

LOTUS BEAUTY

by Satinder Kaur Chohan

|| SAMUEL FRENCH ||

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LOTUS BEAUTY was first produced by Hampstead Downstairs/Celia Atkin, in association with Tamasha Theatre Company on 13th May 2022. The performance was directed by Pooja Ghai, Designer Rosa Maggiora, Lighting by Matt Haskins, Sound by The Ringham Brothers, Dialect Gurkiran Kaur and Assistant Director Cassia Thakkar. The cast was as follows:

PINKY..... Anshula Bain
BIG DHADHI.....Souad Faress
TANWANT..... Zainab Hasan
KAMAL Ulrika Krishnamurti
REITA Kiran Landa

CHARACTERS

REITA – Salon owner, in her 40s

TANWANT – Salon worker, in her mid-30s

PINKY – Reita's daughter, 15

BIG DHADHI – Reita's mother-in-law, in her 70s

KAMAL – Salon client, in her late 20s

(**CLIENTS** can be played by doubling cast members.)

AUTHOR'S NOTES

Whether in Jackson Heights, New York, Delhi, India or Southall, West London, the Asian woman's beauty salon symbolises the global makeover of Asian women, cross-pollinating Eastern and Western shades of beauty.

Set in my hometown of Southall, West London, *Lotus Beauty* is inspired by the multi-generational women of British Asian suburbia and the vibrant ladies-only salons they frequent. In these salons, women go to pamper and preen themselves, sharing their struggles, gossiping and waxing lyrical about their successes, in safe spaces that offer sanctuary and community with other women. But scratch below the polished suburban veneer and a deeper malaise runs beneath. *Lotus Beauty* seeks to peel away the hidden layers of what it means to be Asian and female in modern Britain, holding up a mirror to see the light and shadows reflecting back.

As a Sikh, I had been raised never to cut my hair or remove my body hair. 'Kesh' (hair), one of the five K's in Sikhism, is regarded as a sacred source of divine creation and spiritual strength. For Sikh girls like me, blessed with abundant jet-black hair, playground taunts like 'Brezhnev eyebrows', 'hairy mush', 'Elvis sideburns' abounded. As a teen, I secretly began removing my facial hair and shaving my legs (playing junior tennis made hairy brown legs a big no!) As a late teen, I discovered the joys of threading at my regular salon – *The Beauty Room*, which had grown from a tiny space in Southall's Liberty Market into a bigger, thriving space of its own. (I eventually did an inspiring month's research/working stint there, interviewing female clients about their lives and experiences, which fed into early drafts of the play).

In Southall, I had also grown up with urban myths about the women in white who haunted the local train tracks and roads around Southall Station, sadly rooted in real-life tragic stories. In 2005, one such devastating suicide made national headlines. Navjeet Sidhu, 27, jumped to her death at Southall Station, holding her 5-year-old daughter and 23-month-old son. Six months later, Navjeet's grieving mother killed herself in the same spot.

In 2007, when I first conceived the play in the long, stuttering journey from page to stage – 80 out of 240 rail suicides in Britain, occurred on the stretch of track running through Southall, Slough and other Asian areas. Living in one of those neighbourhoods, one sadly becomes desensitised to the desperate ends chosen by those women, many victims of emotional, physical and sexual violence and abuse but also more recently, male immigrants crushed by broken UK dreams. While 'person under a train' or 'person on the track' is a mere inconvenience for

disrupted commuters, the tragic loss of life is glossed over and forgotten too quickly. *Lotus Beauty* remembers them.

With all its beauty and spiritual connotations – the blooming lotus flower growing out of muddy waters – the lotus seemed a perfect metaphor for the play. The play also draws on Homer's *The Odyssey* and Alfred Tennyson's poem *The Lotos-Eaters*, exploring how some (British) Asians have become modern 'Lotus-Eaters', settling into a state of blissful forgetfulness of who they are and where they come from. In the muddy capitalist swamps of modern Britain, they gorge themselves on a lotus of image, money, materialism, obsessing about how they look, how much they earn, what they own – a 21st century narcosis, rampant individualism and spiritual bankruptcy, which admittedly affects us all.

In *Lotus Beauty*, this cosmetic living manifests through characters disconnected from deeper selves and each other. These are women who become each other's worst enemies, complicit in one another's suffering, absolving male family members of harmful actions, while masking the true weight and wounds of the emotional labour and immigrant/colonial trauma they must carry disproportionately over generations.

