Talking Race, Talking Colour

Racialized Women, their Home and Belongingness in Multicultural Canada

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"Parlons ethnie, parlons couleur" Ce documentaire raconte la vie de sept femmes dont certaines sont nées au Canada, d'autres élevées ici et d'autres encore ont émigré au Canada. Ce film explore la complexité du sentiment d'appartenance dans un Canada multiculturel à partir de leurs expériences selon leurs aptitudes variées ou aux différentes étapes de leur vie. Il joue avec l'idée d'un "chez soi," poussant les spectatrices à réfléchir sur l'impact du concept de «l'ethnie» sur le sentiment d'appartenance si toutefois celui-ci existe, dans ce que l'on appelle "chez soi."

> "[T]he truth is that once we have left our childhood places and started out to make up our own lives, armed with only what we have and are, we understand that … there is no longer any such place as home: except, of course, for the home we make, or the homes that are made for us … which is anywhere, and everywhere, except the place from which we began.
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> —Salman Rushdie, *Wizard of Oz* (57)

The Story of "Talking Colour, Talking Race"

The summer of 2007 was a busy one. Graduation date was approaching and job searches in an ever-volatile non-profit sector were making us anxious. A film-making workshop was particularly challenging to fit into the schedule. Yet, we showed up the Faculty of Social Work, University of Toronto, every week to learn the basics of documentary film-making. Soon, we found ourselves engaged in deeply personal discussions around racialized women's migration/settlement experience in multicultural Canada. A complex topic, it made us reflect on ourselves, our social location as racialized women, personal migration histories, experience of navigating social spaces, our immediate and intellectual response to migration/settlement and, our vision for a "future" in multicultural Canada.

At a personal level, both of us have individual and collective memories along with feelings about migration and notions of home. Being Pakistani and Indian, we embody one of the richest yet most violent histories of modern times, complete with an irrevocable partition of our land, an act of violence that may not heal in many lifetimes. Women, by all accounts, have been most frequently at the receiving end of the tragedy (Menon and Bhasin) and at the forefront of massive inland and outland migration. It is ironic with our histories that we meet in a third space, Canada, to build friendship and begin this journey on exploring the nuances of what it means to be immigrants and racialized women.

Despite the *Canadian Multiculturalism Act* (1971, 1988) and Canada being a signatory to multiple international human rights treaty declarations, the nation's record in respecting the human rights of its own people has been abysmal (Piche, Pelletier, and Epale). Nation-building on the basis of common genetic heritage is strictly exclusionary and Canada, like many other western nations, has followed this model since inception. The very basis of the nation has a racist ideological superiority over its Aboriginal people (Thobani 2000, 2007, 2009) and continues to be structured as such through its immigration policy (Bannerji, 2000b; Buchignnai, Indra and Srivastava; Li), health care services (Williams, Massaquoi and Chatterjee), school systems and institutes of higher learning (Dei) and finally, the labour market (Abu-Laban and Gabriel; Boyko; Reitz; Siddiqui; Workers' Action Centre). Canadian multiculturalism is no exception as it aspires towards multiculturalism within a bilingual/bicultural framework and thus becomes a tool to maintain difference, distance, and dominance while maintaining its language of diversity and inclusion. By adopting a simplistic, Orientalist view of culture as its sole entry point, multiculturalism policy ignores global inequities and the perpetuation of inequity and poverty of Aboriginal peoples and racialized people living in Canada. In taking Canadian multiculturalism as our point of entry into a discussion on race and racialization, we wanted to explore how the dominant

monolithic understanding of culture impacts migrant feelings of home and belongingness.

We are young South Asian women whose lives have been shaped by the experience of migration and racialization. Our personal histories brought us to Canada at different points in our lives. Aisha was 18 years old when she arrived as a university student; Soma was in her late 20s when she arrived as a family class immigrant. We met at the University of Toronto while completing our Masters of Social Work. Our intellectual and academic pursuits, along with our own life experience, led us to explore how our stories being told and re-told to a point where we connected in the spirit of sisterhood and decided to carry on with the process through visuals and in text. Racialized women in Toronto, with innumerable diverse intersections of identities, form just one version of the story that millions of women around our globe are telling/writing/enacting as they/their families move within and across borders. By making stories the centre-piece of our documentary as well as this article, we record a counter narrative to the dominant histories of our time, and make space for personal narratives that are marginal-

