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**Picturing Resistance and Resilience: South Asian Identities  
in the work of Chila Kumari Burman**

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## Picturing Resistance and Resilience: South Asian Identities in the work of Chila Kumari Burman

### Introduction



Fig. 1, Chila Kumari Burman, *Convenience, Not Love*, 1986-7, colour silkscreen and laserjet print, with collage, private collection. Installation image: Nottingham Contemporary, 2017, Courtesy the Artist.

Although sharing a similar colour pallet, the two parts of Chila Kumari Burman's diptych *Convenience, Not Love*, 1986-7, are compositionally different (fig.1). The left-hand panel is divided into two parts, and contains an old-style navy-blue British passport adjacent to the figure of then Prime Minister Margaret Thatcher standing on a golden ground in front of a Union flag. Contrasting that relative iconographic sparsity, the right-hand panel is visually cacophonous, with a mass of collaged imagery presenting historic and contemporaneous South Asian figures, circulating around a centrally positioned row of passports from Sri Lanka, Pakistan, India and Bangladesh. Utilising the diptych format as a way of establishing a visual conversation between two opposing points of view, *Convenience, Not Love* may be understood as an engaging and dynamic artwork that synthesises a kaleidoscope of imagery in order to give not only an account of South Asian experiences of migration to Britain since the 1950s and British political objections to that migration, but also relay the ways in which South Asian women, in particular, have endured and withstood prejudice and discrimination.

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3 Chila Kumari Burman is perhaps best known for her unabashed and uncompromising  
4 series of self-portraits initiated in the early 1990s, collectively titled, *Autoportraits*.  
5 Despite the widespread publication of these *Autoportraits*, Sophie Orlando has argued  
6 that they have, in the main, resisted critical scrutiny.<sup>1</sup> Instead, these artworks have  
7 generally been discussed in terms of their “kitsch and cheerful luridness”,<sup>2</sup> and  
8 utilisation of a hyper-vibrant colour-pallet, reminiscent of both Andy Warhol’s Pop  
9 celebrity portraits and the Bollywood film industry. Indeed, it has been perhaps too  
10 easy to identify much of Burman’s work as superficial or disposable pop because of  
11 its visual excess: her application of all-over decoration, use of popular culture, and the  
12 brightness of her colour tones. However, undertaking a close reading of *Convenience,*  
13 *Not Love* - its iconography, artistic technique, and the historical and contemporaneous  
14 socio-political contexts in which it was made - this paper will argue that Burman’s  
15 diptych signals her myriad concerns regarding the status of the South Asian diaspora  
16 and their lived experience in Britain, and in particular draws attention to the  
17 complexity and multi-faceted natures of female British Asian identities. I will suggest  
18 that these issues were further developed in two distinct bodies of work: firstly, a print  
19 series that utilised archival family photographs, which directly addressed her parental  
20 experience of migration; and secondly, her *Autoportraits*. It is my contention here that  
21 Burman’s highly nuanced engagement with Black feminist issues, as evinced in  
22 *Convenience, Not Love*, evolved into a dissenting “radical narcissism”,<sup>3</sup> that infuses  
23 her later *Autoportraits*.

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26 Trained as a printmaker first at Leeds Polytechnic, 1976-79, and then as a post-  
27 graduate at Slade School of Art, London, 1980-82, Burman was a pioneering visual  
28 artist actively working to rectify the orientalist stereotypes pinned to South Asian  
29 identities in Britain. In 1992, artists-curators Mumtaz Karimjee and Amina Patel,  
30 noted that “In the early eighties there was very little within the visual arts that  
31 explored the diversity of South Asian women’s experiences in Britain”.<sup>4</sup> Indeed,  
32 historic and contemporary representations of the female-self were limited to images of  
33 servitude, epitomised by works such as Joshua Reynolds’ *George Clive and his*  
34 *Family with an Indian Servant Girl*, 1765 (Gemäldegalerie, Berlin). As this paper will  
35 demonstrate, Burman actively challenged not only those colonial stereotypes of  
36 servitude and docility, but also the white feminist ideology that, as Hazel V. Carby  
37 argued, presented “Asian women as being in need of liberation”.<sup>5</sup> Burman’s  
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3 commitment to active Black sisterhood may be witnessed in her willingness to  
4 collaborate and foster mutually-supportive working relationships She has described  
5 how, during the early 1980s she regularly attended events organised by the *Socialist*  
6 *Worker*, went to conferences run by the Organisation for Women of Asian and  
7 African Descent (OWAAD) in Leeds and London, and that her dedication to  
8 collective Black feminist activism both led her to, and was informed by, her work at  
9 the first Asian women's refuge in Leeds.<sup>6</sup> In 1981, with Bhajan Hunjan, she organised  
10 the exhibition *Four Indian Women Artists* at Indian Artists (UK) Gallery. The show,  
11 which included work by Burman, Hunjan, Vinodini Ebdon, and Naomi Iny, was not  
12 overtly political, and of the four artists' work, Burman's was unique in its direct  
13 address to socio-political issues. But the exhibition was, in its-self, intended as a  
14 feminist gesture. Significantly, Rozsika Parker and Griselda Pollock identified *Four*  
15 *Indian Women Artists* as the first exhibition of Black Women artists in their book,  
16 *Framing Feminism: Art and the Women's Movement 1970-85*.<sup>7</sup> For Burman,  
17 undertaking such curatorial projects, and the processes of art making itself, was a way  
18 of trying to "understand what is going on in the world",<sup>8</sup> and her position as a woman  
19 of Punjabi descent, in relation to contemporary events. She was, as Solani Fernando  
20 has identified, "one of the first Black women artists in this country to produce  
21 political work",<sup>9</sup> and Burman's prints, montages and multi-media works reflected her  
22 vocal criticisms of racial, gender, and class inequalities.

