

By the Apron Strings

Interrogating patriarchal hegemonies and visibilising female labour, Areez Katki explores queer identity by re-imagining household pieces of cloth, finds **Adwait Singh**.



Areez Katki. *Temple of Anahita.* Cotton thread hand embroidery on cotton khatka. 16.9" x 16.9". 2018.
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At a superficial glance, the Auckland-based Parsi artist Areez Katki's solo exhibition *Bildungsroman (& other stories)* confronts the viewer with a panoply of rags, bags and kerchiefs cajoled out of their cloistered ignominy into the haloed whiteness of TARQ, Mumbai, from the 8th of July to the 7th of August. The oddments certainly look dressed for the outing, embroidered over and laid out neatly across tables, under glass, or suspended from the ceiling. Upon closer inspection, however, the embroidery underscores not only the particular household cares that these bits of clothing are consigned to, but also the care in which these, in turn, are held by the artist. It is through a gentle unpacking of this tender economy, or what can be described as an affective materialism, that Katki's spiritual, identitarian and psychological quests are timorously revealed.

By securing these castaways a sinecure within the white cube, the artist appears to be performing a symbolic manumission of the domestic sphere from patriarchal hegemonies. The ragged beneficiaries metonymically mime the lived female experience of having to situate the semiotics of existence within the cramped space between the bubbling and crackling of dhansak and malido tastings. These sonics and zests, familiar from a Parsi kitchen, are invoked within the exhibition space to ambiguously convey both nostalgia and oppression. A slightly more unambiguous critique of the patriarchal relegation of domestic labour to womankind, is articulated by a variegated onion emblazoned across a cotton khatka that stares a challenge from a lone wall. Titled *Onions, too, cry*, the work remembers an autobiographical episode involving the artist's newly-married mother who sought to enlist her husband's help in dicing onions ahead of the very first dinner party at their new home in Muscat. The patriarch's categorical refusal of what he saw as woman's work occasioned much hurt at the time. It is perhaps this smarting, stinging and acrid disappointment – the shared experience of countless women upon initiation into the thankless economy of the kitchen – that the work attempts to uncover layer by layer.

Concomitant to the advocacy for emancipation from the tyranny of chores, runs a trans-geographical quest for the feminine divine within the progressively monotheistic fold of Zoroastrianism. The golden skeins that drew Katki to Iran, led them to stumble upon the cult of Aredvi Sura Anahita, the female deity of water whose presence was suppressed under the Sassanid iconoclastic movement from the 3rd century AD onwards. Anahita became a source of soft power that Katki, as a queer individual forced into early priesthood, craved as a counterbalance to the inordinate sway held by patriarchy in Zoroastrian liturgy and Parsi social life. The architectural elements and votive offerings associated with the worship of Anahita have subsequently wound their way onto a khatka titled *Temple of Anahita*, peering from a suitably obscure wall upstairs. A thin menstrual stream sloshing into a bowl down the middle, is not just a mild rebuke of the patriarchal pretensions to purity, but also explains the traditional concentration of Parsi needlecraft in female hands: their only recourse to distraction during periods of imposed menstrual seclusion. These symbols further infiltrate the extant Parsi iconographies and sacral paraphernalia in works like *Farvahar Redux*. Here, the iconic winged figure representing the soul has been subverted first by gendering it female, and subsequently through the profane gesture of holding up the middle finger of one hand, and dropping the cirlet – an emblem of divinely-ordained sovereignty deployed by Persian monarchs – from the other. The latter names the artist's wish for a break from what they describe as “the eternal circle of biological procession” or the doctrine of repro-futurity keyed to the enterprise of state-building and hetero-patriarchal renewal.

Far from being restricted to the precincts of the sacred, the gynocratic reinstatement is cheerfully extended to the domestic domain. This is on view in a work titled *Blue Bathing in Pink* that attributes the extraordinary physiognomy of Venus of Sarab, the prehistoric mother goddess unearthed in Iran, to their ordinary bathing mother. The steatopygic bather is picked out in blue that vaguely echoes the built



Areez Katki. *In Small Places (Farrokh & Sohrab).* Cotton thread hand embroidery on repurposed Bombay Dyeing tea towel. 14.9" x 18.8". 2018. © the artist, 2018.

and natural bodies of water consecrated to Anahita; the pink sanctifies the memory of the flesh-tinted bathroom of Katki's ancestral home in Sir CJ Parsi Colony in Tardeo (Mumbai), routinely used by four generations of women to perform their ablutions. The artist's deep reverence for the matriarchs in their life, lingers in dedications like this, besides their conscious cultivation of crafting techniques inherited matrilineally. This cross-gender identification is bodily substantiated in a chain-stitched impression of hands on an Ikat handkerchief belonging to their grandmother. Titled *Hands on lap*, the work refers to the whispered injunction for decorum that the female members in the house were expected to adhere to, and that Katki as a young queer individual came to emulate. In addition to the motions of needlework, shorthand and toran-beading acquired from these matriarchs, the work hints at the unconscious seepage of other, more intimate knowledges that are still, mutinously preserved in Katki's compartment.

The carefully sourced woven materialities of humble descent, transpire not only as the medium through which

these domestic phenomenologies are rehearsed, but also the matrix that registers the first stirrings of queer sexuality. Take, for example, the khadi handkerchief emblazoned with the cross section of a Doongerwadi. Katki reminisces the softly pulsating homoerotic charge of being linked via similar paibands to other male bodies during religious sacraments and funerary processions. It is hardly surprising that when this sexuality comes to flower in the significantly titled *In Small Places (Farrokh & Sohrab)*, the scene of blanketed conjugacy resolves out of disintegrating domesticity. The hard outlines of tropes of hetero-familial oppression melt down into unresolved squiggles, making fresh room for a congress long-proscribed (the work was created in 2018 to mark the repeal of Section 377 of Indian Penal Code that criminalised homosexuality). As we get ready for departure, a beaded toran titled *Homecoming* proudly proclaims, "GOD BLESS OUR HOMO," confounding the divide between domestic-religious conservatism and sexual-feminist insurgency in one fell swoop. /