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the concepts we learn about in class impact us and the work we hope to do in an intimate and complex manner. Multiculturalism seemed the cornerstone of the immigration and settlement discourse in Canada. However, what we saw happening was actually the promotion of a monoculture under the facade of settlement (which we problematize later in the article), diversity, and inclusion. Sara Ahmed (2000) states that, "[t]he production of the nation requires some-body or some-where to not be in order for it to be" (99). Someone somewhere has to not belong in order for others to belong. Immigrants in Canada are those other or "strange" bodies Ahmed mentions. They are inside but are always on the periphery. Multiculturalism constructs us as such and in turn affects our sense of home and belonging in profound ways. These personal questions moved us to meet other women who wanted to share their experience of migration and racialization and how they understood that experience. Our film became a journey into the heart of these questions we so often asked ourselves and the stories we shared with one another in friendly conversations.

The documentary involved seven women (including the writers), and five of us happened to have lived in Canada during the late 1980s and early '90s, when multiculturalism in Canada reached its peak with the establishment of an official multiculturalism policy. We adopted an autobiographical narrative style as we agree that stories are the most situated forms of knowledge (Furman), especially for women (Sangster; Zackodnik) and play crucial roles in sustaining familial, cultural, national and political histories (Stone, Gomez, Hotzoglou and Lipnitsky). We have used story telling in this paper also because the participants were telling their stories and engaging in the process of creating and sharing personal and communal history. For us, it was like listening to ized to both multicultural discourses and to the processes of public policy making.

All the participants (between mid-20s to late-30s) have unique immigration histories. They have Canadian, Indo-Canadian, Middle Eastern, Black and South Asian identities and heritages and identified as first, second and 1.5 generation.[1] By second generation we mean those participants who were born and raised here (1) and by 1.5 generation we mean those who came to Canada when they were very young (4). All share vast experiences of the service sector, especially, immigrant settlement and education sectors, as consumers and/or professionals. In many ways, they are a diverse yet, similar group. Their stories are well-wrapped around themes of race/racialization and its impact on their notions of home. While we acknowledge that documenting systemic racism and barriers is crucial in unravelling how multiculturalism policy fails to be inclusive or accountable, we decided to focus on the themes around home and belongingness to get closer to lived experience of racialized women and the impact of migration on their identity since:

> Neither popular nor highly abstract treatments of immigration provide us with access to the actual experience and meaning of migrancy for immigrants or exiles themselves; nor do they lead to an understanding of the impact of migrancy on questions of identity, that is, the role of migration on the construction of the self. (Furman 93)

Why Women's Stories?

> *Immigrant women, particularly women of colour are the ones holding the bottom of society up here in Canada… When you understand that, it gives a little bit of courage*

to push back…. I don't care what anyone is telling me, I know how valuable I am … as individuals we have to have that courage … because you are the only person who is going to get up and say something do something. (Participant, Talking Colour, Talking Race)

Since the inception of the project, we have been asked, "why women and why racialized women only?" A simple answer is that being racialized women ourselves, we were interested in other women's experiences, meaning making, coping with and resisting discrimination and racialization in multicultural Canada. As the most commonly documented grounds of discrimination, race and gender were also at the forefront of our questions around access and equity. As we researched on this topic we discovered some alarming statistics that describe the extent of economic and social marginalization of racialized women in Canada. For example, over half or nearly half of some racialized groups of women in Canada are living in poverty: 52 percent of women of Arab/West Asian [Middle Eastern] ancestry, 51 percent of women of Latin American ancestry, and 47 percent of Black women. Racialized immigrant women face obstacles in accessing healthcare, housing, employment, and social services. This happens despite their immense contribution, both in and out of home, and within and beyond their communities (CRIAW). We believe that the marginalization of immigrants and racialized people is not only entrenched in the country's immigration policy but is also a pre-condition for a multicultural state (see our discussion of Ahmed's work above). The vulnerability and unbelongingness of the other is required for the nation state to feel empowered and cultured. Therefore, it should not be the sole responsibility of racialized and/or immigrant women to combat the impact of racism on their lives; instead it needs to be a collective responsibility of our society to change the ways in which we structurally and systemically marginalize and mark racialized and/or immigrant women as "other." This pushed us to create a tool that prioritized the voices and stories of this group to educate and inform the larger communities about the failure of multiculturalism.

