

Pushpamala: A performative deconstruction of the typography of Indigenous women through a postcolonial lens

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Abstract

In this article, I explore how contemporary Indian artist Pushpamala N. challenges colonial photography of Indigenous peoples and exposes its anachronistic portrayal of history. Focusing on three photographs from her series 'Native Women of South India' (2000–2004), I discuss the ways that Pushpamala transforms herself into both the exoticized and essentialised 'native' and the anthropologist, using *mise en scène*, performance and mimicry to reject dominant colonial misrepresentations. Her work thus casts a critical light on the use of pseudoscience by colonial anthropologists to control and create imagined distinctions between western and Indigenous bodies. Recreating a series of these nineteenth-century photographs, Pushpamala captures the ever-changing and constantly evolving nature of female identity, exploring marginalisation through a feminist lens and opening the wounds of India's colonial past.

Keywords

Ethnography, indigeneity, reclamation, misrepresentation, subversion, decolonisation

Photography has always been a method to record important moments in time, while also providing accuracy by capturing the subject, the setting and the surrounding environment. Yet, seen through a postcolonial lens, photography employed by nineteenth-century ethnographers and anthropologists was used to create the subordinate 'Other' through fixating on differences and removing context. Pushpamala N., a contemporary Indian artist, challenges colonial photography and exposes the anachronistic portrayal of history by transforming herself into both the exoticized 'native' and the anthropologist; through her own photography, she subverts and undermines the colonial gaze in a critical and satirical manner (Bhullar, 2018, p. 178; Dave-Mukherji, 2019, p. 68). This article will examine how Pushpamala navigates these fluid realities with the use of *mise en scène*, performance and mimicry in three photographs from her series 'Native Women of South India: Manners and Customs' (2000–2004).

Throughout this series, Pushpamala sheds a critical light on how nineteenth- and early-twentieth-century colonial powers used pseudoscience to control and create imagined distinctions, highlighting physical and cultural differences between western and Indigenous bodies and navigating prevalent power dynamics (Gund Gallery, 2012). By re-creating some of the images from this period, Pushpamala scrutinises and deconstructs the way that phrenology was used as a 'weapon' to construct racial hegemony in colonial ethnographic documentation. Through her appropriation of the pseudoscientific process, she weakens and challenges how 'knowledge' is constituted, reproduced and legitimised, revealing the fallacy and baseless claims of classifications derived from ethnographic measurements (Gund Gallery, 2012). Her art practice involves not only being outside the image but climbing inside the skin of the people she is emulating to reveal and understand their experiences within the framework of a broader colonial discourse (Pushpamala N., 2014; Sinha, 2012, p. 248). Pushpamala's wider collection of artwork captures the ever-changing and constantly

evolving nature of female identity through depicting a plethora of female tropes and exploring marginalisation through a feminist lens. In so doing, she opens the wounds of India's colonial past.

Pushpamala navigates coercive western frameworks, which served to disenfranchise and dehumanise Indigenous people by rendering them mere physiognomies and ratios and thereby emphasising their dissimilarity to a white, western 'ideal' (Gund Gallery, 2012). Western binaries have created fictional distinctions between 'Occident' and 'Orient' in order to perpetuate 'Otherness'. Within this process, imagined racial demarcations are constructed and established, despite them having no grounding in science (Gillen, 2016, 75). Said (1985) contends that Orientalism is a discipline of fictitious ideologies and paranoia, produced and reproduced through the arbitrary fashioning of geographical borders. This paranoia is evidenced during the colonial period by the filtering of media, photography, literature and film through a western lens in order to reinforce racially charged narratives. The stronghold and legacy of this process remain to this day (Said, 1985, p. 10). Said (1978, p. 108) argues that assigning and rendering the 'Orient' as either primitive or submissive and devoid of agency dehumanises its populations, thereby justifying colonial attempts to 'subdue' and 'tame' the native. This orientalist narrative can be traced back to historical relations and interactions between the West and the East, where representations of the 'Other' were driven by political power. This is reflected in modern scholarship, evidenced in Samuel P. Huntington's treatise *Clash of Civilizations* (1998), which argues that civilisations are divided into categories and their differences ignite conflicts, reducing cultures to static and essentialised qualities where race informs social behaviours (see Mandaville, 2014, p. 124). Through her contemporary postcolonial art, Pushpamala implores her audiences in their place as spectator to feel a sense of discomfort by confronting this manufactured dichotomy of humanity based on racial demarcations and notions of a 'primitive Other'.