The play suggests that beauty is about letting superficial masks drop – by truly facing ourselves, facing others, sharing pain and healing those deeper wounds. In this way, perhaps it is possible to begin breaking ingrained cycles of inherited and lived immigrant/colonial trauma, so we not only heal as individuals but as families and communities too. Maybe then, women like Navjeet Sidhu can fully bloom, like the spirited, resilient women the play celebrates. These are the women who have overcome struggles as women and immigrants in Britain, lifting themselves up and others too.

But even for these pioneering women, even if the deepest wounds may carry the greatest pain, their healing may carry the greatest beauty too, which will always run more than skin (colour) deep. Without mud, there is no lotus.

NOTE FOR CREATIVES

The stage directions, use of lights, props, sound (and regularity) of trains and music indicate the everyday workings of the Salon. These can be more freely interpreted by creatives (to build the story and atmosphere) when staging the play.

ACT ONE

Opening

(A winter's morning. Lotus Beauty Salon is rooted in Southall in deepest British Asian suburbia, close to the local train tracks. Rain crashes against the glass exterior. Magic lantern images of Asian beauty queens dance around a mirrored, pink-panelled interior. An Asian radio station warbles a 1960s romantic Hindi film song, telling of longing, love and loss. At the back, floor-to-ceiling blinds hang either side of a glass door, glimpsing a grey street outside. In the centre of the door, a stained-glass pink lotus glows brightly, below a hanging 'Open/Closed' sign set to 'Closed'.)*

(On the right, there is a small reception area, with a desk and swivel chair. The desk is topped with a telephone, open-paged diary and plastic holder, stashed with Lotus Beauty Salon leaflets. On the left, neatly arranged chairs sit next to a magazine rack spilling over with Asian and Western women's magazines. Downstage left, there are two

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adjoining cubicles. One cubicle is slid shut. The other is open – during work moments and transitions, clients can be glimpsed as silhouettes in the cubicles.)

(In the foreground, chairs sit either side of a manicure table. On the far right, beauty products line a small-shelved wall, bookended by kitsch Indian Goddess statues. A large walled mirror hangs above. Downstage right, a draped opening leads to an unseen backroom/kitchen area. The Salon interior looks bright and modern.)

(A distant high-speed train cuts through the magic lantern images and song, revealing REITA, in a neat pink uniform. She polishes the mirror obsessively with a cloth, before getting distracted by her reflection. REITA speaks in an affected British accent, betraying Indian undertones. TANWANT speaks in a heavy Indian accent.)

REITA. *(Analysing her face.)* Bags?

(TANWANT emerges from the cubicle in a slightly dishevelled pink uniform.)

TANWANT. Weight of being woman, hunnah?

REITA. Big bags.

TANWANT. Use desi potion I tell you bout. Big bag, dark circle, vanish no time –

REITA. *(Panicking.)* “Dark circles”?

TANWANT. *(Spotting a grey hair on REITA.)* Reita, nother grey hair?

REITA. *(Panicking.)* Where?

TANWANT. (*Pretending not to notice.*) Nahi, nahi, is the light!

REITA. (*Spotting the grey hair.*) More?

TANWANT. What you s'pect at sixty? Turn blonde?

REITA. Tanni, I'm in my menopausal forties. Not my pensioned-off sixties.

TANWANT. Same thing no?

REITA. Sixty-one dreaded day...

TANWANT. No lifetime guarantee.

(*REITA yanks out a grey hair.*)

Dye, hide but never, ever pull grey hair! Mummyji always said, "Pull one, whole garden grow."

(*REITA hands TANWANT a pot of bleach.*)

REITA. Quick, before opening. (*Drops in a chair.*) Bleach double, triple, if you have to!

TANWANT. I got client first thing –

REITA. I'm the boss.

TANWANT. (*Preparing the bleach.*) OK, I bleaching –

REITA. Lighten every dark line, bag, wrinkle, age spot, liver spot –

TANWANT. I lightening –

REITA. (*Points around her face.*) Here, there –

TANWANT. (*Stops.*) I know what to do.

(*TANWANT resumes preparing the bleach. Pause.*)

REITA. How did I get as old as her?

