

Sutapa Biswas (b. 1962)

Housewives with Steak-knives

Key facts:

Date: 1983-5

Size: 245 x 222 cm

Materials: Oil, acrylic, pastel, pencil, collage and house paint on paper mounted onto canvas

Location: Bradford Museums and Galleries, Cartwright Hall

Nationality: British

Ethnicity: South Asian

Scope of work for Pearson A Level: Art & Identities

ART HISTORICAL TERMS AND CONCEPTS

Subject Matter

Housewives with Steak-knives is a contemporary image of the Hindu warrior deity Kali¹, who is both the bringer of war and peace, and is therefore a history painting according to European criteria - although a Hindu would consider it as a representation of *sanatana dharma* or eternal truth, rather than religious as such². Kali translates as 'black' and was created on earth to destroy evil in human form, yet every time she destroyed it another incarnation of evil arose, driving her mad. Her lover sacrificed himself to end the violence, and stepping on his body she stuck out her tongue. She embodies the eternal Shakti - a feminine force of creation and destruction. A traditional watercolour c. 1865 shows an aspect of:



'the Hindu deity in her most terrifying form. Here she is depicted as black skinned, four armed with her tongue out and blood dripping from her mouth, wearing a garland of human heads. She has the third eye on her forehead. The deity holds her upper right hand in *abhaya-mudra* and the lower right hand in *baroda-mudra*. In her lower left hand she holds a severed head of an *asur* (demon) and in her upper left hand she holds a *kharga*, a sacrificial axe. The deity is depicted in one hand as a benevolent goddess and on the other as fearsome.³

¹ For more details see: <https://www.britannica.com/topic/Kali>

² *Reworking Myths: Sutapa Biswas* interviewed by Yasmin Kureishi in Robinson, Hilary (Ed) *Visibly Female: Feminism and Art Today An Anthology* 1987 Camden Press

³ <https://collections.vam.ac.uk/item/O67459/kali-painting-unknown/>

In Biswas' painting Kali's left hand holds a machete threateningly aloft representing divine power - the 'steak-knife' - makes a deliberate break with Hindu vegetarianism to ensure no link with Hindu religious extremism, a severed white male head below representing her violent aspects. While her top right hand is held up in a gesture/mudra - sign of peace - and her lower right hand is holding a red rose with thorns - a reference to England and perhaps the contrasting English ideal of beauty - 'the English rose'. The red dye patterns on the hands traditionally made from altha, symbolise fertility. The severed head of the 'demon' symbolising human ego becomes a white male. The distinctive eyebrows have led some critics to identify him as Willie Whitelaw, a conservative MP and deputy Prime Minister in Margaret Thatcher's government. Replacing the garland of male skulls symbolic of evil are the faces of other powerful white male (right, clockwise): Adolf Hitler, an archetypal art collector (referenced from Gavin Jantjes *Frightful Knowledge* of 1982)⁴ - though some critics suggest it resembles former Tory PM Edward Heath, Russian revolutionary Leon Trotsky, and a figure with a monocle as a representative of the East India Company (1600-1847) and the British Raj (1858-1947). In doing this she has linked past patriarchal political oppressions - capitalism, fascism, communism, and imperialism - with the present.



Kali's lower right hand holds a flag with collaged images by the most famous woman artist in European art history, Artemesia Gentileschi. Both images relate to the violent biblical story of the heroic Jewish widow Judith who slayed the brutal general Holofernes who had laid siege to her town⁵. This was popular in C17th Italy yet far more powerful than any versions painted by artists such as Caravaggio. However, this version of *Judith Beheading Holofernes* c. 1620 (left) shows her 'fully capable of an act of carefully planned violence' (Pollock)⁶ while *Judith and her Maidservant with the Head of Holofernes* c. 1625 (right) depicts courageous women working together.

⁴ Ibid p. 29

⁵ Book of Judith 13:4-9

⁶ Pollock, Griselda and Parker, Rozsika *Old Mistresses: Women, Art and Ideology* 1981 Routledge & Kegan Paul



By choosing herself as the model for Kali, she is not just painting a self-portrait as such but adding herself to a long line of powerful women using anger to change their patriarchal world and conquer their male oppressors. Biswas includes herself amongst the 'Housewives' - a homage to her mother and matriarchal figures within in the South Asian Community. In a western context the stuck-out tongue, hairy feminist armpits and forceful image link with satirical humour used since the C18th as a way of undermining the powerful. By using iconic images from Western and Indian art Biswas wants European viewers to research into her culture, as she has into European cultural history.

Formal Qualities

The painting is formally composed with a strong vertical axis to the half-length figure and symmetrical arms, with weighting towards the violent active right-hand side. The raised machete seems to create an arch framing the figure. The strong muscular form is created with tonal modelling and a smooth silhouette, save the dishevelled underarm and head hair.