Further to this, Diaspora studies have traditionally focused on men and/or discussed Diaspora as a generalized concept. However, there are many entities of us in the Diaspora: immigrants, exiles, undocumented, refugees, stateless, etc., and it is their intersections with gender and gender roles that make women's experiences uniquely complex and call for unique attention as well. For women, it is not only about navigating the Diaspora but also the borders and negotiating these international spaces with local realities (Dyck and Dossa; Dyck; Gastaldo, Gooden and Massaquoi).

Home as well, is a complex notion for women as some of us leave home to make and maintain another home, often in situations where we are not consulted or have little choice. We are also on the frontlines of social, political, environmental dislocations and disasters and are forced to look for sustenance elsewhere to fulfill our care-taking responsibilities (Derose, Escarce and Lurie; Meadows, Thurston and Melton; Parreñas; Spitzer, Neufeld, Harrison, Hughes and Stewart). Even when we make a choice, the factors determining migration and the quality of settlement leave us, our children, and our families on the margins, without feeling at home.

Women's Stories of Home and Belongingness

We expected that a documentary focusing on women's experience of migration and racialization would bring forward their notions of home. What surprised us, however, was the great diversity within those notions. Although most women were living in Canada during the height of multiculturalism, it did not help them in striking roots and feeling at home just as it did not help the women who were relative newcomers. However, each was unique in their analysis and coping.

Soma's Story

So I came to Canada in 2004 after my marriage. I came here as a family class immigrant, my partner sponsored me. In terms of making the decision to come to Canada, it had been a hard one but it was quite an informed decision I should say because my partner was very honest about what was going to happen … so I knew what's going to happen to all my credentials, all my experience and everything.

I actually had never thought that I would have a "home," I was a misfit back home in India. I know a lot of people have a strong sense of losing a home; I never had that. Home for me was never a geographic location … a place … it always was an idea I carried inside. It was okay not having a home and not having this sense that this space belongs to me. It's [become] a feeling of a perpetual émigré, always looking for a home, always looking for a feeling of being at home and never getting that. It's kind of become regular now and maybe it's okay. Maybe life is like that.

Aisha's Story

My story has two constant truths: one is my economic privilege, which has allowed me untold privileges in life, such as traversing continents frequently to maintain two separate places I call "home" and the other is growing up in a violent, unstable and insecure mega metropolis. It is the country that my loved ones continue to inhabit.

I left Karachi, Pakistan at 18 to attend university in Montreal—but while I lived in Canada most of the year, I didn't "live" in Canada. It took me eight years to start accepting a truth that I had been struggling internally with: I am an immigrant and I am not going back to live in my home country possibly ever again.

I feel it within that geography.… if I wasn't from there

[Karachi] I don't know where I would be from, you know... If that was taken away from me, the city I grew up in, I would feel homeless.

Christina's Story

My parents are from West Indies. They left West Indies when they were 19. I was born in England and then we moved to Canada when I was ten. I have grown up most of life here. I got teased quite a bit, even though I spoke English, people did not seem to understand my accent. I learned very quickly not to speak in an accent. The other issue I found was my colour. I never realized the difference until I came to Canada. The first time I ever experienced racism was when I came to Canada.

I feel like I don't have a home. [Although] my parents are from West Indies, I was not born there either. That's my heritage. Because I was young enough I don't have a lot of things that I brought forward from England, it's not my parents' home either. And then I moved to Canada and it's still not my parents' home. I have grown up most of my life here [but] I've always grown in that kind of environment where I never really fit in, so I always tell people I don't feel like I really have a home.

Rawa's Story

When my family came to Canada [when she was five years old], we were stateless. We moved to Ottawa, in a very multicultural neighbourhood. I was 16 when I got my Canadian citizenship. It was interesting to be welcomed to Canada after living here for so many years.

[However] the closest feeling I have had to the notion of home has been in Canada and I am very comfortable here. [My Family] lived in Lebanon, Kuwait and those countries don't necessarily grant status by virtue of your living there or being born there. And it was not until I got my Canadian passport that I could travel to Palestine (at age 23) to see my family there. So, I have had very complex relationships to the notion of home because although I have families living there, I don't necessarily consider those places home. In Toronto, there are lots of people with similar stories and not necessarily from my community, so this very beautiful thing that happens despite all the discrimination and social stratification. That really resonated with me.

