

Q & A



Queer South Asian Performers Zulfikar Ali Bhutto and Kareem Khubchandani: An Interview

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In her article “South Asian Drag Queens Are Often Erased—Until Now,” Kareem Khubchandani notes that there are at least a dozen active South Asian drag queens, including her own alter ego LaWhore Vagistan.¹ On 2 July 2017 I had an opportunity to see Khubchandani—as well as one of the artists she profiled, Zulfikar Ali Bhutto (aka Faluda Islam)—perform at the “Fatal Love: Where Are We Now?” conference, held at the Queens Museum in New York. Organized by artist, curator, and activist Jaishri Abichandani, the groundbreaking convening brought together curators, academics, and artists to take stock of South Asian American art. However, a rigorous and robust discussion of queer South Asian performance was missing. To begin to address this lacuna, I sent Khubchandani and Bhutto a series of questions via email in March 2019. Pastiche/parody, camp, death, conviviality, futurity, and site-specificity were addressed in the context of their practices. On 15 October 2019 we will meet in person at the Asian/Pacific/American Institute at New York University as part of a public panel to further reflect and expand on their replies.

Alpesh Kantilal Patel: As an introduction, could you both describe your alter egos?

¹ Kareem Khubchandani, “South Asian Drag Queens Are Often Erased—Until Now,” *Into*, accessed 29 August 2017, <https://www.intomore.com/culture/south-asian-drag-queens-are-often-erased-until-now>.

Zulfikar Ali Bhutto: Faluda Islam is the drag-zombie alter ego of Zulfikar Ali Bhutto and a part of my larger interdisciplinary practice, which includes video, textile, and performance in order to illustrate a fictitious queer revolution. Faluda has become a way for me to see histories of martyrdom, guerrilla warfare, and armed struggle in the Muslim world through a queer lens.

Kareem Khubchandani: LaWhore Vagistan is everyone's favorite *desi* drag aunty. She brings the nightclub to the classroom, and vice versa, teaching critical race, postcolonial, and gender theory through lip sync and lecture. Together we've traveled to nightclubs, theaters, and galleries all over the US and India, and she also has a couple of music videos on my YouTube channel.

AKP: How does the photograph function in your practice? How involved are you in the photography? Do you consider it merely a document or something more? I ask because, while I have seen both of you perform live, my primary engagement has been through still images.

ZAB: Photography is very practical for me: it is a form of documentation and sometimes one photograph or series of photographs can neatly encapsulate the mood of a performance. I have collaborated with photographers outside of live performances and, as I continue to do so, am building an archive, documenting the development of the character. Video is really where Faluda finds a place to live, as it can feature aspects of her life and death that cannot necessarily be seen on stage—or better yet, the multimedia nature of my performance allows for conversation to flow between the zombie Faluda and her ghostly comrades from resistance past.

KK: I rely particularly on nightclub photographers who document drag shows to create an archive of my performance and to populate my Instagram. Nightclub lighting is not photo-friendly and the presence of professional photographers who understand how to shoot heavily made-up drag faces and brown skin in terrible lighting is always a blessing (fig. 1). Like Faluda, LaWhore is also drawn to video. I have played with the music video format in “There’s a Stranger in My House” and “Sari”; making these videos taught me a lot about collaboration and dialogue (fig. 2). Drag can easily be solo and lonely work, and video has offered me the opportunity to make drag artifacts with unexpected collaborators.

AKP: Fredric Jameson has written that “pastiche is blank parody.” He was largely referring to the work of artists in the 1980s such as Cindy Sherman. For



FIGURE 1 LaWhore Vagistan as Aladdin teaching Jasmine about “A Whole New World” of fisting, 2014, Big Chicks bar, Chicago, IL.
PHOTO: MICHAEL ELYEA.



FIGURE 2 LaWhore Vagistan, still from *Sari* (2016), directed by Sarah Hill.

Jameson, pastiche is un-ironic and affectless. Richard Dyer, though, has argued in his book *Pastiche* (Routledge, 2007) that pastiche can be embodied and ironic—often in ways which are *not* biting or negative. I would go one step further and indicate that pastiche as a mode of critique can be affirmative. Could you discuss what kinds of signifiers you collide together in your practice? Are your critiques affirmative?