### 39 **Convenience, Not Love**

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43 *Convenience, Not Love* was first displayed in the exhibition *Along the Lines of*  
44 *Resistance: An Exhibition of Contemporary Feminist Art*, 1988, at the Cooper Art  
45 Gallery, Barnsley.<sup>10</sup> Curated by Sutapa Biswas, Sarah Edge and Claire Slattery the  
46 show sought to promote female artists in a collaborative curatorial setting. Burman's  
47 work was created in silk-screen and laser print, with collage, and utilises photographs  
48 from her family album, hand-drawn vignettes, newspaper imagery and popular visual  
49 culture to connect past migrations with the present lived experience of South Asian  
50 communities in Britain. The explicit use of passport covers from Britain and South  
51 Asia addresses the migration of non-white Commonwealth citizens to Britain during  
52 the post-war period, and its two parts have been understood to "represent the two  
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3 sides of post-imperial immigration laws, with British law and its enforcement on one  
4 side and the diverse forms of Asian diasporic experience on the other".<sup>11</sup>  
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8 Since its inclusion in *Along the Lines of Resistance, Convenience, Not Love* has been  
9 exhibited a number of times, notably in Burman's solo show at the Horizon Gallery in  
10 1990, and more recently in the exhibition *The Place is Here*, staged at Nottingham  
11 Contemporary and then Middlesbrough Institute of Modern Art (MIMA) in 2017.<sup>12</sup>  
12 Comparing installation images of the work from 1988 and 2017, and its reproduction  
13 in her 1995 monograph,<sup>13</sup> it is evident that Burman has reworked the diptych over the  
14 years. In its earliest exhibitionary outing the panels were hung in the opposite order,  
15 and as Deborah Cherry has recounted, they have also been displayed vertically  
16 stacked, and in darker, mahogany-coloured frames.<sup>14</sup> A close analysis of archival  
17 images also reveals that Burman has not only changed the arrangement of some  
18 original components since its initial display but has also added material, notably the  
19 Sri Lankan passport and a reproduction of one of her own *Autoportraits*.<sup>15</sup> These  
20 amendments have not dramatically changed the work, but arguably both refined and  
21 enhanced the force of Burman's commentary on the subjects that the work addresses;  
22 this paper will consider the work in its present form.  
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36 Burman's use and combination of a number of artistic techniques, and her willingness  
37 to modify *Convenience, Not Love* over time, is indicative of the artist's anti-  
38 hierarchical conception of, and approach to, art-making. Blending styles and  
39 materials, printed ephemera, photomontage, and silkscreened motifs are interrupted  
40 and intersected with hand-drawn or applied textual and decorative additions. Having  
41 worked consistently in photo-silkscreen and etching during the early 1980s, this was  
42 one of Burman's first, and arguably, most ambitious attempts at harnessing the  
43 various techniques of assemblage. Utilising collage and montage, whereby images  
44 and visual resources have been selected, cut or manipulated, and positioned in  
45 proximity, Burman attempts to address the multiplicity of South Asian identities  
46 within a British context. In harnessing these working practices, Burman's diptych  
47 seems to corroborate Kobena Mercer's assertion that "the formal dynamics of collage  
48 ... [are] especially relevant to the hyphenated character of diaspora identities",<sup>16</sup>  
49 wherein the possibility of combining discontinuous, playful, referential and indexical  
50 imagery is in-itself reflective of a lived diasporic experience.  
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7 While collaged images jostle for attention, it is in the relative spatial calm of the  
8 shimmering golden ground that the isolated photo-silkscreened figure of Thatcher is  
9 able to become a point of orientation. The lone, upright figure of the Prime Minister  
10 dominates the left-hand panel, and with her arms are folded across her body, she is  
11 dressed as John Bull, standing in front of a Union Flag.<sup>17</sup> John Bull is a fictitious  
12 character, epitomising a particular form of English nationalism and British  
13 imperialism.<sup>18</sup> The figure first appeared in a political satire in 1712 and he was  
14 quickly adopted in the popular press as a “down-to-earth, liberty-loving, beer-  
15 drinking, and pugnacious admirer of all things English”.<sup>19</sup> By the Victorian era, the  
16 visual characteristics of John Bull, dressed in a frock- and waist-coat were widely  
17 reproduced in the work of satirical cartoonists John Leech and John Tenniel; for many  
18 at home, he stood as an English-everyman led by common sense, while abroad he was  
19 increasingly understood as “an aggressive imperialist”,<sup>20</sup> both jingoistic and  
20 protectionist. Miles Taylor has recounted that after the First World War, he was  
21 regarded as “a symbol of imperial nostalgia”.<sup>21</sup> For Burman, John Bull was then, an  
22 apposite figure when constructing a visual indictment of Thatcher and the political  
23 ideologies that she stood for. As Raphael Samuel recorded, “in the run-up to the 1983  
24 election, Mrs Thatcher annexed ‘Victorian Values’ to her party’s platform and turned  
25 them into a talisman for lost stabilities”.<sup>22</sup> Despite an ambivalent attitude to the  
26 historic past, Thatcher presented her ideology in terms of common-sense  
27 traditionalism, based on hard-work and thrift, which had national best-interests at its  
28 core. If Thatcher’s moralizing tone and rejection of permissive modernization  
29 appealed to many, it was also satirized in visual culture, notably in Peter Kennard’s  
30 photomontage of Thatcher as Queen Victoria, *Maggie Regina*, 1983.<sup>23</sup> Burman’s  
31 presentation of Thatcher as John Bull follows this radical, satirical visual lineage, and  
32 the Prime Minister’s position in front of the British flag may be understood at a multi-  
33 layered critique that encompasses not only her protectionist (exclusionary)  
34 immigration policies (discussed below), but also the jingoism that she fostered during  
35 the Falklands War, 1982, which she continued to espouse in the years following.

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Thatcher’s particular hostility to those who would upset her particular vision of  
Britishness is captured in *Convenience, Not Love* through the use of a vivid green

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3 speech bubble that expands from her mouth. The words in gothic script read: “That if  
4 there’s any fear that it might be SWAMPED people are going to react and be rather  
5 HOSTILE”. This text repeats the words spoken by Thatcher during a television  
6 interview in 1978, and refers to the apparent fears of ordinary –white– British people  
7 that their country might be swamped with foreigners should immigration remain at  
8 current levels; indeed Thatcher suggested that immigration from the Commonwealth  
9 and Pakistan, where Burman’s ancestral family were from, was unsustainable:  
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17 “Well now, look, let us try and start with a few figures as far as we know them,  
18 and I am the first to admit it is not easy to get clear figures from the Home  
19 Office about immigration, but there was a committee which looked at it and  
20 said that if we went on as we are then by the end of the century there would be  
21 four million people of the new Commonwealth or Pakistan here. Now, that is  
22 an awful lot and I think it means that people are really rather afraid that this  
23 country might be rather swamped by people with a different culture and, you  
24 know, the British character has done so much for democracy, for law and done  
25 so much throughout the world that if there is any fear that it might be swamped  
26 people are going to react and be rather hostile to those coming in”.<sup>24</sup>  
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36 Reiterating the need to curb immigration and protect Britain, Burman has positioned  
37 Thatcher aside a tangle of barbed wire, beyond which is a British passport, flanked on  
38 its other side by a phalanx of riot police printed in blue, black and purple.<sup>25</sup> This  
39 composition appears as though Thatcher and the wire form a double line of defense:  
40 protecting the passport from the unruly masses in the other half of the diptych; the  
41 police on stand-by should they be required.  
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48 From her sparse, but aggressively protected utopia and looking towards her left,  
49 Thatcher seems to be speaking about, and possibly giving a warning to, the people  
50 who populate Burman’s right-hand panel. Here, family photographs, press images,  
51 and found and hand-drawn cartoon strip imagery, jostle and circulate around the  
52 central row of South Asian passports. From a distance the disorderly assemblage of  
53 figures appears as a manifestation of the ‘swarms’ of Asian people about whom  
54 Thatcher speaks, and who threaten to spill over, or jump across the divide of the  
55 diptych, into the luminous golden land that she fiercely protects. If the components of  
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3 the left-hand panel – the passport, the flag, and the figure of Thatcher – signify  
4 Britishness, the right-hand panel may be understood to mimic perceptions of the  
5 undifferentiated South Asian ‘other’. While the passports from Sri Lanka, Pakistan,  
6 India and Bangladesh are themselves exclusionary documents of statecraft, and may,  
7 in different arenas be understood as tools for the construction of national(ist)  
8 identities in the post-Independence era, they are, I suggest, used in Burman’s work to  
9 subversively mimic and highlight the way in which nuances, differences and tensions  
10 between and within Asian identities are rendered indistinct from the position of  
11 Thatcher’s white Britain. In this reading the populous framed within the right-hand  
12 panel are simply an unwanted, Asian-other; a threat to national sanctity.  
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### 22 **Welcome to Britain**

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25 Homi Bhabha has suggested that the articulation of cultural difference challenges  
26 perceived national unity: “Counter narratives of the nation that continually evoke and  
27 erase its totalizing boundaries – both actual and conceptual – disturb those ideological  
28 manoeuvres through which ‘imagined communities’ are given essentialist  
29 identities”.<sup>26</sup> Or, in other words, the ability of non-white migrants to cross British  
30 borders, while also making claims to their own Britishness, disrupted the possibility  
31 of an “imagined community”,<sup>27</sup> in which a white populous is united by common  
32 descent and ethnicity, and shared language and cultural practices. While, in principle,  
33 any subject of the British empire had the right to reside in Britain, stand for  
34 Parliament and join the armed forces, throughout the twentieth century, successive  
35 governments sought to limit the immigration of black and Asian migrants from the  
36 Empire and then Commonwealth. The conundrum faced by UK governments was  
37 how to distinguish between British subjects without undermining the outward  
38 “imperial rhetoric of ‘equal rights for all British subjects’ and *civis Britannicus*  
39 *sum*”.<sup>28</sup>  
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53 Immigrants from British India prior to the First World War have been characterised as  
54 a transient group encompassing “ayahs, lascars and princes”,<sup>29</sup> who travelled  
55 according to the imperial policy of free movement. However, during the inter-war  
56 period, Indian seamen were identified as a ‘problem’ following violent inter-racial  
57 clashes in the shipping ports of Glasgow, South Shields, Liverpool and Cardiff in  
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3 1919. The 1919 Aliens Act, followed by the 1920 Aliens Order, and the 1925 Special  
4 Restriction Order (Coloured Alien Seamen), each extended the 1914 Aliens  
5 Restriction Act, which had been introduced during war time and had obliged foreign  
6 nationals to register with the police, restricted where they could live, and their  
7 employment opportunities. Through these various Acts and Orders, the government  
8 developed what Ian Spencer has described as a series of regulations for “keeping out  
9 British subjects they did not want”.<sup>30</sup>