TANWANT. Who?

REITA. My mother.

(Once she finishes mixing, TANWANT applies the bleach.)

TANWANT. When we little, we look up to our Mummyji. Never think we reach her age. When she thirty, for us, like she sixty. Forty, like she seventy. Fifty, like one hundred. Then we her age and say, “You not know? Thirty is new twenty. Forty is new thirty.” So if you forty-five, really you thirty-five and I thirty-five, so really I twenty-five...or fifteen? ..What your Mummyji was like?

(A distant high-speed train zips past, rattling the cubicle. A small piece of ceiling drops on REITA’s partially bleached face.)

REITA. Ow!

(REITA and TANWANT look up.)

TANWANT. Hai, ceiling’s peeling... Wait, it’s stuck in the bleach!

(TANWANT removes a ceiling piece from Reita’s bleach.)

REITA. *(Getting up.)* I only plastered it last month.

(REITA pushes against the wall.)

Bloody trains. Sound-proofing has stopped working.

TANWANT. Get Harmmeet Bhaji to take a look. Cos he not working either.

REITA. He’s busy looking for work every day.

TANWANT. *(Bites her tongue.)* A-ho.

REITA. My Salon – I’ll take care of it. *(Sitting back down.)*
But I’ll be out of this dead-end town long before that.

TANWANT. Still look hain?

REITA. Won't stop 'til I find my dream house. In fact, I met Councillor Gill last night –

TANWANT. Fancy lady who never work for Southall peoples who vote her?

REITA. She might be selling one of her houses *and* a perfect space for a new Salon.

TANWANT. In 'dead-end' town?

REITA. Upmarket town nearby – with a wealthier clientele.

TANWANT. We poor no good no more?

REITA. I've worked hard to move up – and out.

(REITA taps her face. TANWANT resumes bleaching.)

TANWANT. Quickie bleach me after I quickie bleach you?

REITA. Barely got time for this.

TANWANT. *(Stops bleaching.)* I black iron thava. Burnt roti. How future husband who save me s'pose to see me?

REITA. Do it yourself, after work.

TANWANT. Your bleaching like healing massage –

REITA. No time.

TANWANT. You say we walking ad in Salon. Look this face. What ad this is?

REITA. Bleach.

TANWANT. *(Bleaching.)* Punjabis want wheat colour girl... to chew up... spit out... Chotte buffaloes! Nahi, forget wheat, I want fair 'n' lovely gori gori rang like you –

REITA. Born in the wrong country.

TANWANT. You born there too.

REITA. Born there, belong here. (*Points to face to prove it.*)
Gori gori rang.

(TANWANT stops bleaching REITA, letting the bleach rest. REITA and TANWANT prepare the Salon for opening.)

TANWANT. Today, I might meet him very first time.

REITA. In a ladies-only Salon?

TANWANT. Could happen when I get lunch from Kulcha Cottage.

REITA. You bring a home-cooked Tupperware every day.

TANWANT. When I finish work then – if I not too dark for him to see me.

REITA. Be married two decades, you'll be invisible to each other anyway.

TANWANT. Nahi, I bet Harmeet tell you how much he love you everyday.

REITA. I've no time for gupshup.

TANWANT. S'not gupshup. Romantic – how husband should behave.

(REITA looks closely at TANWANT's face.)

REITA. It is dark isn't it? You should burn the roots right out – with a laser.

TANWANT. When? Too busy with work, finding husband...

REITA. Get Pinky to do it –

TANWANT. Burn my face right off?

REITA. (*Looking at her phone clock.*) She's late again.

TANWANT. Reita, how long I look him?

REITA. 'Til you realise you don't need him.

TANWANT. If I earn more, I buy British husband with passport tomorrow –

REITA. “If you earn more” ...?

TANWANT. I work here three-year already, no one panny pay rise –

REITA. Cash in hand, tax-free –?

TANWANT. When you get new Salon, I get pay rise?

REITA. If I take you with me –

TANWANT. I no go?

(Silence.)

On bus here, I see men on King Street. Ehni thand, stand there, thin jacket, rain-soak skin, work hand grip rip pocket, wait all day for builder job. Proud farmer come all this way to freeze? Starve? Beg?

REITA. No work, yet they peck at the pavement like pigeons.