ZAB: Faluda Islam exists within a larger multimedia series I have been working on for about a year and a half, *Tomorrow We Inherit the Earth*, and within that the performances of this project are titled *The Alif Series* (figs. 3–4). I research histories of guerrilla warfare and revolution in the Muslim world and then reinterpret them into a fictitious queer revolution that takes place in the Middle East and South Asia and then makes its way to the “West,” inverting the dominant narrative associated with queer liberation coming from the West and then going to the East. That is all to say pastiche is an important part of Faluda Islam.



FIGURE 3 Faluda Islam, *Alif Is for Revolution*, 2017, solo performance, Asian Art Museum, San Francisco, CA.

PHOTO: KALIMA AMILAK.



FIGURE 4 Faluda Islam, *Remembering Alif*, 2018, solo performance channelling Jasbir Puar, de Young Museum, San Francisco, CA. Costume: Hushidar Mortezaie. PHOTO: JAMIL HELLU.

Her character is a martyred guerrilla fighter resurrected as a rather tragically funny zombie (figs. 5–6) to continue fighting. She is literally a living martyr. I am inspired a great deal aesthetically by Sana'a Mehadli —the first female suicide bomber—and her goodbye video. I do a performance that is very much a nod to her and that video. I replace one of the Algerian prisoners in Jean Genet's *Un Chant d'amour* with Faluda Islam in a two-channel video that I recently



FIGURES 5–6 Faluda Islam, *They Told Us to Wear Masqs*, 2018, collaborative performance with jose e abad, SAFEHouse for the Performing Arts, San Francisco, CA.
PHOTO: DIERDRE VISSER.

made. Having grown up in a family that very much believed in revolution as emancipation, it became a natural base from which to grow this character. I guess that is the pastiche, the art and drama that comes with heroes, martyrs, the idea of the struggle, and a little bit of zombie horror makeup.



FIGURE 7

LaWhore Vagistan serving sari-wearing, kitty-party, auntie realness, 2016, Rain Nightclub, Austin, TX.

PHOTO: WILLIAM BOYD.

KK: I'm working with South Asian pop culture signifiers: the *desi* auntie, the sari, and Sanjay Leela Bhansali's films and songs. There's definitely critique when I lip-sync Alicia Keys' "This Girl is on Fire" while parodying the infamous *jauhar* [wife-immolation] scene from *Padmaavat*. Critique is even more explicit when I have access to video projection, and I can display text—"Burn caste. Burn islamophobia. Burn misogyny."—on the screen behind me. These were all issues the film was criticized for. At the same time, I have a deep love for the auntie figure, I want to look stunning in the sari (fig. 7). I want to achieve Bhansali's opulence on stage. I approach these varied aesthetic styles knowing they are aspirational, decadent, and sticky in their politics. At the same time, they are essential references in my acts. This is why I hesitate to do some numbers for non-*desi* audiences who might not get the reference and therefore miss both the effort I have put in to serve realness, and the critique that comes in parodic repetition.

AKP: Broadly speaking, theories on camp tend to come from a Euro-American tradition and generally avoid discussions of race. Do you have any thoughts about how the inclusion of race radically asks us to reimagine what camp *does*?

ZAB: I cannot speak on camp in academic terms; I learned what the word meant while living in the UK. As far as I know, camp means cheesy, kitsch, and effeminate in a gay way. I can speak to using Bollywood camp in my performances or Lebanese soap opera camp, but I'm not as aware of camp as an area of study or the racial tensions that exist within it.

KK: I have two thoughts on this. One, there are scholars that have shown that white camp relies on the appropriation and abjection of racialized others.² I think, for example, of early twentieth-century gay house parties at which elite white men dressed in caftans and decorated their homes with Orientalia in order to enjoy and create the mood of sexual decadence—they aestheticized Asianness to achieve queer pleasure. Two, there are so many ways that South Asian queers practice camp that don't read as queer because the referent isn't available to white audiences, because not enough people understand tropes such as the tragic courtesan, the buddy film, the just-missed-kiss, or the wet sari. This goes back to the question of pastiche, and the importance of the referent in queer performance.