16  
17 The Second World War saw larger numbers of Asian – mainly male – workers and  
18 service personnel arrive in Britain. Indian seamen were now regarded as a reserve of  
19 labour, who could undertake the jobs left by British merchant seamen who had joined  
20 the war effort. However, after the war, a British policy of administrative obstruction  
21 sought to ensure that migrants did not settle in Britain. Applications by prospective  
22 migrants for British passports at local High Commissions, whether in Calcutta or  
23 Kampala, could be subjected to lengthy delays, bureaucratic systems and purposefully  
24 opaque communication of their rights as British subjects. After the 1947 partition of  
25 British India, the British government exerted pressure on the newly formed  
26 governments of India and Pakistan to establish exacting controls on emigration. The  
27 issuance of Indian and Pakistani passports was closely controlled; emigrants were  
28 required to prove that they could support themselves financially or pay a repatriation  
29 bond; in 1955, the Indian Ministry of External Affairs issued a directive “preventing  
30 the migration to Britain of Indians with low educational and financial  
31 qualifications”,<sup>31</sup> and in 1958 Pakistan required those applying to travel to Britain  
32 undertake an interview in order to demonstrate proficiency in English language, and  
33 prove that they had a job waiting for them or that they had been accepted into a  
34 recognised educational establishment. For the British, it was desirable to limit  
35 ‘coloured’ migration, without the use of openly discriminatory legislation, which  
36 would be damaging for fledgling post-imperial/ Commonwealth relations; it realised  
37 however, that it could retain its public ‘open door’ policy by passing responsibility for  
38 stemming the flow of migrants to governments of newly independent Commonwealth  
39 countries.

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58 Such was the success of Britain’s policy of obstruction, immigration from South Asia  
59 was limited during the 1950s, when compared to migration from the Caribbean,  
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3 Ireland and Europe. However, ‘coloured immigration’ became a national concern  
4 when riots broke out in Nottingham and London in 1958. Although initiated by white  
5 youth, these attacks were commonly regarded “as the response of local people who  
6 felt resentful against black immigration”.<sup>32</sup> Apologists justified the violence by  
7 arguing that the inner-city areas in which black and Asian people lived had become  
8 overcrowded, and notorious for prostitution, drugs and knife-crime.<sup>33</sup> Although steps  
9 were taken to ensure that subsequent legislation did not appear to endorse this view,  
10 the Commonwealth Immigrants Act was passed 1962. For the first time British law  
11 distinguished between “the rights of British subjects born in Britain and holding  
12 British-issued passports and British subjects who held passports issued by other  
13 Commonwealth governments”.<sup>34</sup> The Act did not specifically legislate against the  
14 immigration of non-white people, but rather introduced a system of employment  
15 vouchers which could be applied for; in practice, white immigrants from former  
16 settler colonies- Australia, Canada and New Zealand- found it easier to obtain entry  
17 into Britain. The Labour Party leader, Hugh Gatskell, described the Act as a “plain  
18 anti-Commonwealth measure in theory, and a plain anti-colour measure in practice”.<sup>35</sup>  
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32 When the Labour party came to power in 1964, it introduced the 1965 Race Relations  
33 Act, which while inadequate, was a first step towards recognising the rights of black  
34 and Asian settlers in Britain. However, when, in February 1968 10,000 East African  
35 Asians entered the United Kingdom, most using British passports, following their  
36 expulsion from Kenya, the government rushed through the 1968 Second  
37 Commonwealth Immigrants Act in three days. The 1968 Act removed the right of  
38 Commonwealth members to move to Britain, despite holding Britain passports, unless  
39 they could prove an ancestral link to the country. The Act was condemned by the  
40 International Commission of Jurists, who saw it as “unprecedented discrimination by  
41 creating a category of British citizens deprived of the right to enter the territory of a  
42 country of which they are nationals”.<sup>36</sup> Enoch Powell’s infamous “rivers of blood”  
43 speech of the same year, inciting racial hatred, had been the culmination of nearly a  
44 decade’s worth of campaigning to keep Britain white.<sup>37</sup> As Michael Dummett has  
45 concisely noted, 1968 marked a moment when “the British public was desperately  
46 opposed to immigration; and by ‘immigration’ it understood only the entry of people  
47 with black or brown skins”.<sup>38</sup>  
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3 The 1971 Immigration Act consolidated the 1968 Act and as Spencer notes,  
4 “abolished the last vestiges of the old Empire-embracing concept of British subject or  
5 citizen”.<sup>39</sup> Henceforth, “historic categories of ‘alien’ and ‘British subject’, that used to  
6 divide the world into those from the Empire/Commonwealth who had rights and  
7 privileges in the United Kingdom and those foreigners who did not, were replaced by  
8 the essentially racially-defined categories of ‘partrial’ and ‘non-patrial’”.<sup>40</sup> Patrials  
9 were defined as those born or naturalised in the UK, or those who had a parent or  
10 grandparent born or naturalised in the UK. The act also put an end to the automatic  
11 entitlement of spouses and dependants to be allowed entry on the basis of their partner  
12 or family member having British citizenship. As a consequence, the “rights of non-  
13 white commonwealth citizens to settle in Britain ended with this act”.<sup>41</sup>  
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24 However, despite legislation, ‘coloured’ immigration remained at the forefront of  
25 political debate as racial tensions mounted; in 1970s Britain, it seemed that ‘paki-  
26 bashing’ became a national sport.<sup>42</sup> In 1978, Margaret Thatcher’s comments about  
27 Britain being swamped with immigrants from the Commonwealth “were widely  
28 condemned as pandering to popular prejudices and even as ‘giving aid and comfort to  
29 the National Front’”.<sup>43</sup> Nonetheless, eight proposals to further increase immigration  
30 controls were included in the Conservative Party’s election manifesto in April 1979.  
31 When Thatcher’s newly formed government introduced the 1981 Nationality Bill,  
32 which was “virtually explicit in its design to ensure second-class citizenship for non-  
33 white people”, Kum Kum Bhavnani, observed that “we can see how little difference  
34 there is between the racism of the National Front and the Conservative Party”.<sup>44</sup>  
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45 Although Britain remains largely estranged from the intricacies of its colonial past,  
46 and the realities of its exclusionary immigration practices, the creation of South Asian  
47 diasporas in Britain is undeniably a colonial legacy; as the Sri Lankan scholar  
48 Ambalavaner Sivanandan reminds us,  
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53 we came to Britain (and not to Germany for instance) because we were  
54 occupied by Britain. Colonialism and immigration are part of the same  
55 continuum – we are here because you were there.<sup>45</sup>  
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3 However, hostility towards the Asian diaspora is presented in *Convenience, Not Love*  
4 as a symptom of a double standard in which it was, as the title suggests, convenient  
5 for Britain to accept migrant labour in the post-war period but only on its own terms.  
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7 Although a large proportion of South Asian migrants came to Britain by their own  
8 initiative, Britain continued to exploit its former colonies in the era of Independence.  
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10 Many new arrivals, especially those from East Africa, found they could only secure  
11 employment in low skilled manual jobs, for which they were over qualified. In the  
12 left-hand panel, a graphic presentation of a caricatured male figure, wearing a  
13 rounded (bowler?) hat mingles haphazardly with policemen pictured in full riot-gear.  
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15 Printed in multiple, the red figures wear sandwich boards bearing the slogan, “Come  
16 to Britain for Jobs”. The man, with his peculiarly shaped moustache, bears a  
17 resemblance to Enoch Powell, who as Minister for Health in the Conservative  
18 government, actively recruited nurses from the Caribbean to work in the National  
19 Health Service between 1960 and 1963. While South Asian workers were not  
20 recruited in such direct ways,<sup>46</sup> the cartoon figure nonetheless encapsulates the way  
21 migrants were necessary to the British economy, while the use of gold in the left hand  
22 panel evokes the promise that Britain was a land of opportunity. However, Thatcher’s  
23 stance, together with the barbed wire and riot police, presents an hostile and  
24 exclusionary reality.  
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38 Telescoping time across the two panels, it appears as though Thatcher, from the  
39 1980s, is not only speaking to, but looking at South Asian migrants who arrived in  
40 Britain during the 1950s and 60s. The new arrivals included people from a range of  
41 social, religious, and educational backgrounds, from the sub-continent and East  
42 Africa, but in her selection of certain figurative images, Burman both demonstrates  
43 and undermines stereotypical visual tropes of the homogenous Asian other that  
44 circulated in the British popular press. A number of male figures arrive in Britain with  
45 their luggage. In the lower right corner is a man carrying a suitcase in each hand.  
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47 Holding his Indian passport, he steps forward into a capitalised handwritten text:  
48 “WELCOME TO HEATHROW”, which is interwoven with sterling currency  
49 symbols (£) rendered in gold; the welcome mat is seemingly laid out to meet him. He  
50 is smiling, and Burman’s use of gold echoes the golden ground of the left-hand panel.  
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52 The man has come to make his fortune and capitalised text announces his intentions:  
53 “HERE TO STAY!!”. This expectant and eager figure is contrasted somewhat by  
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another man, sitting on a bag, patiently alone, and encircled by suitcases and a rolled mattress. Utilising a photograph by (John) Topham of a Sikh traveller at Victoria Station, London, in 1959,<sup>47</sup> here, Burman's visual meditation on economic migration bears similarity with a passage in M.G.Vaaanji's 1989 novel *The Gunny Sack*, in which the main character, on arriving at Heathrow asks:

