

Nalini: Memory of Things

When I was in a coma, I dreamt I was floating in the sea between Africa and India.

Nalini comes as an offering. It is a collection of photographs and objects that reflects on the migratory lives of Arpita Shah's maternal ancestors in India and East Africa. Positioned and displayed carefully in the gallery space, it contains stories of fantasy, ownership and labour associated with their lives. The series is named after her grandmother, *Nalini*, in the spirit of Virginia Woolf who wrote: *we think back through our mothers.*

A popular female name, 'Nalini' connotes the gendered virtues of purity, fertility and regeneration in Hinduism. Shah playfully engages with the rich mythologies the name evokes (from the Sanskrit 'lotus') to ponder the experience of dislocation. Botanical icons become metonyms for other continental ecologies and testify to the experience of growing up – from youth, to maturity and to old age – in different and remote lands. Ecological aesthetics emerge to highlight shared sentimental attachments formed by great-grandmother, grandmother and mother to the flora and landscapes they inhabited: a bougainvillea in bloom, the wet fertile Kenyan soil, the foamy ocean.

Rootedness and connectedness become forms of longing, and planting a botanical art that can relate one more closely to a foreign land. Shah tackles gardening as an art of memory and we are reminded that planting in a novel land is not only a pleasurable pastime, but a crucial domestic activity that can nurture one's own sense of femininity and role in contributing to the household. In the lives of Shah's ancestors, gardening was considered both creative and aesthetic, a way to improve and tighten the fabric of the home. Moreover, gardening nurtured the value of fecundity and ensured continued vitality in the home landscape. But land also offered respite from domesticity. Shah's great-grandmother would wander on her own for an hour in the evenings. Nobody knew where she would go.

Beyond the ecological connections cultivated by the three women, *Nalini* also dwells on the persistence of more iconic buildings through memory. Shah includes the image of the Taj Mahal, the gigantic mausoleum commissioned by Mughal emperor Shah Jahan in the sixteenth century to house the tomb of his favourite wife, queen Mumtaz Mahal, in the city of Agra. The seductive charms of the Taj with its white, plump domes (reminiscent of a woman's breast), bring back childhood memories linked to India. Blown up from a pocket-size sweet tin, the image of the Taj, enveloped by creamy clouds, becomes a studio backdrop, a space that can be used for imaginative projection. Backdrops such as these can still be found in the commercial photographic studios in Africa and India.

Kenya, imagined anew as a Land of Plenty, also played into the foundation myths of Shah's great-grandfather,



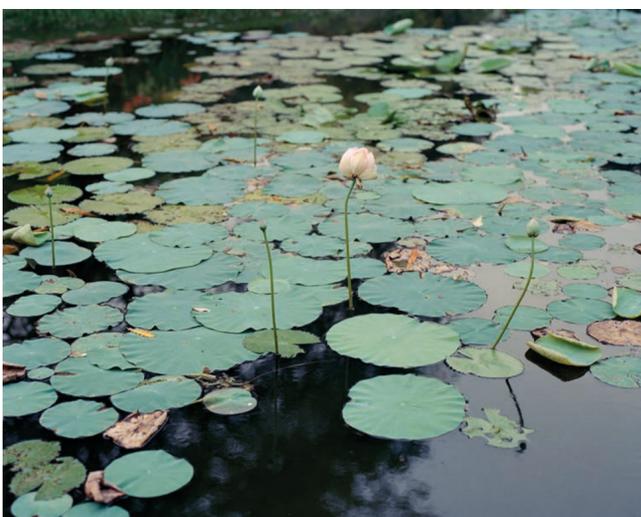
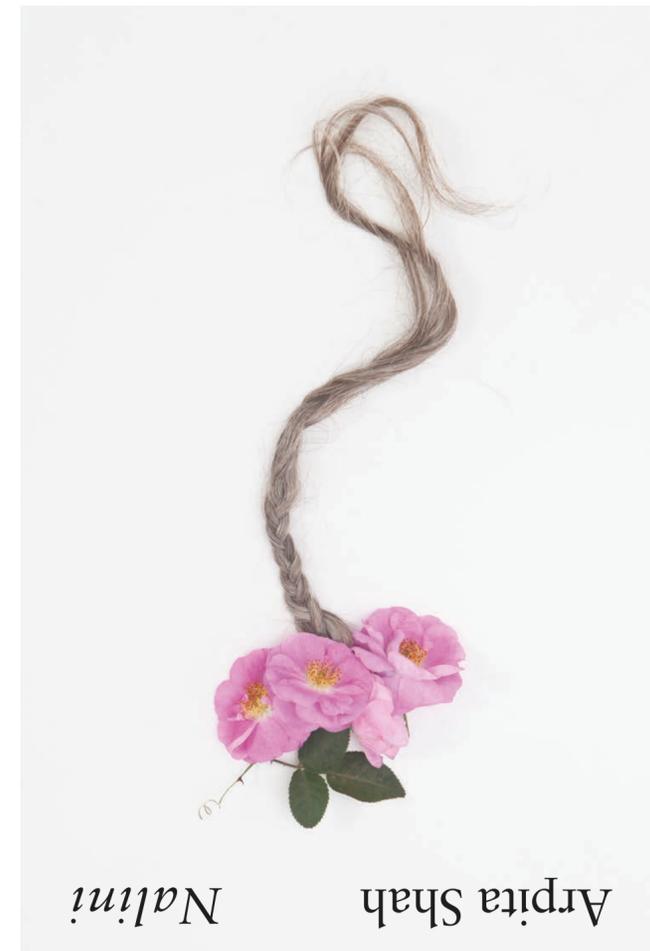
Emilia Terracciano