AKP: Your performances are always already tied to a location. How does venue, for instance, (the bar, the white cube, academic conference, online, etc.) affect production and reception/meaning? Also, in what cities in the US and abroad have you performed? I imagine your expected audience must shape content to a certain degree?

ZAB: Location, location, location! It can totally change the kind of performance you choose to do. A bar is far more accessible, so that can feel quite liberating. But aside from a few exceptions, you don't have time to really get into an idea. White cube galleries are where I might do a reading or repeat a gesture. I think a lot of visual art spaces expect performance artists to "activate" a space and so they are more interested in the activation than the performance or the performance artist. In academic spaces it really depends on what fa-

2 See, for instance: Chris A. Eng, "'Give it up, Kwang': Disavowing Asian Labor and Queer/Trans of Color Critique in Hedwig and the Angry Inch," *Theater Journal* 70, no. 2 (2018): 173–193; Uri McMillan, "Nicki-aesthetics: the camp performance of Nicki Minaj," *Women & Performance: a journal of feminist theory* 24, no.1 (2014): 79–87; Michael Moon, "Flaming Closets," *October* 51 (Winter 1989): 19–54; Alpesh Kantilal Patel, "Camp Aesthetics and Desi Art: Parody, Pastiche, and Embodiment" (unpublished manuscript, 2008); and Pamela Robertson, "Mae West's Maids: Race, 'Authenticity,' and the Discourse of Camp," in *Camp: Queer Aesthetic and the Performing Subject: A Reader*, ed. Fabio Cleto (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 1999), 393–408.

cilities are available. My performances utilize a lot of video and my favourite space is a theatre, a suited-up lecture hall, or something like that. You're free to fantasize. I've performed a couple times in New York, lots in the Bay Area, UC Santa Barbara, Bogota, and Los Angeles. I also perform a lot collaboratively and so those considerations can vastly differ.

I find myself constantly changing up performances or creating new pieces depending on what's available in a given space and the expected audience. The biggest question I always ask is "Are they kinfolk?"—meaning is the audience Muslim, Arab, and or *desi*? As someone from all those diasporas, that's my favourite crowd, especially in a discotheque.

KK: To be honest I *love* performing in a nightclub. The audience is already primed to respond, to scream, shout, sing along, tip, and laugh—that they've been drinking helps (fig. 8). I performed at several elite nightclubs in India and they had the best tech I've ever had access to: lighting, sound, projection, stage, runway. Like Zulfi's experience with theatres, these nightclubs were so well outfitted for interactive and improvisational performance. However, tipping wasn't the norm and in some cases the audience just wasn't sure how to interact with me during the performances even when they wanted to. When I perform on college campuses, I have to do a lot of work to prime the audience; so often college students have only seen professional drag on TV and never in person (fig. 9). It takes the smallest gesture to turn the classroom or lecture hall into a nightclub though. I've seen Faluda Islam give art gallery audiences notes to tip with, and I've brought disco lights that immediately change the mood in a classroom.

AKP: It seems that notions of the convivial (comedy) and death are intertwined to a certain degree and in different ways in both of your practices. Can you elaborate on where conviviality and its supposed obverse fit?

ZAB: Death and comedy are both present in my work, they are perhaps two of my most consistent themes. I'm interested in questions of who gets to decide who lives or dies, and what does a Muslim drag queen turned zombie look like? I'm fascinated by zombies, who I think play the convivial death relationship pretty well. *The Zombie Manifesto* (2017) by Sarah Juliet Lauro and Karen Embry—and all things politically zombie—have become a bit of an obsession for me. Zombies are embedded with paradox: they are both slave and rebel, and they entered the Western subconscious during the slave rebellion in Haiti at the end of the eighteenth century, when rumours spread that Voodoo priests were resurrecting slain soldiers to continue fighting. Even before reading *The*



FIGURE 8 LaWhore Vagistan collecting tips, 2016, Big Chicks bar, Chicago, IL, where she hosted a quarterly queer Bollywood night.