And how does Britannia treat her offspring who come from all over the world to pay their respects? At the Airports, lines, long lines: coloured, white, coloured, white... A coincidence? Hardly. First and second class British subjects. You look at the others in your line, and you wonder, am I one of these?<sup>48</sup>

### Passport Control



Fig.2, Chila Kumari Burman, *Dad on ship- arriving in Britain 1950s*, Cibachrome print, 1995

The figure of the lone male migrant had particular personal relevance for Burman, and in the cibachrome print of 1995, *Dad on ship- arriving in Britain* she addressed the specificities of her familial biography (fig.2). In this work, a photograph of the artist's father in the act of migration is overlain with the text and decorative borders found on the inside cover of a British passport. Mr. Burman travelled to Britain on the MS Batory, which docked at Southampton on 4 March 1954.<sup>49</sup> In the photograph Mr. Burman sits on a stool at a bar; behind the counter stand two bartenders, dressed in white jackets and black ties. His posed is relaxed; one elbow rests on the counter-top, his other arm is placed on his thigh; he looks directly at the camera with a faint smile on his face. He is perhaps mid-journey, aboard the ship transporting him from India to Britain, anticipating his safe arrival; that he should be so assured is underscored by the passport text which reads:

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3 “Her Britannic Majesty’s Secretary of State Requests and requires in the name  
4 of her majesty all those when it may concern to allow the bearer to pass freely  
5 without let or hindrance and to afford the bearer such assistance and protection  
6 as may be necessary.”  
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12 Mr. Burman is presented as one of those British subjects who came to the mother-  
13 country in the 1950s before revised British immigration law made such movement  
14 difficult. Due to his possession of a British passport, Mr Burman is not only assured  
15 safe passage, but also assistance should he so require it. It is this sense of security that  
16 perhaps facilitates his easy demeanor.  
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22 As Darren J O’Byrne has outlined, the passport has a number of functions, including,  
23 but not limited to: “proof of citizenship; proof of identity in general; currency  
24 empowering one to cross borders; request by the sovereign to the foreign authority to  
25 allow safe passage; some assurance of protection for the bearer by the sovereign while  
26 in a foreign country”.<sup>50</sup> Introduced as a security measure prior to the First World War,  
27 the passport became a method of surveillance and tool for national security; following  
28 the 1915 Defence of the Realm Act, all British citizens were required to hold a  
29 passport when leaving or entering the country, and the same year, the colonial  
30 government of British India introduced the Defence of India (Criminal Law  
31 Amendment) Act 1915, which included the Defence of India (Passport) Rules, which  
32 “made embarking on a journey from any port in British India without a passport a  
33 criminal offense”.<sup>51</sup> From 1916 photographs as a visual form of identification were  
34 required in British passports; these portraits were, and remain, banal images, created  
35 according to strict and standardising criteria. However, the “putative transparency”<sup>52</sup>  
36 of the passport as a representational sign of belonging to a nation-state belies its  
37 power as a tool for discrimination. Lily Cho has argued that, “While the passport may  
38 seem relatively benign ... the consolidation of its usage attests to a long history of  
39 state suspicion leveled with particular acuity upon anyone who does not want to stay  
40 put”.<sup>53</sup> As Mr Burman and many others in his situation discovered, possession of a  
41 British passport did not guarantee a hospitable welcome.  
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58 John Torpey has argued that the development of the passport in the modern era also  
59 illustrates the “institutionalization of the idea of the ‘nation state’ as a prospectively  
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3 homogenous ethnocultural unit”.<sup>54</sup> For Torpy, the state monopoly on individual  
4 freedom of movement and the right to settlement – as facilitated or denied by the  
5 passport – also allowed the state to cultivate and maintain a particular ethnocultural  
6 population. Since passports were issued at the discretion of the state, and from at least  
7 1968 according to legally defined conceptions of nationality based on familial  
8 lineage, or naturalization, it was very difficult for non-white British subjects to  
9 successfully obtain a British passport. Indeed, although the 1971 Immigration Act  
10 actually increased the number of people entitled to a British passport, because these  
11 comprised people of European extraction with historic familial origins in Britain – i.e.  
12 white - , this increase was not of popular or political concern. For Radhika Viyas  
13 Mongia, the passport thus emerges as a state document that successfully “conceal[s]  
14 race and racist motivations for controlling mobility”.<sup>55</sup> She concludes her compelling  
15 analysis of migration within the British Empire in the early twentieth century by  
16 arguing that while we may think of the passport as a document that facilitates  
17 movement, “its history reveals that it is born out of an attempt to *restrict* movement  
18 along national lines that are explicitly raced”.<sup>56</sup>

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32 In her use of national passports in *Convenience, Not Love* Burman places the signifier  
33 of Britishness at a distance and separate from the four South Asian signified national  
34 identities; in this act of differentiation Burman physically positions white and Black  
35 ethnicities in opposition, while simultaneously challenging the normative conceptions  
36 of Britishness based in whiteness, and the imagined exclusivity of British and Asian  
37 identities. It is the ideologically essentialized British identity that Thatcher protects,  
38 but as Bhabha asserted, the presence of the other undermines that imagined  
39 community. Burman’s incursions onto the British passport offers a counter narrative,  
40 leading to questions over who, or what, Thatcher is protecting. In the windows of the  
41 passport cover, which would usually contain the holder’s name and passport number  
42 is instead, Urdu script. Written by the artist’s father, the text is unambiguously and  
43 provocatively ‘foreign’, and reads:

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55 “You allow us to come here on false promises. We come here full of hope and  
56 destiny. You have no mercy. We will struggle and survive. Long live. Long  
57 live. Long live”.<sup>57</sup>  
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3 From the scene of anticipation aboard the ship, or the excitement of arrival at  
4 Heathrow, the male migrant making his way in the world is, according to the Urdu  
5 text, maltreated but not dispirited. Anticipating a hospitable welcome and arriving in  
6 Britain with aspirations of economic prosperity, here the message seems unequivocal:  
7 that migrants were permitted in Britain on expedient terms. The symbols of  
8 protection, barbed wire and riot police suddenly become those of threat. Held within  
9 the passport windows, the Urdu text is contained, and as such the two signifieds –  
10 Britishness and Asianness - remain in antagonistic relation. Positioned as it is in the  
11 left hand panel, it is unclear whether the Urdu-British passport is being protected or  
12 attacked, epitomising the ambivalences within British society.<sup>58</sup>

