

The Cursed Land of Lustful Women

Kanika Gupta, Tina Palaić

Art historian and artist Kanika Gupta was artist in residence at the Slovene Ethnographic Museum in Ljubljana between July and September 2021. During her residency, she conducted research on the collection of Indian objects at the museum and presented new works based on this research. Gupta was also involved in a series of public discussions on environmental preservation and folklore related to it. Kanika Gupta was first introduced to the Indian collection at the Slovene Ethnographic Museum in 2018. As part of the residency, she documented the collection, which was then made accessible for a broader public. This collection raises questions about colonialism and hierarchies that continue to operate not only in the context of Europe but also within Indian society, where issues of caste and gender remain stubbornly persistent categories of difference and hierarchy. Far from representing a frozen past, the collection portrays a cultural continuity with phases of slow transition.

For Gupta, the Indian collection is potent with traditional ideas, many of which need to be questioned and some of which address the pressing concerns of our times. The recurring theme of trees and nature within this collection and in Indian art more generally became a compelling motif for Gupta's performance *The Cursed Land of Lustful Women*.

Gupta sees museums as spaces of care, not simply in their educational roles or as guardians of heritage; it is also their role to reconnect people with their roots, with love for nature, and to engage with the world along with its forests, rivers, and deserts as a family. Gupta's performance, which has also culminated in a book with the title *The Cursed Land of Lustful Women and the Power of Storytelling* delves into the idea of care as universal and a love for nature that is not bound by caste, race, and nationality.

*Fig. 1: Kanika Gupta, performance The Cursed Land of Lustful Women.
Photo: Mojca Račič. Gupta's personal archive.*



Fig. 2 + 3: The images are part of the Slovene Ethnographic Museum's collection from India.



Once upon a time ...
They say it was a woman
who discovered the secret of making wine
She used to worship trees ...
Or perhaps, she was ...
The tree Goddess herself!



*'What shall I do with these discourses of yours?
I have gone over like the first of Goddess Uṣā.
Go back to your destiny.
I am as hard to get as the wind.'*
Rig Veda 10.95.2

Tina: Our rapidly changing world is filled with ambiguity and instability, a world devoid of deep roots that provide a sense of belonging. Climate change, which exposes

us to unpredictable environmental phenomena, adds significantly to our sense of insecurity. Turning to the past and drawing on our heritage is thus often a way of attempting to explain our current circumstances while also considering what kind of future we would like to live in. These concerns were also raised by art historian Kanika Gupta, who has been collaborating with the Slovene Ethnographic Museum (SEM) for several years. SEM decided to invite Kanika for the project residency because she skilfully connects Indian mythologies and traditions with the topics of climate change and social justice, especially in relation to gender equality.

Kanika: I first worked with the SEM in 2018 when I documented the modern Indian Bazaar art in the museum's collection. A large section of objects in the Indian collection were yet to be investigated. This was a component of the residency organized by the TAKING CARE project, which had been moved from spring 2020 to the summer of 2021 because of the pandemic. With a brand new year, we had the opportunity to prepare the residency program in advance and set up an online pre-program with three dialogues about my work. The residency became a platform for me to create a discourse around trees and the importance of preserving nature. I was also keen to hear the voice of Slovenia and thus announced a poetry contest which had to be original, handwritten, and on the theme of trees. Much of what I received left me in tears.

Tina: Kanika's own experience of rapid environmental change and loss of natural diversity in and around Delhi and north India, as well as her desires and expectations for the future, motivated her to share with us a very personal story of the destruction of her family's home and the garden that surrounded it to make way for more concrete and cement-based construction. In her film *It was in Spring*, Kanika's inability to save the plantation is made subtly but unmistakably apparent, as was also discussed at the screenings.

Kanika: My documentary film *It was in Spring* subtly touches upon the changing landscapes in urban spaces from the point of view of my personal experience. It has been argued that the film comes from a privileged point of view (since the family in the film is able to afford the reconstruction of the house), but it does also point to the fact that an artificial face of luxury based on concrete, necessarily away from nature, is being sold to every caste and class across the world. From the contemporary profit-oriented perspective, cars and multi-storey constructions with cement are the only way to a better and happier life. This myth is so well absorbed by its consumers that we forget that nature, along with clean air, water, and climate are being compromised.

Tina: In her performance *The Cursed Land of Lustful Women*, Kanika relies on Indian stories from Buddhist, Jain, and Brahmanical traditions to tell the story of India at a time when profound social and environmental changes were taking place. These traditions intertwine issues of nature and attitudes toward it with gender inequalities and power dynamics between various social groups. Using the dance movements of the Indian dance tradition Kathak together with her vivid narrative, Kanika aimed to transcend romantic views of Indian culture and invite people into a dialogue about the environmental and social crises that humanity must deal with together, in solidarity.

Kanika: The residency was also a chance for me to indulge in a conversation around big old trees in urban spaces, which I did through my performance *The Cursed Land of Lustful Women*. As a child I would cherish the patches of forestation on the outskirts of Delhi which I witnessed being lost to commercialization and encroachment. The sense of loss I felt only deepened the depths of deprivation I experienced as a single woman in a tremendously patriarchal part of the world (every second day was a lesson in how unsafe the world is for a woman and what I must NOT do to protect myself). I always found solace in the trees; alas I witness these perishing, everyday. As a performer practising Indian dance, I always felt the need to tell my own stories and nature myths through it. This led to the creation of my performance after a long internal struggle and the completion of my Ph.D. on the theme of female tree deities.

Tina: The story of a fight for the environment is inextricably linked to the story of a fight for women's rights. Two independent Indian artists, Gauhar Jaan, a bold singer and dancer, and Zubeida Begum, a fearless film actress, both living life on their own terms, and Kanika Gupta herself performing *The Cursed Land of Lustful Women*, all mark out this entry. Kanika has used art to assert her right to express her own interpretation of the world and to pursue her dreams and inspirations rather than living a life based on social expectations, as was also the case with the two artists depicted.

Kanika: During the residency, and especially my performance, I learnt to express myself, which I had often found so difficult. I hope to be able to create more such stories and share them; it might prevent disaster.

*When disaster strikes
Spring shall be the first to leave us ...*