PHOTO: TIM CORREIRA.

Zombie Manifesto, ghosts and zombies have guided a lot of my process. When Muslims (and Muslim-adjacent communities) are being killed and dehumanized all over the world, what if we borrowed this idea of the zombie? What would happen if we brought back fighters, comrades, and heroes who were taken away from us far too soon? Could we create an army of zombies in khaki jumpsuits and Palestinian scarves? An unstoppable horde of the dead leading



FIGURE 9 LaWhore Vagistan emceeing a drag show, 2018, Tisch Library, Tufts University, Medford, MA.

PHOTO: TANAY DUBEY.

the revolution? What if they were sentient? Could we debate with them? Fasluda Islam usually wears pretty gory makeup (fig. 10). I like my work to be both funny and unsettling; you're not quite sure how to react. When you're scared the humour disarms you.



FIGURE 10 Zulfikar Ali Bhutto as Faluda Islam, projections by Anum Awan, *Tomorrow We Inherit the Earth/The Queer Intifada*, 2019, CounterPulse, San Francisco, CA.
PHOTO: ROBBIE SWEENY.

KK: My drag is very much about being *with* others, not only through comedy and laughter, but sadness, memory, and mourning as well. I love performing songs that don't seem like they belong in the nightclub but that I know invoke collective nostalgia: "Khabi Khabi" (1976), "Main Teri Dushman" (1989), "Ishq Bina" (1999). I think the biggest risk I took was performing "Dama Dam Mast Qalandar" (a thirteenth-century Sufi poem recorded in the fifties and re-recorded numerous times since). It was a risk because the song is so close and so personal to me—a praise song to Lal Shahbaz Qalandar, the Sufi saint that Sindhis across the world worship and that my aunties would sing at weddings and Diwali celebrations. The show was soon after Trump issued his first Muslim ban, but also after Qalandar's shrine in Sindh in Pakistan was bombed by a militant group. Around this time were also lynchings in India of people eating beef, including Muslims and Dalits. I was scheduled to perform at a queer South Asian event in Boston in February 2017 and it felt like some kind of ritual was necessary: to mourn the dead, to acknowledge pain, to make room for loss, to be with each other. Lip-synching to different versions of the song—by Pakistani, Indian, and Bangladeshi singers—spliced with news clips and commentary from Linda Sarsour was my way of practicing spirituality and critique simultaneously, and bringing home into the nightclub.

AKP: Zulfi, I was struck by the title of one of your recent projects: “Queer Muslim Futures.” Can you and Kareem discuss how notions of “futuraity” configure in your practice?

ZAB: Queer Muslim Futurism forms the crux of my creative practice. I use Islam as a vehicle to propel the futurist imagination, looking into its occult sciences, mysticism, and the evolution of its politicization. It’s also been something I have been writing about quite a lot. I interviewed artist Jassem Hindi in 2018 and he said something that has really influenced the performative elements of my project. He said that “futurism is not a solo project” and if it is, it ends badly. My large-scale pieces are very collaborative and through Islam I think of global solidarity networks. What does Islam mean in a political sense and how has a political Islam changed and evolved? Who does it include and exclude? Futurism can be a very generous mode from which to think through the answers to these questions. We tell stories about the future and we can because that space is inherently unknowable: it is in that space where we can explore possibilities.

KK: I feel like the discourse on futurity has centered aesthetics that conjoin mysticism, science, time/space travel, and Indigenous practices as ways of centering the role of minoritarian subjects in crafting viable futures in the face of colonization, apocalypse, and climate change. I often feel like my drag is a bit *old* in that sense, I’m not performing as the robot-zombie-shaman-alien. I’m the auntie. But to me aunties are really invested in futurity, in transmitting cultural practice, values, and possibilities—all potential tools of survival. I’m often struck by young queer people of colour who don’t have queer and trans elders in their lives. Between my family of drag children across the globe, my day job as a gender studies professor, and touring my drag show across college campuses, I try to do the auntie work of making more forms of culture available and possible in younger generations—teach them well and let them lead the way.

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