Forensic and ethnographic classifications have been instrumentalised to validate the creation of a subordinate 'Other'. Anthropological photographs attest to the ways that colonisers asserted their powers and primordial racial superiority by depicting Indigenous peoples as 'savages', all the while othering them in the process. Maurice Vidal Portman (1860–1935), a naval officer and self-proclaimed historian and anthropological photographer, exemplifies this fixation and construction of 'savages' through his invasive documentation and photography of the Indigenous inhabitants of India's Andaman Islands (Portman self-identified as the 'father' of the Andamans; see Sen, 2012, p. 4). Portman's body of work served to naturalise and substantiate colonial efforts to 'tame' and control Indigenous populations: racial and physical differences were highlighted and assigned constructed meanings of inferiority, with the claim that this was to document a 'dying out' Indigenous population in the name of 'science' (Sen, 2009, p. 365). Through the 'salvage' paradigm of a 'dying race', this ideological and colonial assertion was fuelled by the need to preserve a constructed fantasy of 'savagery', which could be contained within the safety of an anthropological photograph (Sen, 2012, p. 365; Clifford, 1989; Pinney, 1992). The 'salvage' paradigm promotes the 'preservation' of an authentic and 'weaker culture', undermining and disregarding the autonomy and agency of these indigenous cultures that colonial powers are trying to 'save' (Clifford, 1989). Through her artworks, Pushpamala thus raises the ethical implications of this paradigm and questions the western, ethnocentric 'white saviour complex', which insists on 'rescuing' the Indigenous Other. By confronting the viewer with her unbroken gaze, she unravels the microaggression in Portman's blurring of the lines between discipline and futile colonial fantasies, not to mention his sadistic pleasure derived from the obsessive need to document and dissect (Sen, 2012, p. 365).

In one of Portman's photographs (held at the British Library),¹ the viewer can see some of the colonial equipment used to quantify and collect data about the physical attributes of 'natives', such as a metal prop that held the subject's arm perpendicular to their torso (Throckmorton & Gupta, 2015, p. 18). The Andamanese Ta-keda woman pictured in this photograph is adorned with neck, waist and wrist-ornaments, while her gaze is directed at the camera in colonial submission. Colonial portraits such as this frame individuals against Lamprey's anthropometric, monochromatic chequered grid in an attempt to measure and derive values; yet it also serves to foster fear in the subjects, assert colonial dominance through the colonial gaze and perpetuate a sense of racial subordination and inferiority. The camera acts as an authoritative tool to reflect discursive colonial fictional fantasies, which are devoid of the experienced reality of their subjects and landscapes, and immortalise the dehumanised native as a static photograph (Chaman & Rosen, 2015).

In a photograph from her 'Native women of South India' series (titled 'Toda'), Pushpamala emulates Portman's colonial portrait, instantaneously dismantling his use of the camera, and challenging the authenticity of colonial, anthropological photography to shape colonised identities.² In this uncanny reproduction, Pushpamala recreates the sepia-toned finish of colonial photographs: she stands as the subject, her arms outstretched and held up by a metal prop that is similar to the one used by Portman. By depicting herself as the expressionless subject – framed, pinned and measured against a makeshift grid held up by two hands whose owners are hidden from view – Pushpamala ridicules and questions the relevance and validity of scientific 'knowledge' gained from such an artificial process (Bhullar, 2019).

Instead of marginalising the Indigenous Andamanese woman a second time through simply reproducing the original image, Pushpamala reclaims the space and subverts the gaze in a satirical and critical manner, by casting herself as the person who is simultaneously behind the lens, in the frame, and in control. Pushpamala's use of *mise en scène* further explores the contextual setting in which the original photographs would have been taken (Dave-Mukherji, 2019, p. 68). She recreates Portman's chequered board held up by unknown hands, showing the theatrical composition of his photographs (Throckmorton & Gupta, 2015, p. 18). The chequered board was a tool used to make an 'othered people' visible to the colonial world by having their objectified identities defined by measurements, categorisation and documentation, reducing them to mere ratios (Sinha, 2012, p. 246). Pushpamala highlights the absurdity of this by introducing the chequered board in a mocking way, commenting on the artificiality of how these images were envisioned and created (Sandell & Nightingale, 2012, p. 164). Her use of a sepia-toned filter for her photographs mimics the original anthropological photographs; however, her images also have subtle alterations (Gund Gallery, 2012). Pushpamala's decision to remain clothed, in contrast to the naked bodies in the original images, reveals the inappropriate nature of colonial powers, who removed Indigenous bodies from their natural contexts, subjected them to an inspecting gaze through photography, and inadvertently objectified, exoticized and eroticised them within an orchestrated setting (Sandell & Nightingale, 2012, p. 164). Pushpamala uses her body – as an Indian woman dressed in cultural clothing – to embody the 'otherness' that so obsessed the colonial gaze. By doing so, she is able to subvert this gaze and resist its tendency for objectification (Saatchi Gallery, 2020).