22 But, if the Urdu script is understood as an accusation and statement of defiance, then  
23 *Convenience, Not Love* in its totality may be understood as a scathing critique of  
24 British immigration policy, a commentary on the institutionalized racism that  
25 impacted on the everyday lives of ordinary working class people, and the hypocrisy of  
26 successive British governments over who has the right to settle in Britain.  
27 Significantly, Burman's construction of this work as a diptych asserts the divisions  
28 and exclusions faced by migrants to Britain; the format of the work being indicative  
29 of the lived situation of many of Britain's diasporic communities, living alongside,  
30 but never fully within the purview of Britishness. What is at stake in this work then, is  
31 the issue of whether Britain's subjects from the former Empire are truly British. As  
32 Rina Arya has suggested, "The passport may be a visible reminder of her legal status,  
33 but it does not guarantee the sense of feeling at home".<sup>59</sup>

### 44 **Meek and Passive Victims?**

48 *Convenience, Not Love* presents a non-linear, entangled meditation on South Asian  
49 migration, and although experiences of male migrants are fundamental to the work, it  
50 is the status of women that drives Burman's anti-essentialist work. If the singular and  
51 isolated image of Thatcher recalls her political prioritization of the individual at the  
52 expense of the community at large, she is contrasted with multiple images of women  
53 in a range of quotidian, sociable and socially engaged activities in the right hand  
54 panel. To understand the radical nature of Burman's presentation of South Asian  
55 femininity, it is necessary to appreciate just how derogatory public, institutional, and  
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3 counterintuitively (white) feminist perceptions of Asian women were, in Britain  
4 during the late 1970s and early 1980s. Although the British South Asian diaspora  
5 includes people from different social classes, religions, and castes, and as such,  
6 women with different socio-economic and political agency, in 1984, Parita Trivedi  
7 asserted that Asian women in Britain were regarded as servile, “beaten-down”,  
8 shackled, after generations of colonial misadventures and familial oppressions.<sup>60</sup>  
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10 Within this context, Burman’s presentation of women in *Convenience, Not Love*  
11 should be regarded as an attempt to counter hegemonic political and visual discourses  
12 in Britain, which, as film-maker Pratibha Parmar observed, stereotyped Asian women  
13 as “meek and passive victims”.<sup>61</sup> This stereotype of Asian women was exacerbated by  
14 British immigration policy; most women migrating to Britain from the Indian  
15 subcontinent came to join husbands and fathers who had already undertaken the  
16 journey.<sup>62</sup> These female migrants were regarded as dependents, and were not  
17 conferred citizenship in their own right, but rather, were allowed to remain in Britain  
18 on the basis of their marriage; should marriages end in divorce or widowhood, women  
19 were liable for deportation. As such, South Asian women were not regarded as active  
20 agents in their own lives. At one level of interpretation, the image in the top left of the  
21 right-hand panel is indicative of the presentation of Asian woman as submissive that  
22 received widespread circulation in Britain as large numbers of Asian refugees arrived  
23 from Kenyan and Uganda in the 1970s. A group of women are shown crouched and  
24 huddled together; some wear scarves covering their heads, nearly all look directly out  
25 at the viewer, somewhat expectantly. However, in quoting this photograph Burman  
26 challenges its veracity; her modifications of it indicate a self-conscious subject  
27 position that was at odds with the stereotype to which she herself was expected to  
28 confirm. The photograph is hand tinted, adding vibrant colour to each figure, while  
29 one woman has also been adorned with a glistening jewelled bindi. The effect of these  
30 interactions with the image is to give each woman her own subjectivity; and in putting  
31 this image alongside those with more assertive depictions of South Asian femininity,  
32 Burman creates a dialogic space in the right-hand panel in which to rethink South  
33 Asian womanhood.  
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56 Below the row of South Asian passports is a hand-drawn cartoon strip that narrates  
57 the common experience of female migrants. A young girl with thick black braids tells  
58 a familiar story of migration to a blond-haired youth: Her uncle came to Britain to  
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3 work in the 1950s, and having saved enough money, later sent for his wife and son  
4 the join him. They waited nineteen months for an interview with immigration  
5 officials, who, with the aid of a translator who spoke a different dialect, queried  
6 whether or not they were related. Interviews, we are told, were not recorded, and as  
7 paperwork mounted, errors were not corrected. For those who made it to the UK, the  
8 young narrator sardonically asks, “did you know that immigration officers expect to  
9 receive answers to questions they haven’t asked? ... and until 1979 women were  
10 forced to have internal examinations to verify virginity”. In the penultimate frame the  
11 blond character suggests that, “for the people who are here, all’s well that ends well,  
12 eh!”. Not so, says the girl, “the threat to their security continues here from the police”.  
13 The narrative concludes ominously, “their troubles were just beginning...”

24 Reference in this graphic narrative to internal medical examinations endured by  
25 female migrants accounts for the prevalent critical interpretations of *Convenience, Not*  
26 *Love*. When it was included in Burman’s solo show at The Horizon Gallery in 1990,  
27 Nina Perez noted in her review that the diptych “deals with brutal immigration laws,  
28 virginity tests and asserts the fact that despite all this Asian people are here to stay”.<sup>63</sup>  
29 Lynda Nead similarly concluded in 1995 that “the work deals with immigration laws  
30 and the virginity tests which determined the entry of Asian women into Britain”.<sup>64</sup>  
31 Virginity testing was controversially exposed by the *Guardian* newspaper in February  
32 1979. It reported how, on 24 January, a 35 year old Indian woman arriving at  
33 Heathrow had been subjected to an internal examination in order to determine whether  
34 or not she had previously had children. On the basis of this information, it was  
35 believed possible to determine whether or not she was still a virgin. And on the basis  
36 of this so-called virginity-test, her application to enter the UK to marry her fiancé  
37 would be decided.<sup>65</sup> Such was the paranoia surrounding non-white migration to  
38 Britain, South Asian women were regarded with particular suspicion by British  
39 immigration officers who believed that many were fraudulently participating in  
40 arranged marriages in order to obtain a British passport; as the title of Burman’s work  
41 suggests, they were considered brides of convenience, not romantic love. Despite  
42 government assertions that the case exposed by the *Guardian* was unique, virginity-  
43 testing regularly took place, whether in the UK, or with the cooperation of local  
44 officials prior to the women’s departure from the subcontinent.<sup>66</sup> And as Parmar has  
45 noted, these gynaecological examinations were carried out on the assumption that

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3 Asian women were always virgins prior to marriage, itself an “absurd generalization  
4 ... based on the same stereotype of the submissive, meek and tradition-bound Asian  
5 woman”.<sup>67</sup> Regarded in this context, the equivocal nature of Burman’s title becomes  
6 striking; In a recent conversation, the artist has explained that although the phrase  
7 ‘convenience, not love’, may refer to economic migration (as described above), when  
8 she made the work, the issue of virginity-testing and arranged marriages was at the  
9 forefront of her mind.<sup>68</sup>

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17 The treatment received by Asian women seeking to enter the UK is starkly contrasted  
18 in *Convenience, Not Love* by the inclusion of a single black and white newspaper  
19 photograph of the controversial South African athlete Zola Budd in the left-hand  
20 panel. If female South Asian migrants were treated with particular suspicion,  
21 Burman’s use of Budd’s image serves to further highlight the flagrant inequalities  
22 faced by women of colour at the border, starkly demonstrating how British  
23 immigration policy established first and second class British citizens. Positioned  
24 amidst the policemen and the Powell-like figure inviting migration, the newspaper  
25 image shows Budd in the act of crossing the finishing-line in first place: she is  
26 presented as a success and therefore welcome in Britain. Although born in South  
27 Africa, in 1984 the *Daily Mail* newspaper initiated a campaign to grant Budd British  
28 citizenship. The then 17-year old runner was a prodigious talent, who was unable to  
29 compete on the international stage because of the ban on South African athletes at  
30 international sporting events— part of a strategy of sanctions in response to the  
31 continuance of South Africa’s apartheid system. Having established that Budd’s  
32 father was British, the newspaper published campaigning articles on its front pages,  
33 and lobbied the government to grant the athlete British citizenship. In just 10 days,  
34 Budd’s application for citizenship was submitted and approved by the Conservative  
35 government.<sup>69</sup> It is worth noting that at a time when Burman and others were  
36 expressing solidarity with black resistance in South Africa, in 1984, the year Budd  
37 was granted British citizenship, “Thatcher became the first British prime minister in  
38 23 years to host an apartheid head of state”.<sup>70</sup> It is perhaps little wonder then, that in  
39 Burman’s artwork, Budd is protected by a coterie of riot police.

