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29 March 2023

ENG 3803

Analysis of Artist Book: *The Fortune Teller*

TW-mention of sexual assault

The Fortune Teller, an artist book published in 2016, was created by Malini Gupta to tell the intimate story of her childhood experience in India. This intricate, multi-faceted artist book came as a result of Gupta's initial thesis interest in this type of text technology, which led to her passion for Book Arts and literature. Beautifully hand-crafted and abundant with culturally-inspired decorum, *The Fortune Teller* appears on its surface to be an amusing children's game to interact with. However, once uncovered, Gupta has documented her chilling testimony as a woman who has experienced the reality of growing up in a world still brimming with inequality and complacency. *The Fortune Teller* is an exemplification of the experiences that women, particularly those with strong cultural backgrounds, face when their voices are diminished in times of anguish. This piece aims to acknowledge the restriction of women's voices, like Gupta's and does so in a way that its form intentionally shows how culturally harmful norms facilitate it. Gupta conveys this strong sense of misogyny and disbelief of women in her work through this artist book's unassuming and delicate beauty, the inclusion of both logical and personal content, and its ties to the deeply ingrained gender biases from Indian culture in its literary and artistic aspects.

The Fortune Teller first appears to its audience as a small, tidy red box, with its title simply put on the top for them to wonder about its content. When opened, a small fortune teller game is revealed, similar to the ones that could be crafted from a sheet of white paper as a child to predict one's future. However, this fortune teller, pre-made and ready to be played once the box is opened, is crafted with extreme detail. Each outer section portrays a painted religious Indian figure, and each inner section is painted with bold red numbers and greenery weaved around it waiting to "signify your fate." The corners are embellished with gold, even further signifying that this piece took great lengths to be made and portrayed as something to be handled with care and just simply beautiful to look at. It begs the question, could something so appealing to the eye also have something so important to say? The beauty of this piece is meant to act as a curtain to the underlying purpose of this piece. Just as the voices of children are not to be taken too seriously, the fortune teller game presents itself just as such; a children's game. Just as women in many cultures are still viewed primarily for their purpose of finding the best suitor match to bear children with, their beauty is once again put before their own voices. Gupta displays this unassuming beauty as the first thing the audience perceives from *The Fortune Teller* to represent the way women are continuing to be assessed in our world; first, for their physical identity and second, for their voice.

Once the audience plays the game that Gupta has created, they will then reveal a "future" that has remained a reality for so many today. Hidden behind the numbers are facts from various sources that detail the rates at which abuse against women and children occur, why men receive the inheritance in many cultures, particularly India, and other proof of disadvantages minorities face in culturally specific environments. One states, "The Ministry of Women and Child Development published a 'National Study of Child Abuse,' which reported that 53 percent of the

children interviewed had suffered one or more forms of sexual abuse.” These facts are made that much more significant when looking further into the tidy, red box to find another piece of the artist book. Laid underneath the fortune teller is another set of pages documenting Gupta’s own personal experience as a child with cultural misogyny and sexual assault. Once again, the creator has used the form of the artist book to represent how society accepts and treats these issues presented by women. She does this by including both data *and* personal experience because oftentimes the voices of women need to be justified and supported by hard facts, with their own personal witness not being enough for the world to believe. This becomes even more significant when the placement of her personal experience is second to that of the statistics found in the box, inherently arguing that evidence needs to be provided first before actual testimony can be accepted from a woman.

The audience can tell from the initial look into *The Fortune Teller* that Malini Gupta’s background as an Indian woman is represented strongly and meant to contribute to the purpose of this piece. Misogyny is so heavily disguised under the norms of traditional cultures that it bleeds into the identities of even the most modern generations. The audience sees this instilled in Gupta when she recounts the disappointed reaction of her grandmother in regard to her parents birthing a third girl. While Gupta’s brother was being celebrated as if his birthday was a wedding, Gupta’s sister was being married off at thirteen years old. This treatment becomes coherent with the culture as these actions continue today. By sharing her personal experience with her family, including images of religious Indian deities, and using data taken from studies in India, Gupta has made her intentions for this piece clear. Though she is proud of her culture, it is the same culture that dimmed her voice until the moment she published this piece to talk about her experience.

Malini Gupta and *The Fortune Teller* represent the countless number of women that have had to guise their input with beauty, delicacy, statistics, and a carefully selected placement of words. Despite modern-day feminism and equal rights efforts, culturally rich historical norms will continue to remain complacent in the fight against misogyny as they are passed down through family line after family line. Gupta and her testimony written and portrayed in this artist's book is one of the courageous and thought-provoking ways that audiences can become aware of these issues they may not have been inclined to look into in the first place. *The Fortune Teller* plays into society's need for a delicate, tidy, red box, to convey what women have been trying to exclaim for centuries: stop silencing their voices.

Works Cited

Gupta, Malini. *The Fortune Teller*. Second printing. Portland, Oregon: Ochre art + design, 2015. Print.

“The Fortune Teller by Malini Gupta -Sold out!” *23 Sandy*,
<https://23sandy.com/products/the-fortune-teller-by-malini-gupta-sold-out>.