TANWANT. When I take bus back, still they wait. Then, late night, apnay girls take their place, wait for dirty mans pay them do dirty job.

REITA. Where do they all keep coming from?

TANWANT. Same place we all come from.

(Blue police lights and blaring sirens ricochet around the Salon.)

Hai, what happen out there?

REITA. Don't move.

(With her bleached face, REITA rushes out and disappears from view. TANWANT freezes on the spot, eyes closed, hands over her ears.)

TANWANT. What if... what if...?

(Blue lights continue flashing. Sirens continue blaring.)

TANWANT. *(Shouts.)* What happen out there?

(Silence.)

(Shouts.) Reita?

(Silence.)

Reita?

(TANWANT quickly slathers bleach over her face, slumps in the chair and covers herself with a towel. REITA rushes back in, locking the Salon door.)

REITA. They drove right past, down – *(Glares at TANWANT.)*

TANWANT. BD always say if police come, swap place with client ek dhum. Make client beautician, beautician client, then they check her, not you. *(Patting her face.)* Think I leave it on now.

REITA. *(Sighing)* We nearly done?

TANWANT. Thori left.

(REITA swaps places with TANWANT, who takes off REITA's bleach.)

REITA. You hear they raided Reflections the other day?

TANWANT. What? ...

REITA. Babita said immigration police *and* soldiers burst in like a SWAT team.

TANWANT. Swat what?

REITA. Soldiers were wearing army jackets, waving machine guns –

TANWANT. Gu-gu-guns?

REITA. Clients were on beds, half-naked, dripping in oil and wax. Soldiers marched five Salon workers out in handcuffs. Whole street was watching.

TANWANT. Long as I with you, I no worry.

REITA. It's a huge fine, even a jail sentence – for me. But Pinky always says, “Tanwant is the fastest Freshie threader in the West.”

TANWANT. *(Relieved.)* Blesses her.

REITA. Soon, I might not have a choice.

(TANWANT finishes taking off REITA's bleach.)

TANWANT. *(Abruptly.)* There. You done.

REITA. *(Checking her phone clock.)* Opening time! I'll get the other cubicle ready. Tidy the magazines, refill the wax *(Hands TANWANT wax roller cartridge bottles.)* – warm wax, not cold wax, like yesterday. This isn't a church – it's a business – and button up.

(REITA turns the shop sign from 'Closed' to 'Open,' en route to the other cubicle. Holding the bottles, TANWANT composes herself. Tidying the magazines, she drops one and scans an article.)

TANWANT. *(Points to the magazine.)* Oh look Reita. In China, police excute prisoner. Then beauty company buy prisoner body... and skin them. Use skin to make collagen lip and wrinkle cream. Try those product. Stop going round in dark circle. It show.

REITA. *(Peering from the cubicle.)* You'll grow old one day too.

TANWANT. *(Reading.)* Uh nahi. Cos here, say woman can inject dead foetus cell to stay young.

REITA. That's disgusting. *(Pause.)* Is it expensive?

TANWANT. Only rich can afford to stay young, stay beautiful, hunnah? Poor peoples grow old, grow ugly, too quick.

REITA. Where do they get the dead foetuses?

TANWANT. Better not know. Then you has clear skin with clear conscience – look twenty year younger.

REITA. (*Retreating into the cubicle.*) Could be a high-class treatment in the new Salon...

TANWANT. Rabba, wish I keep my dead foetus now...

(The door rattles. A ghostly female figure drifts by.)

REITA. (*Calling out.*) It's open!

(The door rattles again.)

You check. Must be those dirty crackheads again.

(KAMAL's face is pushed up against the lotus on the door, frozen in terror by TANWANT's ghostly face. As TANWANT unlocks the door, KAMAL drops over the doorstep, breathless and soaked. KAMAL wears a dull-coloured shalwar kameez underneath a wet jacket, with white trainers. She speaks in an Indian accent.)

TANWANT. Nahi, only Kamali.

KAMAL. (*Distressed.*) Sat Sri Akal.

TANWANT. Reita, your cleaner here!

REITA. (*Shouting from the cubicle.*) Kamal, take a seat.

(Dazed and agitated, KAMAL shuffles around. Eyeing up KAMAL, TANWANT sits at the desk, refilling wax bottles. KAMAL shakes off the rain, drying herself with a tissue. She takes