

SQUEAK CARNWATH

Confidence, 2013

Oil and alkyd on canvas over panel, 60 x 55 in



PHOTO CREDIT: LEE FATHERREE
ART © SQUEAK CARNWATH/LICENCED BY VAGA, NEW YORK, NY

JYOTIRMOYEE
DEVI SEN

The Mistress Wife

—Translated from the Bengali by Apala G. Egan

The awaited invitation embossed with the royal seal arrived at last. She tore open the envelope in feverish haste and pored over the details. Rani Chandavatiji, the third queen, had requested the pleasure of her company at a dance performance to be held at the palace. When Shethanijee was young, she had attended these festivities with her family, but, for some reason, the summonses had ceased. Throughout her childhood, during the afternoons when time hung heavy, her grandmother would unlock a treasure chest of tales and weave stories replete with castles and kings, and queens and concubines, to an audience of enthralled children.

The fabled abode loomed large over the kingdom and cast both its shadow and its spell over the inhabitants. During her preteen years, she would gaze as though in a dream at the edifice from her rooftop, impatient for the overtures to resume. When the maharaja and his sons rode on their elephants, the gilded *howdahs* on the pachyderms' backs swaying gently, she, along with her brothers, sisters, and cousins, would race to the veranda to catch a glimpse of the procession in the distance.

Holding the card in one hand, she waltzed to the wardrobe to select clothing fit for a royal visit. Long skirts, *choli* blouses and veils in yellow, green, and cerulean reflecting the seasons glimmered inside the armoire. Which outfit would catch the maharaja's eye, she wondered, as the silks and muslins rippled through her fingers. The crown prince of her childhood was now the king.

She heard her husband downstairs call out to a servant. The visions of regal opulence vanished to be replaced by the visage of her spouse; he was a plain man, some might call him ugly. Short, hunched, more dwarf than person, Shyamnath Sheth was the only son of a wealthy businessman whose property holdings alone might put some hereditary landlords, the *zamindars*, to shame. She had been given in marriage to him when she was barely in her teens; it had been an advantageous match, her parents said, that of all the moneyed families, his had been the most prosperous. Besides, what he lacked in looks was more than made up for by his financial acumen. Unkind people called him an impotent midget, but he had a son and daughter by her to prove otherwise.

Shethanijee opened all the jewelry boxes and drew out diamond-studded tiaras, pearl necklaces, gold chokers,