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## Anuradha Kapur's Daughters Opera, set in post-NRC Assam, foregrounds fortitude of disenfranchised women

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[Vikram Phukan \(https://www.firstpost.com/author/vikram-phukan\)](https://www.firstpost.com/author/vikram-phukan)

Feb 28, 2020 10:51:26 IST



An inter-cultural Indian-Australian opera project quietly opened in Delhi's Black Box Okhla in early January. Directed by the high priestess of experimental theatre Anuradha Kapur, *Daughters Opera* is based on librettist Tammy Brennan's evocative *Daughters*, a song-cycle of a dozen compositions by David Chisholm that gives voice to the fortitude of women lost to violence, anywhere or everywhere.

Embittered but resilient, their lives find expression in soprano Aivale Cole's soaring vocals, with musicians Eduardo Baltar Soares, Moa Edmunds Guevara and Miranda Hill providing intimate musical accompaniment. The longing and the loss inherent in Portuguese fado music provides a melancholic soul to working-class subcontinental women who occupy the lowest of rungs. Kapur sets her work against the backdrop of the botched NRC (National Register of Citizens) exercise in Assam, which left lakhs of people summarily disenfranchised, with women being the 'worst victims'. This is a premise with nation-wide implications, now that protests have flared up across the country against similar exercises in other states, with the spectre of the discriminatory CAA looming over the lives of millions. Scenography by Deepan Sivaraman and a live soundscape by Marco Cher-Gibard provide the project its cultural coordinates and class bearings.



The cast of Daughters Opera  
 (https://images.firstpost.com/wp-content/uploads/2020/02/DaughtersOpera825\_1-min.jpeg)

Kapur's all-women ensemble, which includes the likes of Shilpika Bordoloi, Aashima Mahajan and Uma Katju, is first introduced to us in the form of an impassive tableau primed for an imminent blood-letting, pulled inexorably towards us in an open-faced shipping container on creaking wheels. The bunker, while no doubt rigged for spectacle or immersion, immediately brings to mind images of human trafficking, even as a miniature 'pop pop' steam-boat makes its way across a slim reservoir of inert water (a nice touch). The musical quartet take their place in a boxed-in area (the best views, but possibly not the best acoustic experience, can be had from the Black Box's cheap and cheerful 'balcony' seats).

The set design seems effective in its economy and doesn't call undue attention to its portents, allowing audiences to become better acquainted with the women, even if they can only be viewed from afar. These are working-class women who ferry across from tenements to sweatshops and fish-pits, their colourful saris underneath regulation overalls belying the drabness of a fatiguing existence that nonetheless cannot extinguish their spirits. *Daughters Opera* is no smorgasbord of darting vignettes and focuses instead on limited excursions into the world of this so-called forgotten populace. The music becomes a dramaturgical through line that strings together their quotidian lives. Gibard works off a foley set-up that's akin to a factory workstation, with deafening fog horns and the clangour of industrial machinery par for the course.



A still from *Daughters Opera*  
 ([https://images.firstpost.com/wp-content/uploads/2020/02/DaughtersOpera825\\_2-min.jpeg](https://images.firstpost.com/wp-content/uploads/2020/02/DaughtersOpera825_2-min.jpeg))

