

“BECAUSE I AM A GIRL, I MUST STUDY”

Arati Kushwaha

“A father asks his daughter:

Study? Why should you study?

I have sons aplenty who can study.”

Kamla Bhasin¹

‘Because I am a Girl, I Must Study’ is a remarkable poem on paper. I have heard this poem by Kamla Bhasin (b.1946), an Indian developmental feminist activist, poet, author and social scientist, read in Hindi and it was even more impactful. Her work focuses on gender equity and education and is incredibly inspiring. In the text, Bhasin describes why gender equity and girls’ education is vital in Indian society. In particular, as far as education is concerned, girls in rural areas are especially deprived and female enrolment in schools is very low, due to the ignorance of parents and societal norms. In addition, gender discrimination is common in rural districts, where there are high mortality rates for girl children.

Slow Decay (2017) is a project which seeks to contribute to a vibrant conversation about challenging traditional cultural views (relating to ideas, social behaviour, politics) of the girl child in India, as well as more general feminist discussions. Taken as a whole, this study articulates the poor treatment and attitude towards the girl child in Indian society, especially in the form of gender inequity and the struggle for girls to find acceptance and a place in a hierarchical society which is often structured not in terms of affection, but by rigid social norms, parental ignorance and traditional values. My work explores the themes of identity, gender, sexuality, femininity and selective self-induced abortion. I want to advocate for gender equality because the current situation is unfair and unacceptable. I ask the question: Why are gender equity and girl’s education so vital for Indian society?

Indian society is largely composed of hierarchical systems within families and communities. These hierarchies can be broken down into age, sex, ordinal position, kinship relationships (within families), as well as caste, lineage, wealth, occupation and relationship to the ruling group within the community. From birth, girls are automatically entitled to less; from playtime to food to education, girls can always expect to be entitled to less than their brothers. Girls also have less access to family income and assets. India is a patriarchal society; men are generally in control of the distribution of family resources. Women are considered to be ‘worthless’ by their husbands if they are not ‘able’ to produce a male child, and often face considerable abuse if this is the case.

Slow Decay deals with the theme of gender discrimination, executed by means of soft constructions, video, waxwork and found objects; it seeks to represent diverse and critical ideas and raise public awareness of the issues examined. My inspiration derives from old traditions. I have always been fascinated by soft sculpture, not only from a technical perspective, but also because it often generates interaction between the concepts of hard and soft. I also exploit the softness of materials to translate the emotions and sensitivities generated by social issues.

Monster (2017) is a three-dimensional sculpture and hybrid being – a combination of human and animal, the classical

water monster Hydra and the Hindu Goddess Durga.² Hybrids have become a focus for much recent art. My engagement with hybrids has opened up a new perspective on gender discrimination, which has parallels in human society. *Monster* is an expression of the psychic state of Indian society, the apathy shown toward the girl child who is often considered a liability or burden from her birth. *Monster* represents the awkward position of the girl child in society, one who cannot demand equal rights from her father, brother, husband or son. More specifically, it sends a broader social message about the disparity between male and female.



Figure 1. Arati Kushwaha, *Monster*, 2017, steel, chicken wire, dacron, Kalamkari fabric, papier-mâché. Photograph: Pam McKinlay.

In her 2010 book *Goddess Durga and Sacred Female Power*,³ Laura Amazzone explores how, in many human societies, an empowered model of the divine and fearless female is absent. Traditional depictions of Durga show a warrior woman with eight hands. Her sacred female power reflects a duality: on the one hand, she is fertile and warm-hearted; on the other hand, she is aggressive, a fearless destroyer who offers an alternative model of female potential and empowerment and a willingness to unleash her anger against wrongdoing, using violence to achieve liberation.

Monsters figure in the mythology of many cultures. Inspired by the ancient Greek myth in my choice of form and pattern, I chose the water monster Hydra, a legendary creature in the form of a monstrous water snake. Thus, I compare the Indian girl child to (a) *Monster*.

The notion of the monstrous-feminine is the focus of feminist theorist and cultural critic Barbara Creed (b.1943). In her book *The Monstrous Feminine: Film, Feminism, Psychoanalysis*,⁴ she explores the importance of gender in the



Figure 2. Arati Kushwaha, *Monster*, 2017, steel, chicken wire, dacron, Kalamkari fabric, papier-mâché. Photograph: Pam McKinlay.



Figure 3. Arati Kushwaha, *Monster*, 2017, steel, chicken wire, dacron, Kalamkari fabric, papier-mâché. Photograph: Pam McKinlay.

construction of woman's 'monstrosity.' Creed discusses how, historically, in all human societies women's sexuality has been portrayed as something scary, weird, threatening and terrifyingly abject, more monster than human. I believe that artists have a responsibility to articulate their outrage at such a caricature. *Monster* (2017) declares my reaction to the experience of inequality that flow from such constructions.

A linguistically based sculpture, *Education and the Girl* (2017) represents the notion of border; it is an expression of deprivation, of repressed female sexuality. It is the expression of Third World personhood. In India, girls are exposed to traditional customs and rules and household activities by parents and society, and are caught in the cycle of early marriage, between the ages of five and 12 years. The girl child has to confront a border. This sculpture, made of paraffin wax moulded into small pink-and-red alphabet candles, represents her social context, with a strong feminist message attached. Red is the colour associated with anger, warning or death, particularly because of its association with blood. An engagement with language and transformation of materials is the chief rationale behind the sculpture.