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58 However, Burman’s artwork also demonstrates that many South Asian women did not  
59 simply accept their assigned status as second-class citizens, but rather drew on a  
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3 matrilineal history of anti-colonial struggle to challenge British hierarchies of power.  
4 Alongside the more prosaic images of women washing clothes, cooking and laughing  
5 together, Burman also positioned images of historical and contemporaneous female  
6 defiance (see fig.6). Images of radical women from the Indian subcontinent include a  
7 popular comic-book rendition of Lakshmibai, the Rani of Jhansi, pictured on  
8 horseback dressed in elaborate body armour and brandishing a sword; in 1857 she had  
9 led the Indian rebellion against the British in imperial India. She is accompanied by  
10 popular images of other “valiant Queens” sourced from children’s graphic novels:  
11 Rani Durganati, who ruled the region of Gondwana between 1550 and 1564, and  
12 Raziya Begum, known as Razia Sultan, who was the Sultan of Delhi between 1236  
13 and 1240. Other images depict women on protest marches – both in the UK and in  
14 India - holding placards, carrying sticks, and chanting into loud speakers. One  
15 watercolour vignette presents a woman shouting into a loud hailer, demanding a  
16 public enquiry, while a hand-tinted press photograph records the 1976-78 picket line  
17 of striking female workers at the Grunwick Film Processing Laboratory, north  
18 London. In their unambiguous affirmation of female agency, Burman’s aggregated  
19 community of women challenge value-laden assumptions of South Asian womanhood  
20 in Britain and demonstrates an awareness of the need for images that counter  
21 prevailing discourses of race and gender. Here the multiplicity of drawn, collaged and  
22 printed images is disruptive and dynamic; pictorial coherence or compositional  
23 stability is denied: harnessing the material and formal qualities of her assemblage  
24 technique, Burman demonstrates the pluralities of South Asian female experience:  
25 refugee, economic migrant, homemaker, Queen, revolutionary.  
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### 45 **Working Women**

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48 Although Burman has stated that it was her father who wrote the Urdu text in the  
49 British passport windows, giving the phrases a male voice, the words may equally be  
50 spoken by her female protagonists. As Amrit Wilson recounted in her landmark 1978  
51 feminist text, *Finding a Voice: Asian Women in Britain*, having endured degradation  
52 and humiliation in order to arrive in Britain, South Asian women were then faced with  
53 a myriad of other hurdles and challenges in the workplace, where ethnic stereotypes  
54 were used to justify inequalities.<sup>71</sup> Since wives and daughters were usually classified  
55 as dependents, British officials had not anticipated that they would enter the  
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3 workplace. In fact, large numbers of South Asian women did work, but, as Amina  
4 Mama recorded, with other Black women they “are to be found in the lower echelons  
5 of all the institutions where we are employed ... where the work is often physically  
6 heavy ... the pay is lowest, and the hours are longest and most anti-social”.<sup>72</sup>  
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11 Working class South Asian women often found themselves “invisible”,<sup>73</sup> but as  
12 Burman makes clear in the right-hand panel of *Convenience, Not Love* they were not  
13 only active in the workplace, but vocal in the face of discrimination. In 1974, an  
14 industrial dispute led by Asian women at the Imperial Typewriters factory in  
15 Leicester resulted in workers walking out on the discovery that white women  
16 undertaking the same jobs were earning more money.<sup>74</sup> Although, as Wilson recounts,  
17 “strikers returned to work having won few concessions”,<sup>75</sup> it was nonetheless a  
18 galvanising experience for them. Burman’s inclusion of images on the Grunwick  
19 picket-line bears testament to the force of Asian women and their demand for  
20 equitable treatment. In 1976-7 the Grunwick strike was led by Jayaben Desai and the  
21 picket line constituted the mainly female Asian workforce unwilling to accept poor  
22 pay, sexual provocation and degrading treatment by the white managers and owners.<sup>76</sup>  
23 The Factory management sought to use their preconceived understanding of Asian  
24 patriarchy as a mode of control, arguing that those on the picket line brought shame  
25 on their families. However, reflecting on the strike and its legacy, Wilson observed:  
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39 “No one, least of all Asian women workers themselves, would claim that they  
40 are highly militant or strong. What they have been in the past, in the face of  
41 their grim working lives, is resilient. They have refused to despair, accepting  
42 quiet stoically that they have been given. Now this stoicism is changing. Partly  
43 it is changing because women are getting more familiar with the industrial  
44 scene and partly because of the tremendous impact and influence of the strike  
45 at Grunwick Photoprocessing [sic]. That strike has proved for always that  
46 Asian women workers can be strong, resourceful and courageous, that they  
47 can stand up, face the world and demand their rights”.<sup>77</sup>  
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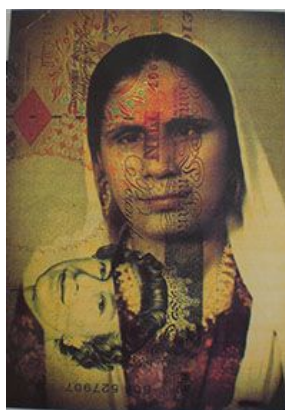


Fig.3, Chila Kumari Burman, *Portrait of Are Mum, Sweet Flower*, 1994.

Wanting to take control of representations of her own working-class culture, in the early 1990s Burman produced a series of prints in which she combined archival family photographs with British currency. In *Portrait of Are Mum, Sweet Flower*, 1994, a colour photograph of the artist's mother is overlain with the design of a ten pound note (fig.3). Mrs. Burman is dressed conservatively, with a shawl covering her head, and she looks demurely to lower left. The ten pound note is positioned vertically, so that the portrait of Queen Elizabeth II is positioned at a 45 degree angle and she seems to float just below Mrs. Burman's chin. The decorative script and graphic embellishments of the money appear inscribed tattoo-like on Mrs. Burman's face. Discussing this work Orlando suggests that the combination of the British monarch with "the face of a South Asian woman, creates an immediate reference to the history of imperialism",<sup>78</sup> while Meena Alexander asks, perceptively, "What does it mean to write over a mother's face, layering over a mother with the imprimature of a colonial state?".<sup>79</sup> For Alexander the work is infused with a "subtle tension" in the interplay of two contradictory depictions of motherhood.<sup>80</sup>

If the British Monarch – national mother – is here rendered as symbolic of colonial exploitation for financial gain, the chosen image of Mrs Burman conforms to maternal stereotypes conveying a soft, nurturing sensibility. However, as with many of Burman's chosen and manipulated images, *Portrait of Are Mum, Sweet Flower* may be read in divergent or dualistic ways. Rather than presenting an Asian woman held beneath imperial systems, it is also possible to regard the two components, the woman and the money, in converse relation. If *Portrait of Are Mum, Sweet Flower* is understood to show currency stamped or overlain with the photographic image, it is

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3 possible to regard themes of commercial entrepreneurship and class aspirations, while  
4 also presenting a positive narrative of economic migration within the purview of  
5 Britishness. If the image of Mrs. Burman is prioritized, she is seen to take control of  
6 the money, rather than be controlled by it. In 1983 Burman proclaimed that “me mum  
7 is a really amazing, strong woman”,<sup>81</sup> and more recently has noted that her  
8 presentation in this portrait is something of a red-herring: Mrs. Burman rarely wore  
9 saris or traditional Indian dress at home, and the artist recounts that she was rarely  
10 ‘demure’. In addition to her role as a homemaker, Mrs. Burman also managed and  
11 prepared the stock for her husband’s ice-cream van - Burman recalls making toffee  
12 apples in the family kitchen<sup>82</sup> - and oversaw the cashflow of the business, counting  
13 and banking the profits at the end of each day: “Me Mum, she kept the whole thing  
14 together”.<sup>83</sup> Burman’s choice of an image of her mother that apparently conformed to  
15 the passive stereotype of South Asian femininity is then subverted by the presence of  
16 money which becomes symbolic of her financial acumen and aspiration. As such,  
17 rather than an image of a meek, sweet Mum, Mrs. Burman provides an immediate  
18 example of active womanhood. Indeed, by using family photography in *Portrait of*  
19 *Are Mum, Sweet Flower, and Convenience, Not Love*, Burman normalizes the  
20 depiction of South Asian women in a range of different activities, and highlights how  
21 women undertake numerous roles and responsibility within the family. Burman is  
22 herself present in *Convenience, Not Love*, pictured with her mother, alongside aunts  
23 and cousins, and as such the use of family photographs conveys a complex picture of  
24 the prosaic lived reality of South Asian women. It is my contention here that  
25 Burman’s point is underscored by her mode of working, where “the politics of  
26 montage concerns the way in which we negotiate heterogeneity and multiplicity”.<sup>84</sup>  
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### 46 **Burman’s Radical Narcissism**