his commercial aspirations and long-term fortunes. In an old archival photograph we see his Krishna Dairy Depot, set up in Nairobi in 1928, surrounded by male staff members and motorized vehicles. Krishna, a mythological figure with pointy chin and sweet small smile, is often depicted asleep in a silvery ocean of milk. Tales of baby Krishna's love for milk and butter, his pranks to break milkmaids' pitchers and steal the mythical liquid are cherished by women and children in India, as is the churning of an ocean of milk in the ever-continuing struggle between the Devas and the Asuras, the Gods and the Demons. Milk of the primal oceans churns into butter shaping the elements of creation and then of the world. The natural and divine substance could easily become a substitute for a mother's milk. In this milky environment perfectly suited to nurturing all forms of life in the fertile lands of Kenya, Shah's great-grandmother ('fair as milk, like a queen') received emptied milk cans full of fruit and flowers (*phool*) from the 40 or so local workers employed at Krishna Dairy Depot.

For Shah's maternal ancestors, to separate from Kenya at the start of WWII meant renouncing a lavish lifestyle and losing a freedom that was extra-mural.

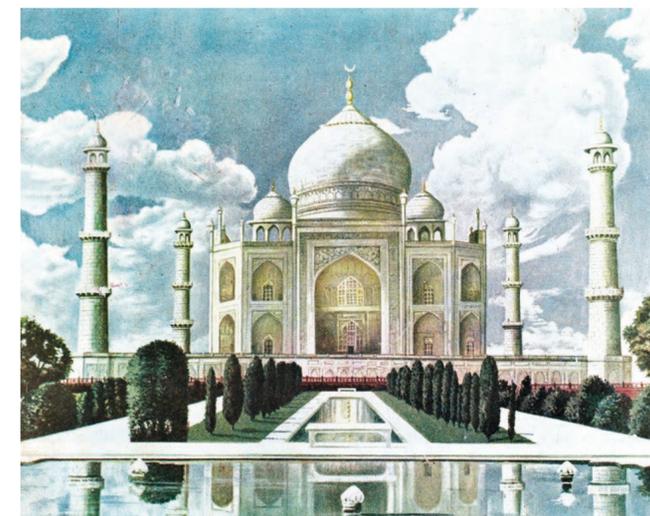
Back in Gujarat, India, colourful frocks and sumptuous accessories made and worn in Nairobi were chucked away to make room for dreary and monochrome *chanya choris* – feminine propriety was reinforced. Swahili became a ruse, a coded language. 'I wish we'd never left Nairobi, nothing but sadness in India', recounts Nalini.

Nalini also renders homage to ancestral memories in the form of flower offerings (*puja* in Hindi). The thin, papery flowers of the bougainvillea adorn an old faded passport. As homage, a prayer is not only a request but can be testimony too. Photographs, footprints and names written in books abound in Indian homes and are treated as more durable and tactile means to re-connect with ancestors. Notwithstanding the advent of digital imagery, printed photographs are still very popular and family members obtain pictures of their elders before they pass away. Framed and placed on domestic altars, such portraits are beautified with locally-sourced flower garlands (such as marigold and jasmine). Shah does something of the kind. Figuring and tracing diasporic desire, *Nalini* becomes a fluid constellation of memories, but only the lens can tell us that. The Milky Way is a silver slipstream of migration, it is oceanic. *Nalini* is a place where time's beginnings can be plotted but never be settled. Birds set to migrate will return to nest. Saris tightly wrapped around a woman's body and hand-gathered into even pleats below the navel, like the petals of a lotus flower, are folded to be passed down. Lives are seemingly threaded through and across space: *backward into her mother and forward into her daughter.* Nalini...what's in a name?



Arpita Shah is a photographic artist and educator based in Edinburgh, Scotland. She works between photography and film, exploring the fields where culture and identity meet. As an India-born artist, Arpita spent an earlier part of her life living between India, Ireland and the Middle East before settling in the UK. This migratory experience is reflected in her practice, which often focuses on the notion of home, belonging and shifting cultural identities.

Arpita's work has been exhibited internationally, including at the Detroit Center of Contemporary Photography (2013); Tramway in Glasgow (2014); Focus Festival in Mumbai, India (2015); Chobi Mela IX in Dhaka, Bangladesh (2017); and Autograph APB in London (2018). She is also co-founder of Focàs Scotland and the recipient of the 2019 Light Work + Autograph ABP Artist-in-Residence programme, which commences in 2019.



Emilia Terracciano is a writer and art historian based in London and Oxford. She is a postdoctoral fellow at Ruskin School of Art, University of Oxford, where she teaches the course Globalisation, Photography and the Documentary Turn. She is the author of *Art and Emergency: Modernism in Twentieth-Century India*.

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