

This is an Open Access journal distributed under the terms of the Creative Commons Attribution License (CC-BY) 4.0 <https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by/4.0/>, which permits unrestricted use, distribution, and reproduction in any medium, provided the original author and source are credited.

Articles © 2023 the contributors

[HTTPS://DOI.ORG/10.14324/111.444.2396-9008.1540](https://doi.org/10.14324/111.444.2396-9008.1540)

**‘Lumen’, Sutapa Biswas, Autograph, London, 4 March 2022–4 June 2022. Catalogue: Ed. Amy Tobin, Ridinghouse, London, 2021, 128 pages, paperback, ISBN 9781909932647, £25.**

*Elliot Gibbons*

Set amongst the dark, moulded wooden interiors of the Red Lodge in Bristol is a female figure doubled in the intersecting reflections of two nearby circular mirrors. This woman, wearing a black sari and reciting a monologue throughout, is the main protagonist in Sutapa Biswas’ film *Lumen*. ‘Lumen’ is also the name of a survey show of Biswas’ work that recently travelled from the BALTIC Centre of Contemporary Art in Gateshead to Kettle’s Yard in Cambridge. In comparison, the final iteration of the exhibition at Autograph in London was considerably pared down, with the film *Lumen* presented by itself. Despite not situating the film in relation to Biswas’ path-breaking oeuvre, one is able to grasp a matured distillation of a practice seeking to centre the experiences of women from the South Asian diaspora. Though the thirty-minute film largely consists of the female actor taking up the role of the artist’s mother within the Red Lodge, the combination of this scene alongside a series of dissimilar images elicits an illuminative journey across space and time.

The actor’s poetic address to the camera is inspired by her mother’s experience of leaving India in the mid 1960s, as well as her own, and her grandmother’s experience under colonial rule. Gilane Tawadros notes in an article looking at Biswas’ early work, along with the work of fellow black British female artists, that the artistic practice of ‘gathering and re-using’ was a common means of reflecting the diasporic experience.<sup>1</sup> Biswas not only gathers the experiences of her female relatives through the long form poem in *Lumen*, but she also enfolds multiple other histories through the use of disparate sources. Archival footage of Indian labourers under the British raj and their white rulers interrupts scenes of present-day Bombay and the actor performing her monologue. This combination causes a temporal disjuncture highlighting the continuation of colonial disruption from India pre-independence to India post-independence and the aftereffects of partition.

Such temporal ruptures are reflected on by the protagonist throughout the film. She details how her daughter’s soul is cast between the future and past because of their journey to England, and later notes a discord between her present and future self. This diasporic sensibility is further evoked through the combination of panning shots over illustrations by James Forbes. Forbes sailed to Bombay as a writer for the English East India Company in 1765 and produced an account of his seventeen-year sojourn in a book titled *Oriental Memoirs* (1834). One image closes in on a black crow perched on colourful drawings of various flora and fauna: a rare moment where the ominous, dark, crow-like presence, spoken of incessantly, is visualised. The crow serves as a synecdoche for Biswas’ own gathering and collation of multiple references within the film. Equally,

the crow and its ease of movement becomes a paragon to the film's own perpetual movement across time and space.

Watching *Lumen*, the viewer boards a ship and quickly becomes dislocated from their respective sense of home. The sheer heterogeneity amongst the scenes within the film engenders a rhythm evocative of the rough seas once crossed by her mother, and herself. The fluctuating pace of the film is grounded by the actor playing the role of Biswas' mother amid the environs of the Red Lodge. The Red Lodge is significant as it was once home to a reform school for girls set up by the English abolitionist Mary Carpenter in 1854. Carpenter also advocated for the rights of Indian women to teach during her visit to India in 1866, and later founded the National Indian Association, bringing future Indian leaders to England for education.<sup>2</sup> Biswas is re-using this history to enrich these recurring scenes wherein the female actor delivers her monologue reflecting upon her movement from their homeland.

The motif of a South Asian woman dressed in a sari is integral to the film, not only because it is what structures the film, but because it centres the subjectivity of women within a diasporic narrative. Gayatri Gopinath notes a tendency for narrative frameworks to depend upon an oedipal relation between fathers and sons in South Asian diasporic arts and culture, which in-turn often renders the relationship between mother and daughter invisible.<sup>3</sup> Biswas' *Lumen* does not seek to retell a patriarchal story of dislocation. Instead, feminine subjectivity is the principal anchor within *Lumen* as it seeks to recount a story of migration and the specific trauma that ensues from a matriarchal perspective. The historical implications of the Red Lodge backdrop in each of these scenes further hammers home

the feminist motivations underpinning the film.

Biswas' tidal patterning of divergent sources in the film exudes a diasporic sensibility. Yet, this is also conveyed by individual scenes, such as one which simply pans upwards to a lit chandelier that spins continuously. The perpetual motion of the chandelier signals how British scholars, such as Paul Gilroy, have theorised diaspora as a concept which does not seek to fix ethnicity absolutely, but rather as being an infinite process of identity construction.<sup>4</sup> Likewise, the sense that the protagonist's identity is under construction is conveyed by her frequently being pictured looking into circular mirrors resting upon easels. In some instances, her being is tripled or doubled by the crossing paths of the mirrors' reflections. As such, this visually conveys how the monologue draws upon and embodies the experiences of Biswas, her mother, and her grandmother. But it is also a further means of centring the female subject within a chronicle of migration. *Lumen* deftly narrates a story of diasporic becoming from the historically disparaged perspective of South Asian women.

1 Gilane Tawadros, 'Beyond the Boundary', *Third Text*, 3, no.8-9 (1989): 147.

2 Thom Gehring and Fredalene B. Bowers. 'Mary Carpenter: 19th Century English Correctional Education Hero', *Journal of Correctional Education*, 54, no. 3 (2003): 116-117.

3 Gayatri Gopinath, *Impossible Desires: Queer Diasporas and South Asian Public Cultures* (Durham & London: Duke University Press, 2005), 5.

4 Paul Gilroy, *The Black Atlantic: Modernity and Double Consciousness* (London: Verso, 1993), 223.

This is an Open Access journal distributed under the terms of the Creative Commons Attribution License (CC-BY) 4.0 <https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by/4.0/>, which permits unrestricted use, distribution, and reproduction in any medium, provided the original author and source are credited.

Articles © 2023 the contributors