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49 This playful and discursive approach to female portraiture was further developed in  
50 Burman’s printwork during the early 1990s. In a body of work collectively titled,  
51 *Autoportraits*, Burman seemingly moved away from making overt political statements  
52 or reference to contemporaneous events, and instead developed an uncompromising  
53 form of self-portraiture. Significantly however, her use of her own body was in  
54 contradistinction to the dictums of the white feminist movement, that advocated a  
55 “turn away from the corporeal” and was “vehement about the absolute need to remove  
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3 the *female* body from representation”.<sup>85</sup> As Amelia Jones has recorded, for many  
4 white feminist artists and critics, the presentation of the female body automatically  
5 participated in, and was subject to, phallogocentric objectification; In 1982 Mary Kelly  
6 asserted that, “Most women artists who have presented themselves in some way,  
7 visibly, in the work, have been unable to find the kind of distancing devices which  
8 would cut across the predominant representations of women as object”.<sup>86</sup>  
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42 Fig.4. Chila Kumari Burman, *28 Positions in 34 Years*, 1992, Laserprint and painting,  
43 47x62 in, Birmingham City Museum and Art Gallery  
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47 However, for Black and Asian artists in Britain, where historic and contemporary  
48 representations of the female-self were limited to colonial stereotypes, the position  
49 asserted by Kelly and others was inadequate.<sup>87</sup> In using her own self-image in works  
50 such as *28 Positions in 34 Years*, 1992 (fig.4), Burman (to follow Jones), articulates a  
51 radical narcissism, whereby she “flamboyantly objectifies the female body but also  
52 simultaneously performs her body/self as subject”.<sup>88</sup> Her *Autoportraits* explore the  
53 intersection of her objectification as female, and exotic other, while the multiplicity of  
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3 her self-image within a single work hinders reductive interpretations that would  
4 delimit her identity to a set of stereotypes.  
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8 In *28 Positions in 35 Years* Burman offers 28 self-portraits presented in a grid of four  
9 rows of seven rectangular images. Ten of the images are tightly cropped so that the  
10 face fills the rectangular frame; others present the artists from a mid-distance,  
11 showing her head and torso; these images are notable for the way in which Burman  
12 poses with her hands, which variously cup her face, or are presented to the audience.  
13 Burman has repeated the use of several photographs, so that she is seen in the same  
14 pose a number of times; in one instance, a close-up of her face has been used in both  
15 front and reverse. Significantly, her mode of dress combines western and Asian  
16 garments; in multiple images Burman wears a tailored jacket and pork-pie hat, while  
17 also adorned with jewelled *bidi*, glass bangles and henna tattoos.  
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27 Rejecting the negative connotations usually associated with the word, Jones asserts  
28 that narcissism can be a radical strategy for female artists, and particularly women of  
29 colour. This is because as an exploration of the self, the narcissistic artwork,  
30 “*inexorably* leads to an exploration of and implication in the other”.<sup>89</sup> If the body  
31 performs (or is performed) according to its own socio-political context, this  
32 necessarily means that experiences of racial stereotyping and discrimination are  
33 already embedded within the body. Wherein “self-involvement was seen as the surest  
34 way to repudiate the objectification of women and to politicise personal  
35 experience”.<sup>90</sup> Burman’s multiplied self image both enacts and exacerbates the  
36 fragmentation of the strictures placed on South Asian womanhood, asserting its  
37 heterogeneity and intersubjectivity. Her performed narcissism disrupts what Mercer  
38 has called the normative “‘truth value’ produced by dominant codes of visual  
39 representation”.<sup>91</sup>  
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51 That Burman regularly utilised a particular rectangular frame and facial pose that  
52 looks out at the audience in her *Autoportraits*, on the one-hand recalls Warhol’s  
53 multiples, but might also refer to the uniform repetitions of the passport photograph.  
54 But where the passport photograph requires the sitter to present their face devoid of  
55 emotion, adhering to a standardized pose set against a neutral background, each of  
56 Burman’s individual portraits in *28 Positions in 35 Years* is unique in the way that she  
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3 has interacted with, and modified, the original image. Blocked stripes, swirling  
4 spirals, dots, dashes, and linear rays rendered in an array of yellow, red, green, pink  
5 and blue variously overlay the photographic image and collectively create a frenetic  
6 composition which demands the viewer's attention, but which resist a settled viewing  
7 experience. Understood as a development of Burman's engagement with modes of  
8 identity formation, the repeated self-portraits thus question the veracity of the  
9 photographic image. She has stated, "My manipulation of the photographic image  
10 questions the idea of the photograph as a document of the empirical reality to reveal  
11 an 'image of myself'".<sup>92</sup> For despite its memetic capture, Burman's graphic and  
12 painterly interventions on the photographic image suggest that it is always lacking.  
13 Historically, the photographic portrait has been regarded as depicting its subject and  
14 conveying their actual appearance. Thus the photograph was able to function as a  
15 system of disciplinary control and was adopted as an empirical document within the  
16 law and its enforcement agencies. With regard to the passport photograph, Cho has  
17 suggested that, "The injunction against emotion ... projects a fantasy of a passive,  
18 transparent, and readable national subject."<sup>93</sup> In this fantasy, the subject is conforming  
19 and easily schematized; they are neither passionate nor dissenting. However, for Cho,  
20 the hybrid qualities of diasporic personhood challenge the possibility of a neutral or  
21 conforming subject, wherein subjectivities cannot be contained within the disciplining  
22 frame of the passport photograph.<sup>94</sup> The visual excess of Burman's *Autoportraits* may  
23 thus be understood as expressing a profusion of personality, which is multiple, hybrid,  
24 and dynamic. In her rich and decadently patterned *Autoportraits* Burman refutes the  
25 possibility that the photographic image, as purported by the passport photograph, can  
26 capture the totality of a personal – or national – identity.