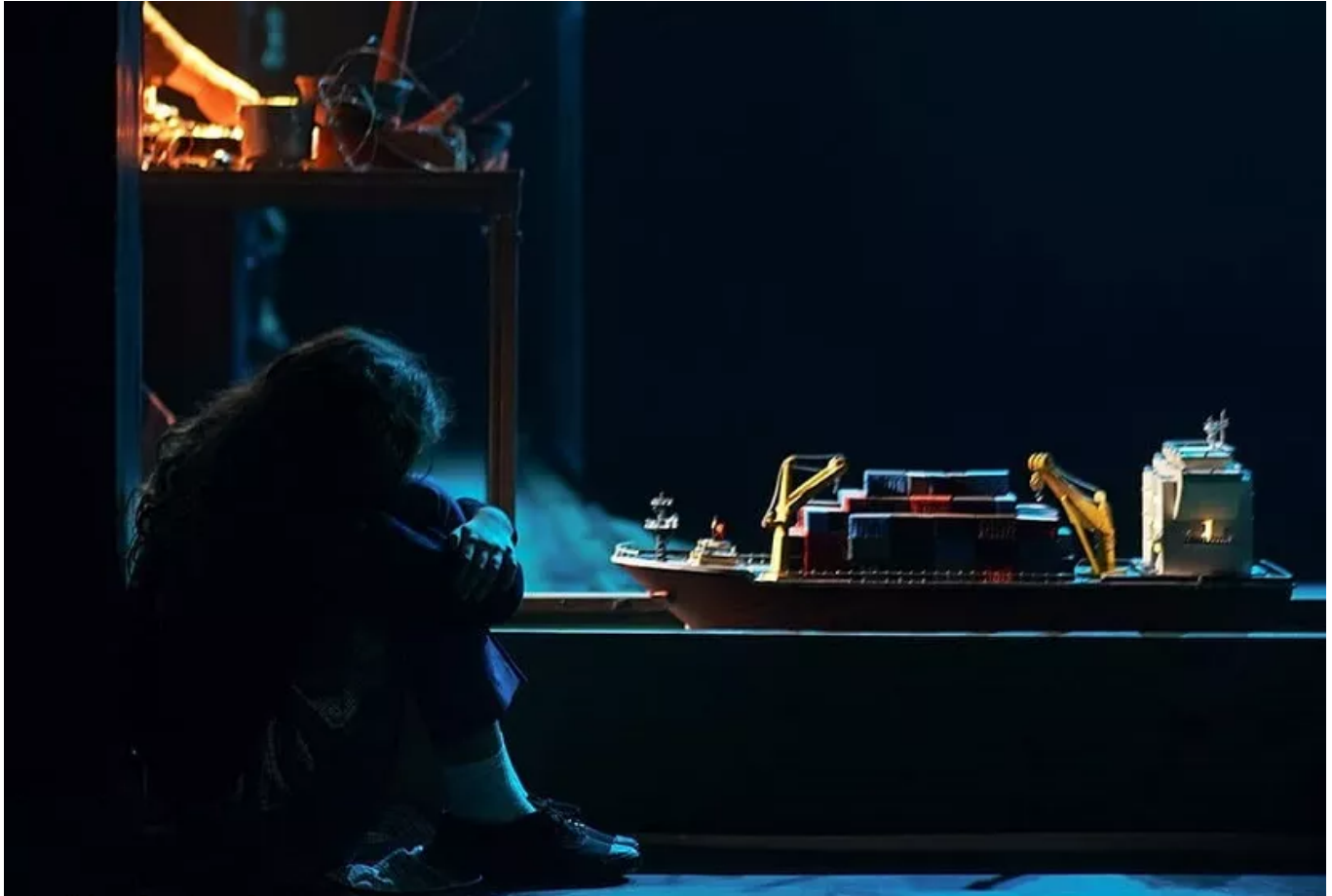
*Daughters Opera* runs into roughly an hour that seems both hurriedly and lovingly put together. The scenes come across as a tad one-note but allow us to seep into the depths of the mundane because of the durational aspects of the staging. For instance, in one interlude the women spend their time sorting out rags of different colours, very efficiently at that. The scraps of cloth could well be the guts of rotting fish or the entrails of bovine mammals, and, at least cerebrally, we are reminded of the hazards of industry. The violence meted out to these women are societal and institutional, and their working conditions leave much to be desired.

In another set-piece, that speaks of the tenuous link to nationhood that 'legacy documents' dipped in brine provide, the women try to reclaim papers washed away in floods. The seawater is never absent, and the plastic laminates allow these identities to last forever in a nowhere land. The collective labour, and shared arduousness, gives way at times to moments of lightness, as when the hardened women huddle together to smoke in a break, with Cole in hand to sing '*La Madrina*', an ode to Cocaine Godmother Griselda Blanco perhaps. Their raw voices sometimes sing along. We are never touched enough to really care, but the information booklet has been passed along. The 'All in a Day's Work' format doesn't let us follow the women into the squalor or colour of their homes.

The sparing use of spoken text is often effective, and also spurious and tokenist at times. The 'found texts' include passages from Kumkum Sangari's *Solid : Liquid — A (Trans)National Reproductive Formation*, and testimonials in tri-lingual triplicate, that show how similar immigrant and native lives are to each other. The politics of the market force the stateless to



remain in a state of permanent limbo because that might enable the powers-that-be to control behaviours and migrations in a way citizenry would never permit. Adding to this disaffection, the chamber music sometimes doesn't live down its alien ethos, piping in from a stately abode the women cannot enter, but could possibly peer into from the outside, if they weren't otherwise preoccupied.



A still from Daughters Opera  
([https://images.firstpost.com/wp-content/uploads/2020/02/DaughtersOpera825\\_3.jpg](https://images.firstpost.com/wp-content/uploads/2020/02/DaughtersOpera825_3.jpg))

As art in the capital is often wont to do, *Daughters Opera* bears the charge of being 'Rich Man's Theatre of Poor People's Souls'. These optics are unavoidable and shouldn't be simply disregarded. It's never likely to cross over beyond the echo chamber, never likely to be anything more than effulgently aesthetic. Its intersectionality is moot. Fortunately, Brennan's libretto is full of the universal cadences that don't fetishise or exoticise the local trappings Kapur has mounted for it.

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