I don't feel comfortable in a room where everyone looks like me. The cultural things I associate with growing up are so varied. So very mainstream Canadian and American things. Also, hip hop is very important to me. [It is] something that I really identify with. So, I think I find home in a variety of things and not necessarily in a sense of place.

Melissa's Story

My parents decided to come to Canada from Sierre Leone. We were the first black family to migrate to a small community of 30,000 people in the interior of Newfoundland. A lot of people had never seen an immigrant before, never seen black people before. We had to figure everything out by ourselves.

Home helps us survive. It keeps us sane. We have this place to go to. When things get really bad, I can fantasize about home. But home also stops me from engaging in this culture. We don't invest here, we don't invest in the Canadian. We invest in going home, emotionally and physically. I spent a lot of time as a child fantasizing about going home. I never called myself Canadian until very recently because it is about taking back what we have invested in. I have given a lot of energy in making sure this society is working. That does not mean I am not looking at home but I no longer fantasize about it.

Home is a complex notion as some of us leave home to make another home, often in situations where we have little choice. Even when we make a choice, the factors determining migration and the quality of settlement leave us, our children, and our families on the margins, without feeling at home.

Amina's Story

I am from Somalia. My experiences in Canada were not so great. I came here when I was eleven [From United Arab Emirates]. Coming here you start out from scratch. There's not a lot of services available for refugees… we were refugees but I didn't understand what refugees was, the term was difficult to grasp, because nobody explained it to us.

I had the experience of being a refugee, but couldn't settle … not feeling part of here cause you're always being labelled and never ever feeling part of this country even though I have been here for more than 20 years. As much as I try to succeed and try to assimilate into this country, it's very hard to get acknowledged and to get accepted because it's always going to be that you are the "other" rather than you are a part of us.

Shakshi's Story

So I grew up on a really small community near Vancouver Island … but there was a really strong history of Indian people coming there and working there in the mills.

Every time my grandmom would talk about India to us, she would say that's your home, that's your fathers home, that's your father's father's home. That land that you went to has been in your family for generations. And that was a very strong feeling for me.

Even my sense of belonging here [in Canada] is not a 100 percent. But I think in the last few years I've come to a very different understanding of belonging in Canada and think my relationship to it has changed a lot from my historical understanding of the history of First Nation's people here in Canada. I question why, as an immigrant, why I need to, whether I have any claims to being, for this to be my home.

Once I started to trouble those things for myself, I'm not so concerned about belonging anymore. I think I am okay with being a child of an immigrant. I'm okay with having two homes to some degree. I think my sense of belonging is always in question, I don't think it's a static thing. I don't feel like I have to be constrained to one place and I think I'm okay with that now. And who knows, maybe it will change in the future. And maybe when I have kids it will look different. Especially because my kids will be very different … they will be African, and Indian, and Canadian.

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How Do We Continue To Tell Our Stories?

The stories we heard inspired self-reflection and compassion. The process allowed us a space to talk about our innermost fears and the individual ways that we are learning to cope with living with multiple intersections in multicultural and transnational communities. In the following sections, we critique the existing policy of multiculturalism as falling short of capturing these complexities and make some recommendations based on what we heard **and what we ourselves continue to experience and reflect on.**

Canadian multiculturalism fails us because diverse histories remain unaccounted for and untold in our collective histories as peoples living in Canada. Most importantly, the policy has not translated into the mainstream learning of Canada's colonising history, neither with respect to the Aboriginal peoples nor otherwise. It has rather, promoted a parochial lens on the racialized communities living in Canada. Not surprisingly, most of our participants repeatedly pointed out the need for change in the educational system:

> *…it was lunchtime … a kid had thrown a piece of food in the hallway … the teacher comes rushing in…grabs a Somali kid in the class and says to him…. I don't know how your people act back home but you are in Canada now and you are in a civilized country … that's bad enough but also worse because he did not even do it, so you can see that there's already this assumption … some of these teachers are really operating from a place of anger towards students … that's not healthy learning environment … then it feeds into self esteem, it feeds into the fact that they get pushed towards certain things, whether it's sports and trades and what not, pushed away from academics. It's a self perpetuating cycle. Because they are pushed away from academics and pushed away from certain things, then the next crop of teachers can say that this community does not value such and such type of education.* (Participant, Talking Colour, Talking Race)

