Moments of Misrecognition

Violence Against Women and the Multicultural Classroom

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Cet article met l'accent sur les implications éthiques et politiques dans les représentations de la violence faite aux femmes immigrantes dans le contexte d'une société hégémonique blanche et multiculturelle. Son propos est basé sur une étude de l'impact du documentaire « Parlons-en », (Let's Talk About It) *de Deepa* ***Mehta*** *qui a été utilisé comme outil de conscientisation dans les cours en études de la femme.*

This interrogation of the vexed intersection of gender, culture, and violence has been prompted by my recent experiences teaching women's studies at a reputedly progressive university. Feminism and multiculturalism constitute core values in my pedagogy, but more frequently now I notice a disjuncture between my students' and my own understandings of these terms. Not surprisingly, a similar dissonance occurs in confrontation with mainstream media's coverage of the topic of multiculturalism, or even in the new tenor of academic mission statements, that byproduct of university corporatization, where previous emphasis on diversity and equity gives way to notions of excellence, branding, and marketability. Something must have changed if the Conservative Minister of Citizenship, Immigration and Multiculturalism announces that "integration" of immigrants is currently a preferred goal,[1] and if, for this year's Metropolis Project competition, the Social Sciences and Humanities Research Council, a major national funding institution, invites researchers to study the most effective models for integration and inclusion in Canada. The fact that in public discourse multiculturalism is now constructed more as a problem, notoriously illustrated by the sharia debates, seems to me another sign of neoliberal blunting of the progressive edge of any politics focused on women and minoritized groups. Similar to what happened with lifestyle feminism, multiculturalism's radical, transformative potential has been muted, if not eradicated, together with the evaporating dream of a just society. At the same time, old prejudices—sexist, racist, and ethnocentric stereotypes—rear their ugly head.

Trying to find out how the concepts around domestic violence are shaped and biased by messages conveyed through media representations including so-called multicultural content, I stumbled upon a real ethical conundrum. On the one hand, there is the urgency of a tragic situation faced by many immigrant women from vulnerable populations who might benefit from public education programs directing them to community-based support networks and services. In this context, films, documentaries, and artwork that remove the stigma and secrecy of abuse and offer "stories of survival and resistance"[2] should be considered a valuable aid in addressing a deep social problem. On the other hand, there is a risk that such stories will themselves be turned into stigmatizing discourses and used in support of arguments for assimilation, fuelled by stereotypes of violence attached to cultural specificity. It is a negative variant of familiar discussions around multiculturalism, rooted in the paradoxes of "the politics of recognition"[3] and its struggle to reconcile the demands of universalism and respect for cultural uniqueness, where cultural uniqueness is quickly reinterpreted as otherness.

One particular instance that illustrated for me conflicts inherent in using representations of violence in ethnic communities for the purpose of feminist consciousness-raising was Deepa Mehta's 2005 documentary *Let's Talk About It.*[4] Teaching third-year courses on feminist methodology and feminist cultural studies, I usually incorporate films that not only decentre dominant perspectives, but also help students make the connection between the personal and the political, at the same time allowing them to develop critical skills. In order to explore how the concept of domestic violence is constructed as a result of selection, ordering, and decoding that are ideologically motivated, I conducted a small qualitative research

project, showing Mehta's film to a sample of 30 students (25 percent of whom were non-white women) and collecting their responses through a questionnaire and a focus group. They were asked to comment on the aspects of content and effectiveness as well as their own emotional reaction to the documentary: Whose stories were represented? What new knowledge was produced? What ideologies were used to frame the problem of domestic violence? How successfully did the film avoid reinforcing existing stereotypes of gender, race, class, ethnicity, and culture? What ethical issues were raised? Where would they situate themselves as viewers in relation to this material? What I found through the answers to these and similar questions was that employing such contested representations as a pedagogical tool is not without perils and that often such moments in our teaching practice lead to misuses of diversity, reproducing the boundaries of exclusion and stereotypes meant to be critiqued. Moreover, through the congruence of cultural production, its reception, and multicultural feminist pedagogy, this specific example revealed to me shifting power relations and multiple scattered hegemonies that not only affect what kinds of representations can be produced in Canada at this time and how the viewers' own location sets the limits of meaning construction, but also show that what is missing is a larger framework for understanding violence against women, one that would be effective in mobilizing women across borders and intersections around this single issue.

