

Brown Skin Goddess

Kaanchi Chopra

This piece has been influenced by Michelle Cliff's *No Telephone to Heaven*, especially the transformations of the character Clare throughout her experiences in different countries and her involvement with the guerilla movement to bring power to the people in Jamaica. In the end, the novel states that Clare's identity remains subjective, summarizing her as: "White. Black. Female. Lover. Beloved. Daughter. Traveller. Friend. Scholar. Terrorist. Farmer." The words "traveller" and "farmer" emphasize the idea that many authors, filmmakers, and creatives equate caring for the natural environment with feminist resistance. The locations that these women inhabit condition them and motivate them to advocate for the issues they are fighting for.

The concept of ownership and taking (up) space is primary to the work I've created. Razia Sultan, the first female Muslim ruler of the Indian Subcontinent, held control over the land thousands of years ago, and she represents power and strength. In today's context, as a woman of color in the United States and in India, I am scared every time I walk alone. With my artwork, I hope to show how a brown-skinned female body reclaims public space. Her appearance, in comparison to the road and the buildings and the cars that envelop her, is exponentially bigger. She is in a position of power where she can walk down the street, wearing whatever she wants, at whatever time of the day, alone or with whomever she aspires to be alongside.

Natural elements are intertwined with her body. I look to nature as my biggest source of inspiration, and by merging the fish with the woman's torso, I hope to equate this woman of color with the boundless being that the world looks up to.

Multiple snakes dance around her head to form a crown, showing her fearlessness. Her image holds a lot of Hindu symbolism: the wings are inspired by Garuda, a bird who acts as a vehicle for our woman to achieve heights, while the red and white bindis on her face are inspired by Durga, another Indian goddess whose bindi represents the third eye and gives her a sixth sense.

I wanted to give a more realistic touch to Hinduism with this piece. India is a land driven by religion. Men pray to Indian goddesses like Laxmi for more wealth, while some of the same men commit heinous crimes of assault and harassment to countless women in the streets. What I've observed is all our goddesses are well-clad, light-skinned, female figures draped in elegant saris with long wavy hair and lips in pink, sealed with a smile. As someone who grew up in a household that believed in idol worship, I saw these figures everywhere. I joined my hands in front of them every day. So do almost 966 million Hindus living in India and outside of it. It perplexes me how men rape women, while the next day they pray to another woman for a good and long life. I believe the representation of our goddesses needs a more relatable touch. A more realistic, powerful, and perhaps even feared version needs to come to life, and that is why I created my Brown Skin Goddess. I hope to challenge notions of patriarchal fairness, especially double standards, to unite resistance movements in the Global South.

She also has a tattoo on the left of her abdomen that reads "Fuck your bullshit," which is basically her (and my) direct response to conservative men. The cultural implication of my work might or might not put my life in danger in the hands of the corrupt and conservatives, but I believe it could also act as a form of solidarity, as a celebration of darker skin representation, as someone little girls can look up to. She normalizes wearing crop tops and having tattoos and navel piercings. She teaches girls that you can embrace the good and beautiful elements of your culture and reject what you don't agree with. You can continue to create changes in dialogue, instigate conversations, and ultimately normalize a new normal, not just what has been deemed the "ideal" by one race and gender globally.