In European art red is often symbolic of anger and black of death. The red pigment is a symbol of power and fertility within Hindu art, and Kali (black) arose out of darkness. The combination of black and red is very powerful and associated with matriarchal and revolutionary cultures. Biswas is also acknowledging black as beautiful. The white background is 'a metaphor for white space, the institution of Whiteness and a direct reference to Robert Rauschenberg's *White Paintings*' (Biswas)⁷ with their pristine surfaces which she has studied with Fred Orton at Leeds and allows for a play of light across the surface. So, Kali (meaning black) triumphs over whiteness, hence switching European colour symbolism. Kali is wearing a top bought from Miss Selfridges with a design that suggested eyes and mouths to Biswas, created by the ikat dyeing process of Indonesia. This links to the traditional 'third eye' on Kali's forehead which suggests intuition⁸ but is also a way of 'protecting the body against a hateful gaze'.⁹

The painting is on a large scale and hangs at an angle forward from the wall by 330mm such that the machete is raised above the viewer; at the top it breaks the traditional containment of the frame.

1. CULTURAL, SOCIAL, TECHNOLOGICAL AND POLITICAL FACTORS

⁷ Martin, Courtney J. in Conversation with Sutatpa Biswas p. 27, in Biswas, Sutapa *Lumen* 2021

⁸ <https://kalimother.wordpress.com/iconography/>

⁹ Martin, Courtney J. in Conversation with Sutatpa Biswas p. 26, in Biswas, Sutapa *Lumen* 2021

Biswas was born into a Bengali speaking Hindu family in Santiniketan, West Bengal, India, where her Marxist father taught at the Tagore Institute. His politics necessitated his departure to the UK and his wife and children followed him, travelling by sea and rail when Biswas was four. Her parents had lived under the British Raj (1858-1947); they were part of the resistance movement, experienced the final violence of the partition of India in 1947, and were forced to leave what is now Bangladesh. Her grandmother had been a devotee of Kali. Applying for British citizenship Biswas only had the choice of 'black' or 'white' ethnicity (rather than South Asian), hence the state 'othered' those who shared colonial oppression and the term Black became a political category.

Biswas made *Housewives with Steak-knives* when she was still an undergraduate student in Fine Art with Art History at the University of Leeds (1981-85) where her tutors included the feminist art historian Griselda Pollock who had recently published *Old Mistresses*. An intellectual dialogue began whereby Biswas deliberately incorporated xeroxed images from the book into her painting to point out what was missing - non-European imagery: 'I was calling for a feminist resistance to patriarchal violence against women's bodies that was anti-colonial. Secondly it was a call for collective organisation and unity among women and across geographical spaces and cultures, against imperialism.'¹⁰ Pollock has since acknowledged that Biswas 'had a profound impact on me and my work'.¹¹ At a time when many white feminist artists had been avoiding the body to make conceptual work - for example Mary Kelly - Biswas has focused on the Asian woman's body. The hairy armpits also signify the 1980's feminist rejection of capitalist beauty expectations that women should battle their natural bodies to be flawless, humorously played off against the prominent eyebrows of the severed head.

It pays homage to the strong vocal South Asian women of her family and community - 'I have never felt oppressed within my family'¹² - in contrast to the stereotypical media representations of femininity as fragile and Asian women as passive, silent, trapped in domesticity and arranged marriages. From her schooldays she was aware of the 1977 Grunwick strike, by south Asian migrant women from East Africa, for union rights. Growing up in Southall she was aware of the feminist group, Southall Black Sisters. As an undergraduate Biswas studied Paul Gilroy's *The Empire Strikes Back: Race and Racism in 70s Britain* (1982) especially Pratibha Parmar's article, and Edward Said's *Orientalism* (1978). She used these, as well as Roland Barthes concept from 'Myth Today' (1973), in her attempt to demythologise the ideology of colonialism.

Housewives with Steak-knives was conceived as part of a larger body of work, including a repeated performance she gave with a fellow student when an undergraduate, *Kali* 1983-5. Videos of the second iteration are now in Tate's collection: www.tate.org.uk/art/artworks/biswas-kali-t14278.

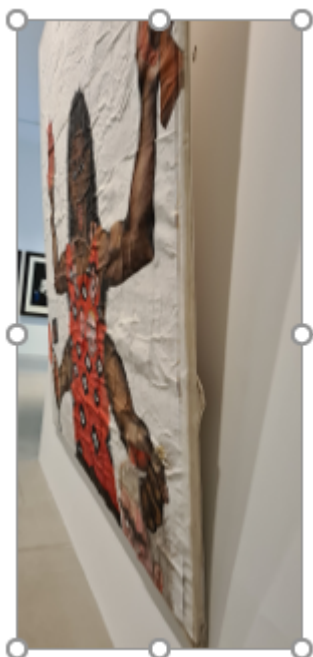
DEVELOPMENTS IN MATERIALS, TECHNIQUES AND PROCESSES

Housewives with Steak-knives began on a single piece of white paper and was enlarged with additional pieces using masking tape. The combination of acrylic paint and pastel created wrinkles on the paper. It was initially exhibited on a stretcher, then rolled up after

