot a few times and on the day of the photo shoot she wore a sari that matched the dusty pink petals, because I wanted her to look like she was sinking into the image, she is turned away and in many of the portraits in this series you can't always fully see the faces. It's because I wanted the viewers to get a sense of that deep longing we all have for the past, our ancestors, our childhood, home, and to want to reach into the image and turn it around.

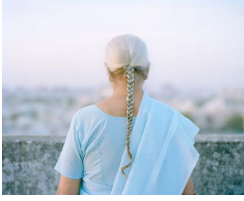


As part of this project, I started rummaging through family members' attics in India and the UK. This is one of the first images that I found, it's a crumbling photograph of the infamous Krishna Milk Depot that my family owned in Nairobi in the 1930s. In the centre of the image is a 5-year-old Nalini, my grandmother, looking out at me. Finding this photograph was very significant for me - my grandmother would talk endlessly about the turquoise hues of the Mombasa sea and the wild bougainvilleas that surrounded the Krishna dairy farm. So being able to physically see it was wonderful and incredibly emotional. I think if I hadn't started this project, this image would have decayed in the attic where I found it.



This is a portrait of my great grandmother, her passport documents her journey across India and Kenya, a journey that many Gujarati Indians had made when Kenya and India were colonised. When I travelled to Kenya in 2017 for the first time as part of this project I took her passport with me, I wanted this

photograph to include my journey, so as homage to her I picked fresh bougainvillea from where her home in Nairobi used to be.



This is a portrait of my grandmother Nalini looking out into the Ahmedabad cityscape just before sunset, her hair and sari with similar tones to the sky. I often asked her what she was thinking when she stares out into the balcony like this, and she said the pinky sky tones reminded her of Nairobi.



This is a hand-tinted portrait of my Grandmother which I have re-photographed with dried lotus flowers, a shrine-like still life. The original photograph was taken in a studio in Mehmdabad India, when she was much younger.

This is my great Grandmother's silk sari from Nairobi which was passed down to my grandmother, to my mother and now to me. As an Indian woman there is something incredibly powerful about being able to perform the same rituals of wrapping a sari around your body in the same way your female ancestors did.



Jambli, which means purple, is my grandmother's favourite colour, and this is a photograph taken in her bedroom in Mehmdabad. She often tucks her comb under her pillow after combing her hair and neatly braiding it, you can see the wispy silvery strands entwined in its lilac tines. My grandmother's health has never been great, so I made this image when she was in the hospital and we weren't sure if she was going to get better.



This is a portrait of my grandmother's silver flowing hair - she was just at that peaceful moment after she had combed it and was about to braid it before going to sleep.

Nalini is a deeply personal project for me, but there are also some very universal themes in it and that's why I love working with photography. An image can be endlessly layered with meaning: the sitter's story, the photographer's story and the viewer's own story. Some images can be so deeply personal and autobiographical, yet at the same time be incredibly universal, all of this in just one single frame.