Mehta's film contains four vignettes, each telling a story of abuse through interviews with three immigrant women and one man. They come from different communities (Hispanic, South Asian, and African Canadian), speak different languages (Spanish, Punjabi, Hindi, and English), and represent different socio-economic backgrounds (from a hotel housekeeper to a lawyer). What is striking about the method of presentation, however, is that the interviews are conducted by the women's child or children, or in one case, by the daughter of the male abuser. The use of children as intermediaries can be seen as a partial solution to the problem of power imbalances on the axis connecting the filmmaker, the interviewees, and the audience; it is a device that deflects the gaze. At the same time, the innocent-eye perspective serves to sanitize the brutality and ugliness of grown-up conflicts while it also invites moralizing. The universal appeal of discourses of childhood, in the context of human pain and suffering, allows the filmmaker to reinscribe humanist sentiments into the issue of violence against women, de-emphasizing its larger political and socio-economic underpinnings. Clearly, such framing seems consistent with Mehta's attempt to humanize both victims and perpetrators and resonates well with the ideology of wounded families in need of healing. "Everybody is a victim, even the abuser. The point is there is no black and white"—these are the words summing up her stance.[5]

There are also some troubling issues around the politics of the film's production. *Let's Talk About It* was partly financed by a grant from OMNI Television, where it originally aired in October 2005. The story of OMNI Television is evidence that the government is abdicating its responsibility for supporting multicultural programming and downloading it to the private sector that inevitably turns it into a commercial venture. OMNI Television, licenced in 1979 as Channel 47 in Toronto, describes itself as "Canada's first free over-the-air multilingual/multicultural television system" and a provider of "ethnocultural television programming."[6] In 1986 it was acquired by Rogers, and currently 40 percent of its programming is English language mostly commercial content, talk shows, and comedy. Multilinguistic and multicultural broadcasts account for 60 percent of its content. According to the home website, all programming is sustained by revenue generated by the sale of commercial time. As a good corporate citizen, OMNI has created a documentary and drama fund, part of the Ontario Independent Producers' Initiative, which reviews and develops proposals submitted by independent filmmakers who meet the criteria specified by the sponsor. This imposes serious limitations on the type of multicultural productions that can get a nod of approval from a commercially driven mainstream media institution such as Rogers. The fact that independent filmmakers are at the mercy of free-market capitalism for funding of their projects is in itself symptomatic of neoliberal frugality and the gradual fade-out of official multicultural rhetoric.

These problems on the production end, which may have indirectly influenced the content of representation, are compounded by other problems that arise on the reception end. No artist can control who will see the film and in what context, and whether the film will be appropriated for different agendas. It is true, however, that some representations have more "usefulness" for ideological appropriation that may run counter even to their authors' intention, especially if they deal with the subject matter that is already fraught with controversy, like combined violence against women and multiculturalism. As my questionnaires and the focus group have showed, Mehta's documentary sends contradictory messages regarding ethnic and racialized stereotypes of abuse. Only a small fraction of students thought the film was successful in avoiding stereotypes: "*by representing multiple ethnicities and multiple economic circumstances, it managed largely to avoid battered-woman stereotyping.*"[7] As another student notes: "*I did not recognize any stereotypes. The personal accounts seemed valid and unique. The film portrays subjects as people rather than characters.*" For one respondent, it even dispelled stereotypes:

The film was successful in sup-

porting the view that domestic violence is not just a cultural phenomenon. I personally thought domestic violence only occurred among Blacks and Hispanics. I didn't think that domestic violence was high in Punjabi culture. The film demonstrated that domestic violence affects all social groups. It's just that some are heard of and others are hidden.

insights into specific difficulties faced by immigrant women when calling 911 *("they want a change, not the end of marriage*"). The respondents also loved the novelty of having children interview their parents and the inclusion of the male perspective. They repeatedly expressed admiration for the women and stressed the empowerment they took from seeing them overcome the abuse and prosper.