Ten feet long, this 'border' spells out 12 statements which carry a powerful political message:

Education and the Girl
Custom and the Girl
Bias and the Girl
Repression and the Girl
Gap and the Girl
Disparity and the Girl
Protocol and the Girl
Guilt and the Girl
Shame and the Girl
Mortality and the Girl
Deprivation and the Girl
Treatment and the Girl

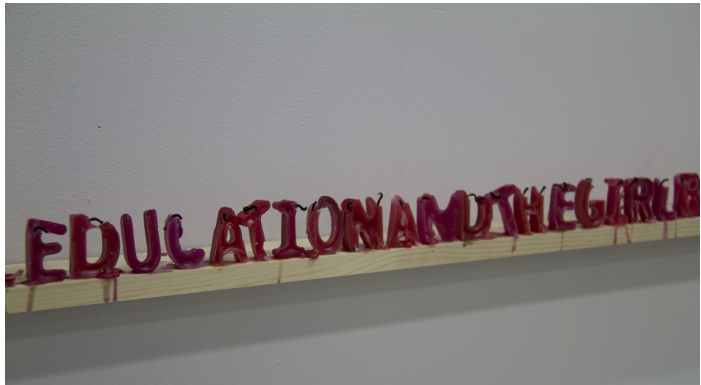


Figure 4. Arati Kushwaha, *Education and the Girl*, 2017, paraffin wax and wooden plank.
Photograph: Pam McKinlay.

Education and the Girl embodies a potential burning process – burning would destroy the unseen border:

My sculpture *Utero* (2017) derives its title from a Latin word meaning womb. It is inspired by Portuguese artist Joana Vasconcelos's work *The Bride*,⁵ an enormous construction representing a magnificent chandelier consisting of thousands of tiny tampons. Vasconcelos places her focus on the female genitals and the beauty of menstruation and repressed feminine sexuality.

Similarly, *Utero* playfully simulates a chandelier made out of pre-existing objects, using metal coat-hangers to expose issues around the girl child. *Utero* depicts the female reproductive system to highlight sex-selective self-induced abortion, a major social issue in India. A self-induced abortion (or self-induced miscarriage) is often performed by the pregnant woman herself or with the help of non-medical assistants. In India, women frequently attempt to remove the fetus with a metal coat-hanger inserted into the uterus through the cervix. *Utero* transforms these coat-hangers into a uterus using a bending technique, thereby placing the focus of the work on the female body.

Utero, constructed using more than 500 galvanised metal coat-hangers, brown pigment, glue, and cinnamon powder,

is an appropriation and manipulation of pre-existing, common objects. As commonly practised in India, consuming fine cinnamon powder stimulates the uterus and procures abortion: take two tablespoons and repeat this dose daily until the abortion occurs. The found objects used here are intended to generate questions about female social dilemmas, the interpretative role of the artist and the purpose of art in its social context.



Figure 5. Arati Kushwaha, *Utero*, 2017, metal coat-hangers, brown colouring, glue, cinnamon powder. Photograph: Pam McKinlay.

My work *Vulnero* (2017) takes its name from a latin term meaning damage. A colour video installation of 15:41 minutes duration, without a soundtrack, *Vulnero* portrays the silence of the girl child whose voice is not heard. Silent and non-verbal, the piece captures the brutal treatment and silent destruction of the girl child in Indian society. Throughout the making of the work, I asked why gender equity and girls' education are so important. The white gauze rolls, woven material and breathable fabrics I utilised in the video can be used to protect an injured part of the body. The colour red is associated with blood, a vital body fluid. The oscillation between white and red expresses the action of breathing in and out.

Through my *Slow Decay* project, I have sought to interpret why gender equity and girls' education are so important in the Indian context. The stories and allusions portrayed in my work force the viewer to ask questions about the current situation. Kamla Bhasin's poem – interrogating a social context in which girls' education is seen to be pointless because they are considered secondary in terms of familial priorities, and their traditional roles are fixed – provided me with a convenient starting point.

In aesthetic terms, *Slow Decay* was intended to explore new ways in which soft constructions, found objects, video, and wax could be employed to explore social issues in a way that would have an impact on the viewer. My use of found objects and my video work attempt to generate questions about female social dilemmas, the interpretative role of the artist and the purpose of art in a particular social context. Indeed, the ultimate aim of my work is to spread awareness of issues of gender equity through my art practice.

Arati Kushwaha completed a Master of Visual Art in 2018 at the Dunedin School of Art. Arati's deepest commitment and greatest challenge is to raise awareness about discrimination against the girl child in the Indian context through sculptural installations.

- 1 Kamla Bhasin, *Voices from the Frontlines*. April 26, 2012. <http://www.peacexpeace.org/2012/04/because-i-am-a-girl-i-must-study/>.
- 2 Durga is the fierce manifestation of the protective mother goddess, willing to unleash her anger against wrongdoing, using violence to achieve liberation and destruction to empower creation...
- 3 Laura Amazzone, *Goddess Durga and Sacred Female Power* (Lanham, Boulder; New York, Toronto, Plymouth, UK: Hamilton Books, 2010).
- 4 Barbara Creed, *The Monstrous Feminine: Film, Feminism, Psychoanalysis* (London and New York: Routledge, 2012).
- 5 Crispin Sartwell, "Beauty and Reconciliation in the Art of Joana Vasconcelos," *Joana Vasconcelos: Material World*, 2015, http://joanavasconcelos.com/multimedia/bibliografia/2015_MaterialWorld_CSartwell_EN.pdf