The most effective way to change the negative experiences associated with being racialized women in Canada is to address systemic issues instead of using culture as an entry point. For many of us, culture is not a fixed essential identity that we can comfortably exist within, even as so called "new" immigrants to Canada. We face a silencing of our experiences when we do not fit within either the normative of "Canadian" values or with the values associated with our identifiable culture (e.g., what we eat, what we wear, how we dance). As racialized people and as racialized women we are marked and contained, despite the limitless possibilities to our identities. An understanding and acknowledgement of our diverse histories and the conditions of globalization that brought many of us within the borders of this nation are important discussions in a multicultural society. How the concept of "culture" replaces or recodes "racial difference," and in the process manages to sustain the idea of race as an act of nature, is also crucial (Montgomery). It is only then a discussion of access and equity may be possible.

However, it is a struggle for us to outright reject the policy as some other countries have been doing (e.g., Australia). As racialized women ourselves and as service providers, we witness the systemic exclusion of racialized women daily and we appreciate the discussion on inclusion and diversity that this policy facilitates, in however narrow a fashion. We however believe it is important to

critically challenge the existing tensions in multiculturalism policy of creating space for multicultural belonging within bi-cultural/racial framework and also, deconstruct the language that does not acknowledge the Indigenous land rights. This is a country where decolonization is an ongoing struggle and as immigrant settlers on this land we try to locate ourselves in relation to Indigenous peoples. This is a location of discomfort but nevertheless necessary for solidarity work that community members and academics are trying to build and sustain. It is also crucial for as responsible scholarship on immigration and multiculturalism.

We also need to acknowledge that culture is always in a state of flux, a discursive process (Moodley) and challenge the dominant positivist notions around culture and communities that are *different*. Finally, individual's understanding of home and belonging is shaped by diverse factors; in this case, they were determined by the women's communal history, stages of migration, personal experience, world view and socio-political understanding of Canada as a stolen land of the Aboriginal peoples. This diversity asks for an open and critical understanding of the current strategy of multiculturalism.

Closing Thoughts

The documentary is an ongoing project and we are continuously learning through this process. One major limitation of this project has been its convenience sampling. Also, we did not explicitly ask how "gender" impacted their experience and although they instinctively critiqued the multicultural policy while discussing home and belongingness, it was not posed as a specific question. The video has been shown during orientation of staff and students at a Community Health Centre in Toronto and has been submitted to relevant film festivals. We hope to share this video online through partnerships with local, provincial, national, and international websites. We also hope "Talking Race Talking Colour," both visually and textually, continues to educate people about the processes and impacts of racialization and encourages racialized women, service providers, and community members to step forward to tell their stories and make sure they are heard to create positive and lasting changes in the societies we live in:

After all, we could gather plenty of examples of immigrants or exiles who become personally insular if not politically nationalistic or xenophobic in their new settings. Nonetheless, it is worth exploring even briefly how migrants themselves identify their migrancy as an agent of possibility. For, through all their anguish and pain, they often develop ways of seeing the world that carry the potential for a workable multicultural future.

By the time this article has gone to publication, our lives as women, and as racialized women, with varying social locations has again shifted dramatically. Where a mere six months ago we were both working in the social service sector in Toronto, Soma has begun working on her Ph.D. at the Ontario Institute for Studies in Education of the University of Toronto, and Aisha has shifted back to her home country, Pakistan. As our lives move forward our stories become more difficult to essentialize and instead become part of this ever changing landscape of this human experience we call life. Movement from one space to another, be it geographically or not, influences and shapes our health. Our ever present desire to create positivity in the societies in which we live, and in the lives of people that we encounter, pushes us to see where, despite having different stories, we all coalesce and converge. The lesson we continue to learn is that one cannot assume, one cannot judge, and one cannot anticipate what someone's story is, especially based on their race, gender or migration experience. The *Multiculturalism Act* of Canada presupposes that there are essential differences between cultures, and therefore we must accommodate, integrate, or compensate for such differences to live in a harmonious way. Yet, we ask readers to reflect on simple questions: "different from whom?" and "integrate into what?"

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[1]There is discrepancy in literature around the definition of 1st, 2nd and 1.5 generations.

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