In another photograph from the 'Native women of South India' series,³ Pushpamala's face is measured by phrenology callipers, which resemble a gun being held to her head. Although this photograph is not a direct reproduction of a pre-existing colonial photograph, Pushpamala demonstrates the process by which Indigenous people such as the Andaman and Toda people were subjected to the colonisation of Southern India. Pushpamala masquerades as a Toda woman, her piercing gaze directed at the camera as disembodied hands hold callipers to

measure her face, putting her under a 'microscope'. These callipers were supposedly used by colonial anthropologists to determine an Indigenous person's 'worth' according to their statistical value. Here, they are shown by Pushpamala to be a weapon wielded by biologically determinist scientists in a dehumanising act, which threatens her cultural and gender identity as an Indigenous woman.

Thus, through her provocative artworks, Pushpamala reveals the socially constructed nature of the original colonial photographs, by which anthropologists created 'realities' in order to essentialise the 'native', rather than offering an authentic representation of Indigenous lives and bodies. These late-nineteenth-century photographs exemplify the effect of racial typology, creating social hierarchy through the treatment of space. The human figures of those depicted are compared to the 'unseen' anthropologist, who controlled the setting in order to produce an image fitting their own exotic fantasies. Portman claimed that ethnographic photographs needed to be an accurate depiction of the pure human form, where lighting, shadows, expressions and posture had to be uniform (Pinney, 2013, p. 35). However, Pushpamala challenges the authenticity of these photographs, highlighting that they capture more than just a 'neutral' depiction of their subjects. The colonial sepia tonal contrast, contextual setting and detached expression allude to the subjects' disempowerment and expose the inorganic state in which these photographs were taken. They also reaffirm the nineteenth-century colonial obsession with recording and documenting physical features of different races in order to preserve this once 'savage' but now pacified colony (Baumbach et al., 2017, p. 155). Pushpamala, therefore, uses her artwork to interrogate how conventional knowledge systems are produced and at what cost. Her photographs shed light on how mediums such as photography were instrumentalised to exacerbate racial discrimination in order to assert colonial power and justify racism.

Pushpamala's art also challenges the notion that the camera has an 'unprejudiced eye'. The viewing of photographs is always biased and non-neutral, as the viewers' gaze is influenced by their different political, cultural and social ideologies. Pushpamala does not critically examine the Indigenous bodies in the original photographs, but rather shifts the focus onto the position of the spectator and invites them to reject the colonial fantasy that Indigenous people are 'primitive' (Sinha, 2012, p. 224). Her subtle changes to and performative interpretations of the original photographs uncover what is concealed in the social context and setting of these images. She therefore brings to light the underlying problematics of the asymmetrical interaction between the coloniser and the colonised, while simultaneously highlighting the performative nature of photography (Kaur & Dave-Mukherji, 2015, p. 10).

Pushpamala's artworks thus act as a vehicle for social commentary and critique in which the distinctions between her recreated photographs and the original photographs are blurred. This emphasises the anachronistic nature of photographs as a means to determine history, where history can be taken out of context, reimagined and distorted (Dave-Mukherji, 2019, p. 68). Pushpamala disrupts this idea of linear history recorded by anthropologists and ethnographers, who exerted their power through photography as a medium to fashion the 'self and Other'. In another photograph from her 'Native women of South India' series,⁴ Pushpamala exposes how the series is created, revealing the dynamic at play between spectator and subject. She re-enacts the role of subject once again, crouched in front of a backdrop, gazing at the lens, and surrounded by the poised set-crew and cameras, thus revealing the choreographed setting. Through composition and scale, she exposes the exploitative nature of this process and highlights the disconnection that exists between the photographer and subject, thereby diminishing and invalidating claims to historical accuracy. The 'native's' subordination is shown here through Pushpamala's crouching position, which is lower than those controlling the setting, thus exposing the authoritative role of colonial