### 46 **Picturing Resistance and Resilience**

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49 "My work is about reclaiming the image of Asian women, moving away from  
50 the object of the defining gaze, towards a position where I / Asian woman  
51 become the subject of display. My self-portraits construct a femininity that  
52 resists the racist stereotype of the passive, exotic Asian woman, imprisoned by  
53 male patriarchal culture. Rather I become the maker and definer of my own  
54 image. Femininity is a fun, liberating force, rather than an oppressive force,  
55 allowing me to challenge the viewers' preconceptions of Asian femininity".<sup>95</sup>  
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5 Throughout her career Burman has garnered widespread admiration for her  
6 “unswerving commitment to a range of social and political narratives”,<sup>96</sup> which in  
7 turn have underpinned her challenge to the oppressive parameters placed on South  
8 Asian women, both in the home, and in wider British society. In the diptych  
9 *Convenience, Not Love* Burman’s engagement with collected press imagery, drawn  
10 vignettes, the family photographic archive, and her own self portrait, conveys a  
11 sonorous commentary of hopeful departure, optimistic transit, hostile encounter and  
12 settlement, culminating in resilient resistance. Intermingling the experiences of first  
13 generation South Asian migrants with those of the born-in-Britain diaspora, in  
14 proximity to historic and contemporaneous figures of resistance, Burman defies those  
15 limitations placed on Asian womanhood by racist stereotypes and British post-  
16 colonial anxieties. Simultaneously, *Convenience, Not Love* presents the British  
17 passport, pejorative visual stereotypes and discriminatory immigration procedures as  
18 tools for legitimising the exclusion of the South Asian diaspora from a national  
19 imaginary. Replicating an attempt to keep at bay the Asian populous, the two halves  
20 of *Convenience, Not Love* re-enact the discrimination experienced by Britain’s  
21 subjects from overseas, while asserting that contemporary British identity is  
22 nonetheless formed and informed by diasporic immigration. South Asian diasporas,  
23 and specifically South Asian women, in Britain are promoted as not only radically  
24 dissenting, but entrepreneurial and resilient in the face of systematic state  
25 discrimination and work-place inequality. In response to Thatcher’s warning of being  
26 “swamped”, Burman harnessed the various techniques of printmaking, collage and  
27 montage in order to create a work of visual excess that unsettles both, national  
28 parameters and pictorial convention. Through the mixing and manipulation of found,  
29 made, and collated visual resources she unapologetically ruptures attempts at ethno-  
30 national exclusions and European aesthetic niceties. These visual strategies evolved  
31 into her narcissistic *Autoportraits*, which further refute the possibility of isolating or  
32 containing South Asian identities. Cumulatively, Burman has arguably taken Pop’s  
33 twin poles of the simulacral and the referential<sup>97</sup> and colonized them with a black  
34 feminist discourse: conjoining the spectacular of Pop, with a diasporic hybridity, in  
35 the works discussed, she maintained multiple, sometimes conflicting positions, the  
36 implications of which are subject to change according to the socio-political climate in  
37 which they are viewed. It is the contention here that these works should properly be  
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3 regarded as a Black feminist retort, which draw attention to the complexity and multi-  
4 faceted nature of British Asian identities. Chila Burman's works affectively assert  
5 South Asian identities as heterogeneous, messy, and flamboyant; British and *here to*  
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7 *stay*.  
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16 <sup>1</sup> See Orlando, *British Black Art*, 96.

17 <sup>2</sup> Poovaya Smith, *The Circular Dance*, 11.

18 <sup>3</sup> Jones, *Body Art*, 24.

19 <sup>4</sup> Karimjee and Patel, 'Aurat Shakti', 42.

20 <sup>5</sup> Carby, 'White Women Listen!', 216.

21 <sup>6</sup> Conversation with the artist, 5 August 2017.

22 <sup>7</sup> Parker and Pollock, *Framing Feminism*, 64.

23 <sup>8</sup> Burman, 'Hiya Sisters', 53.

24 <sup>9</sup> Fernando, 'Chila Kumari Burman', 57.

25 <sup>10</sup> Biswas, et al. *Along the Lines of Resistance*. The exhibition ran from 7 December  
26 1988 - 22 January 1989.

27 <sup>11</sup> Nead, *Chila Kumari Burman*, 28.

28 <sup>12</sup> See Sharma, 'Said Adrus's Zeitgeist'.

29 <sup>13</sup> Nead, *Chila Kumari Burman*, 30-31.

30 <sup>14</sup> Cherry, 'Suitcase Aesthetics', 803.

31 <sup>15</sup> The Sri Lankan passport was added to the work at a later date, and was not present  
32 when the diptych was exhibited in *Along the Lines of Resistance*. See reproduction  
33 illustration of *Convenience, Not Love* in Beckett, 'Resistance, Continuity, Struggle',  
34 5.

35 <sup>16</sup> Mercer, 'Romare Bearden', 126.

36 <sup>17</sup> Eddie Chambers has identified this left-hand panel as an artwork in its own right,  
37 titled, *You allow us to come here on false promises*; however, the artist has asserted  
38 that this is incorrect, insisting that the work only exists as a diptych. See Chambers,  
39 *Black Artists in Britain*, 88. Conversation with the artist, 5 August 2017. Nonetheless,  
40 Burman did reuse the compositional elements of the British passport, Margaret  
41 Thatcher and Union flag, in opposition to the passports of India, Pakistan and  
42 Bangladesh in her artist's page for the exhibition catalogue, *The Medium and the*  
43 *Message*.

44 <sup>18</sup> Taylor, 'Bull, John'.

45 <sup>19</sup> Taylor, *ibid*.

46 <sup>20</sup> Taylor, *ibid*..

47 <sup>21</sup> Taylor, *ibid*..

48 <sup>22</sup> Samuel, *Island Stories*, 330.

49 <sup>23</sup> Kennard, *Maggie Regina*, 1983.

50 <sup>24</sup> Thatcher, *World In Action*. Pakistan left the Commonwealth in 1973 due to  
51 Britain's recognition of Bangladesh, and so is mentioned by Thatcher separately.  
52 Rasheed Araeen also used Thatcher's words in his mixed media artwork, *Look*  
53 *Mamma... Macho!*, 1983-1986; Space does not permit a longer discussion, but for  
54 reproduction see Aikens, *Rasheed Araeen*, 256-7.  
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25 The navy blue British passport was replaced by the standardized EU burgundy design in 1988. However, there have been discussions about whether this 'British' design is set to be reinstated post-Brexit. See Wheeler and Tominey, 'Britain's Blue Passport RETURNS'.

26 Bhabha, *The Location of Culture*, 149.

27 Anderson, *Imagined Communities*, 1991.

28 Spencer, *British Immigration Policy*, 8.

29 See Visram, *Ayahs, Lascars and Princes*.

30 Spencer, *British Immigration Policy*, 12.

31 Spencer, *ibid.*, 96.

32 Layton Henry, *The Politics of Race*, 39.

33 Layton Henry, *ibid.* 39.

34 Spencer, *British Immigration Policy*, 134.

35 As cited in Webster, 'The Empire Comes Home', 133.

36 As cited by Torpey, *The Invention of the Passport*, 151.

37 Powell's 'Rivers of Blood' speech was delivered at a Conservative Association meeting, in Birmingham on 20 April 1968. See Powell.

38 Dummett, *On Immigration and Refugees*, 104.

39 Spencer, *British Immigration Policy*, 144.

40 Spencer, *ibid.*, 143.

41 Alibhai-Brown, *Who Do We Think We Are*, 72-73.

42 See Solomos.

43 Layton Henry, *The Politics of Race*, 94. Citation from *Sunday Times*, 26 February, 1978, no page reference given.

44 Bhavnani, 'Racist Acts', 51.

45 Sivanandan, 'Catching History on the Wing'.

46 See Dhondy, 'Asian Communities'.

47 The original photograph is reproduced in Dhondy, 'Legacy of the Raj', 51.

48 as cited in Marangoly George, *The Politics of Home*, 192.

49 See *A Passage to Britain*.

50 O'Byrne 'On Passports', 403.

51 Viyas Mongia, 'Race, Nationality, Mobility', 210.

52 Owens, 'Representation', 98.

53 Cho, 'Citizenship', 279.

54 Torpey, *The Invention of the Passport*, 1.

55 Viyas Mongia, 'Race, Nationality, Mobility', 210.

56 Viyas Mongia, *ibid.*, 211.

57 as translated in Nead, *Chila Kumari Burman*, 28-29.

58 See Piper, 'Body & Text', a visual essay in which Piper presents the British passport as an ambivalent tool of colonial domination and oppression.

59 Arya, *Chila Kumari Burman*, unpaginated.

60 Trivedi, *ibid.*, 38.

61 Parmar, 'Black Feminism', 116.

62 Parmar, 'Gender, Race and Class', 241.

63 Perez, 'Chila Kumari Burman', 31.

64 Nead, *Chila Kumari Burman*, 28.

65 See Smith and Marmo, 'Uncovering the "virginity testing" controversy', 161.

66 Anon., 'Asian Women subjected to "virginity tests"'.  
67 Parmar, 'Gender, Race and Class', 245.

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69 Ellicot, 'How the Daily Mail Split Thatcher's Government'.  
70 Evans, 'Margaret Thatcher's shameful support'.  
71 Wilson, *Finding our Voice*.  
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73 Parmar, 'Gender, Race, Class', 259.  
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87 Sonia Boyce is another significant British artist using self-portraiture at this time. See Tawadros, *Sonia Boyce*.  
88 Jones, *Body Art*, 17.  
89 Jones, *ibid.*, 46.  
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