It tells me is that race is still at the fault line of multiculturalism, breaking into the surface of the benign talk of plurality. My survey reveals problematic moments of misrecognition, which are related to racialization by default of multicultural difference. For a white viewer, the choice of four ethnic examples may displace the problem of domestic violence from the "mainstream" into ethnic groups.

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Still, the 80 percent majority of the students surveyed pointed out that by focusing only on ethnic and racialized examples of the abused and abusers, the film reinforced the view of "*minorities as weaker groups with wrong ideologies*" and "*stereotypes of powerless women, angry men, and extreme violence in communities of colour*." Several respondents demanded the inclusion of white perspectives or objected to their "exclusion:" "*The film shows a number of women from a variety of ethnic groups, yet not one from the dominant white perspective, as if domestic violence is not a problem among whites*." Some even sounded an alarmist note: "*It's troubling to see that the white demographics was not represented…. Where are the white women? Are they not abused? I know for a fact they are and should have been included*." It is interesting to note that this negative reaction among white respondents echoes accusations of "reverse discrimination," common among opponents of equity in debates on multiculturalism. And yet, other critiques offered by the students focused on normative representations of the family and marriage as well as heterosexuality. Apart from these critiques, however, there were several aspects of the documentary praised. The students reported gaining new

Indeed, the fours segments of the film show how each woman reclaims her agency after reaching a turning point, which for different subjects occurs after being thrown out of her apartment, being humiliated in front of her children, or being subjected to a life-threatening assault. They all manage to leave the abusive set-up, despite the difficulties they face after separation, including self-doubt, housing and financial problems, as well as prolonged legal battles. The organizations and institutions to which they can turn, such as the church, the community centre, or other family members, are often the very same institutions that turn a blind eye to violence or motivate the victim to remain silent. Asked why they had put up with abuse for so long, the woman from El Salvador explains that her abuser was "a good father;" the South Asian woman felt bound by the tradition of arranged marriage while the African Canadian woman kept the abuse secret for years trying to maintain the façade of a perfect middle-class family. In the end, however, she was politicized by her experience, became a lawyer, and channelled all her energy into anti-violence activism.

What the above brief overview of student responses to *Let's Talk About*

The danger of such representation, when it is offered for cross-cultural consumption in the white supremacist context, is that it reinforces deep-seated and unarticulated prejudices against immigrant, racialized, and ethnic communities. Treading a fine line between "humanizing" and "exoticizing," the film reaffirms the assumption that in Canada "the only bodies possible for [racialized] beings are wounded bodies, bodies whose rights have been abrogated by being produced as failed or excessive. Under these circumstances playing up failure returns [racialized female] bodies to the circuit of [otherness]" (Patel 2002: 223). Representational difficulties involved in hegemonic perception of violence against women in multicultural communities may be related in part to Mehta's reliance on narrative. My critical observations coincide with general skepticism about the presumed universality of narrative, already voiced, for example, in Jarmila Mildorf's research. The narrative paradigm of women's stories of abuse that has been chosen by Mehta may not be such a universal feature as is often claimed and may, in fact, be highly dependent on the viewers' critical competence and cultural context. Hence, it is important to consider not only the immediate

context out of which these narratives emerged, but also to analyze these narratives within larger sociocultural frameworks, such as multiculturalism and the immigration law, the family law, the criminal law, the patriarchal state, and the corporate media.

If indeed, as Jacqueline Bodo reminds us, "the viewers' position in the social structure determines, in part, what sets of discourses or interpretive strategies they will bring to their encounter with the [film]" (58), the reception of Mehta's documentary suggests that it can function to reinforce the liberal framework in the perception of violence against women. What many students get from the film is that the solutions to the problem lie in individual women's courage to break the silence and seek help; in more community support and services being available to women; and in improving the justice system. One conspicuous absence is the absence of a more radical feminist analysis in approaching violence against women. Many students seem to be mystified as to the causes of domestic violence, as evidenced by differently repeated versions of the following statement: "*There is no singular reason for the causes of domestic violence, but it can happen to any race, culture, and class of women*." Unfortunately, there is a curious acceptance bordering on acquiescence to the fact that it is such a wide-spread phenomenon. Thus attitude lends an air of inevitability and naturalization to violence against women. Through its ambiguous or absent framing, the film fails to acknowledge the full extent of male domination and to admit that violence is an integral part in maintaining this domination, just as it also completely ignores the systemic role of institutional heterosexuality, economic marginalization, and white privilege in making immigrant women's position more vulnerable.