¹⁰ Martin, Courtney J. in Conversation with Sutatpa Biswas p. 30, in Biswas, Sutapa *Lumen* 2021

¹¹ Pollock, Griselda 'Tracing Figures of Presence, Naming Ciphers of Absence: Feminism, Imperialism and Postmodernity in the Work of Sutapa Biswas' 1998 reprinted in Biswas, Sutapa *Lumen* 2021 p. 50

¹² *Reworking Myths: Sutapa Biswas* interviewed by Yasmin Kureishi in Robinson, Hilary (Ed) *Visibly Female: Feminism and Art Today An Anthology* 1987 Camden Press p. 39



each showing to increase the surface texture; it was only backed on canvas in the mid-1990s. Expensive acrylics were used for the figure of Kali, with pastels for the patterns highlights and textures, elsewhere cheap house paint was used. This was a deliberate choice by Biswas to reference the 'economies of difference...histories of European colonialism...India was Britain's bank. Enslavement, looting and extortionate taxation exhausted the country's resources.'¹³ The collaged xeroxed images of Gentileschi's work come from *Old Mistresses*. 'It was important for me to take a page out of this book and to incorporate it into this work in order to situate what was missing from the feminist critique of art history'.¹⁴ The choice of reclaiming pastel (traditionally associated in Europe with women's amateur work) was popular with other feminist artists at the time, such as Sonia Boyce.

WAYS IN HAS BEEN USED AND INTERPRETED IN PAST AND PRESENT SOCIETIES

After her degree show *Housewives with Steak-knives* was first exhibited alongside *Kali* in 'The Thin Black Line', a show of eleven Black women artists at the prestigious Institute of Contemporary Art in London, curated by Lubaina Himid in 1985. Himid wrote: 'Our methods vary individually from satire to storytelling, from timely vengeance to careful analysis, from calls to arms to the smashing of stereotypes. We are claiming what is ours and making ourselves visible.'¹⁵ Reviews of the show revealed the divided positions of reviewers at the time. From M. Ali writing in *West Africa*: 'It is a powerful image which derives its strength from reference to traditional culture'¹⁶ to the *Guardian* which found it 'choking on its own anger'¹⁷. Kwesi Owusu in *The Struggle for Black Arts in Britain: What can we consider better than freedom* regarded the show as 'steeped in the struggles of resistance to Imperialism and the British state... to be BLACK is not merely a matter of skin colour. It is a state of consciousness, of what Frantz Fanon would have called 'combat breathing': a living, interminable challenge to Imperialism in the metropolis. This state of consciousness articulates the dialectics of race, sex, and class within the context of exploitative and endemic racism of capitalist social relations.'¹⁸ In feminist Rosemary Betterton's *Looking On*, Himid summarised the situation for most young black women in art schools as: 'an insistence, that as a black woman, the artist has something to be angry about and should express it; an insistence that angry or political

¹³ Martin, Courtney J. in Conversation with Sutatpa Biswas p. 31, in Biswas, Sutapa *Lumen* 2021p. 31

¹⁴ Ibid p. 30

¹⁵ Quoted in Parker, Rozsika & Pollock, Griselda (Eds) *Framing Feminism: Art and the Women's Movement 1970-1985* p. 67

¹⁶ Ibid *West Africa* 16 December 1985 p. 2638

¹⁷ Ibid *Guardian* 27 November 1985

¹⁸ Owusu, Kwesi *The Struggle for Black Arts in Britain: What can we consider better than freedom* 1986 Commedia p. 21

statements are not art' before praising Biswas for 'coming forward as strong political artist[s], challenging myths and stereotypes fearlessly.'¹⁹

By 1989 Gilane Tawadros called *Housewives with Steak-knives* the 'clearest enunciation of Black women's creativity as a form of creative resistance'.²⁰ Summarising the importance of her work in *Black Artists in British Art: A History since the 1950s*, Eddie Chambers - a member of the Blk Art Group formed in Wolverhampton in 1979 - wrote in 2014: 'Biswas' astonishing work of the 1980s boldly challenged, head on, stereotypes of Indian women as demure and submissive whilst this work, simultaneously, unapologetically investigated and recalled, with great clarity, aspects of religious and cultural identity evocative of Biswas' ancestral home of India'.²¹

After Leeds, Biswas studied at the Slade School of Art 1988-90, and was a research student at the Royal College of Art 1996-98. She is now a reader in Fine Art at Manchester Metropolitan University.

FURTHER READING AND LINKS

Biswas, Sutapa *Lumen* 2021 Ridinghouse

Chambers, Eddie *Black Artists in British Art: A History since the 1950s* 2014 I B Taurus

¹⁹ Betterton, Rosemary *Looking On: Images of Femininity in the Visual Arts and Media* 1987 Pandora p. 260

²⁰ Tawadros, Gilane 'Beyond the Boundary: the Work of Three Black Artists in Britain', *Third Text* 3, no.8-9 (1989) p.145

²¹ Chambers, Eddie *Black Artists in British Art: A History since the 1950s* 2014 I B Taurus p. 153