anthropologists in staging and creating the original images. The use of a dull backdrop removes and displaces the ‘native’ from their natural context to emphasise their physical features. Ironically, however, ‘natural’ props such as foliage are also added to recreate the manufactured setting, which was evident in Portman’s process of staging his ‘exotic and primitive subjects’ in their ‘natural’ state and ‘habitat’ (Pinney, 2013, p. 35). This also reflects the narrative surrounding Portman’s construction of the ‘picturesque’, which required the photograph and setting to be devoid of unnecessary aesthetics and the bodies to be ‘stark naked’. This failed to capture the essence of his Indigenous subjects but, instead, allowed him to create manufactured images of bodies he saw as ‘savages’ (Pinney, 2013, p. 35).

Through recreating some of Portman’s sets for her own reinstallation of ethnological photographs, Pushpamala exposes anthropologists’ real intentions. She uncovers their process of staging ‘natives’ and the highly selective ways that they portrayed ‘reality’, offering the viewers a carefully curated image. Yet female and Indigenous identities are continually shifting and reimagined, rather than remaining static throughout history. The real tragedy, however, in this colonial construction of otherness and inferiority occurs when those being categorised and reduced to stagnant identities start to believe their own misrepresentations. Pushpamala criticises the relevance of cultural knowledge created through the pseudoscience of physical anthropology. By reconstructing colonial photographs through a postcolonial lens, she deconstructs the essentialism of female Indigenous bodies that was promoted using the ostensibly innocuous nature of photography (Sharanya, 2019, p. 126).

The staged nature of ethnographic photography thus allows Pushpamala to express her contemporary views through mimicking the similar construction of the original photograph (Baumbach et al., 2017, p. 155). Through its repetition and nameless faces, the ‘Native women of South India’ series obscures Pushpamala’s subjects, highlighting the unimportance of the subjects in colonial photography, who were employed for the purpose of ‘quantitative representation’ (Sharanya, 2019, p. 123). Pushpamala’s re-enactment of these older images reveals that they functioned to present Indigenous bodies as a statistical and documented mass, whose individual experiences were insignificant. She thus emulates *and* problematises the original colonial project.

The erasure of the violence embedded in colonial anthropology is evidenced by the British museum classifying Portman’s photograph of the Ta-keda woman as a ‘personal ornament’. The curator describes Portman’s role as ‘survey[ing] the physical characteristics of the Andamanese and generat[ing] statistical norms from the mass of evidence they gathered’ (British Museum, n.d). By failing to see the violence embedded in colonial artefacts such as this, galleries and museums continue to allow coloniality to be performed, perpetuated and upheld (Andrew & Neath, 2018). This raises ethical questions and conflictual debates surrounding the colonial archive, which presents a constructed, theatrical visual narrative as ‘documented measured truths’, without revealing the violent and staged creation of ‘primitivism’ (Andrew & Neath, 2018). This is an oppressive phenomenon of erasure and dismissal that has been experienced by people of colour throughout history, where their identities are reduced to either mass trauma or part of the ‘civilisational process’. Pushpamala therefore addresses the need to repurpose the colonial archives by creating her own adaptation, in order to expose the systemic injustice, violence and racism present within this so-called ‘neutral’ process of documentation and depiction. As part of this process, she upholds the decolonising effort towards ensuring that indigenous individuals can govern their representation within contemporary and historical contexts.

To conclude, through her sharp investigation of the representations of the 'exotic other' in historical photographs, Pushpamala claims agency for those who have been marginalised. By enacting the roles of the subject and the photographer, she redirects the gaze back to the viewer, confronting them through the eyes of a marginalised Indigenous woman, as well as a critical contemporary feminist artist of colour. Pushpamala employs photo-performance in order to produce a critical social commentary on the underlying racism and violence of western essentialism and the western gaze on culture and indigenous bodies. By doing so, she inextricably ties the problematic colonial past to the postcolonial present.

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Notes

1. Portman's photograph can be viewed on the British Museum website.
https://www.britishmuseum.org/collection/object/EA_As-Portman-B30-15.
2. Due to copyright restrictions, I was unable to reproduce Pushpamala's artwork in this article. The image can be viewed at <http://naturemorte.com/artists/pushpamalan/selectedwork/2316/>.
3. The image can be viewed at https://www.saatchigallery.com/artists/artpages/pushpamala_n_todah26.htm.
4. The image can be viewed at https://www.saatchigallery.com/artists/artpages/pushpamala_n_todah9.htm.

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