"Storying" domestic violence, to use Jarmila Mildorf's phrase, cannot be detached from ideology and from the analysis of violence against women as a social problem and a predominantly political issue (Potts and Wenk 459). Any attempt to make the issue more "palatable" or "inoffensive" runs the risk of normalizing the situation. Mehta's narrative practices around domestic violence are open to problematic contextualization. On the one hand, we have the overdetermined context of immigrant communities, resulting in stigmatizing discourses and stereotypical imagery. On the other hand, we have the insufficient context of depoliticized perspective. Such representations of violence have far-reaching consequences as they can potentially impede the achievement of transnational and transcultural solidarity, instead entrenching the distancing us-them divide. The problem must be addressed from a larger theoretical feminist perspective, emphasizing the relationships between physical, structural (socioeconomic), and symbolic violence. These dimensions are barely hinted at in *Let's Talk About It*, which privileges the use of the individualistic narrative paradigm. Mehta's contribution is a small chip in this structure of oppression, necessary even if problematic, because it leaves open the invitation to talk about it. But rather than provoking the discussion as the promise of the title suggests, the film merely raises awareness of the problem.

In the end, the analysis of the issues surrounding the production and reception of Mehta's documentary leads to the recognition of familiar patterns. The liberal rhetoric that underlies her approach, growing from the assumption that silence is wrong, embraces the tropes of "giving a voice" and "making visible." It places this film in a tradition that figures "silence as an obstacle to social change, and asserts the role of speech in the process of securing the rights of a group whose oppression has been rendered invisible" (Bachmann 235). What this case might also indicate is that neoliberal paradigm is capable if reinventing itself successfully in the hands of multicultural subjects.

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[1]This information is included in Daniel Stoffman's reassessment of the failures of Canada's "surface multiculturalism," in the Comment Essay for *The Globe and Mail.*

[2]The phrase comes from the subtitle of the art exhibit, called "Re-Drawing Resistance: South Asian Women's Stories of Survival and Resistance," that showcased the work of women survivors of violence. It ran in Toronto from May 7-22, 2009, at the Women's Health in Women's Hands Community Health Centre (Roy).

[3]I am alluding here to Charles Taylor's acclaimed essay which offers a philosophical inquiry into the relationship between the liberal democratic state and multiculturalism's demands for recognition of equal worth of distinct cultural traditions.

[4]There are two different cuts of the documentary in circulation, one 60 minutes and the other 47 minutes long. I showed the shorter version.

[5]Mehta's comment was actually made in reference to *Heaven and Earth* a. k. a. *Videsh*, her 2008 feature film dealing with domestic abuse, but it applies well to the documentary (Patel 2009).

[6]This and the following information has been gleaned from the home website of OMNI Television, retrieved on September 20, 2009.

[7]All quotations in italics are taken from the student questionnaires conducted by myself at York University in April 2009. To ensure the respondents' anonymity, all names are withdrawn.

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ARDISS MACKIE

Roya's Racialization: Found Poetry from a Young Iranian Immigrant Woman

white like canadians

canadians say
they are white

I always ask them,
"What do you mean by white?
What colour I am"
they say,
"Oh no, we mean
white like canadians.
you are black."

I say
"I am black?"
they say
I am brown but
they never say
"you are white."

I am here,
I am black and I am
not like canadian people

I am interesting for them

when you first see colour,
the first meeting is more
important than the others

based on the first meeting,
when they all meet Me
I am interesting for them
they all ask Me, "Oh you
speak good English
you have no accent
you speak good
you dress like canadian
girls"
lots of them told Me.

but in the second meeting
we are like separating, getting
apart

I am a foreigner in Canada
with a different culture
it is really hard to live
alone
in a country different from
your culture
because
we are not the same.

weird questions

they always ask something
different from me

they ask something
from my country:
"Have you ever seen snow?"
"Do you know which colour
is grass?"
"Have you ever seen
mountain around your city
or anywhere?"

weird questions

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