Racism

Understanding Oppression Of

By Enakshi Dua

Cet article passe en revue deux façons d'expliquer l'oppression que subissent les Canadiennes originaires de l'Asie du Sud. La première met l'accent sur la famille, l'institution du patriarcat et la persistance des idéologies patriarcales tradi- tionnelles qui créent et maintiennent l'oppression de ces femmes par les hommes. La seconde méthode considère le racisme dans la société canadienne comme étant responsable de l'oppression des femmes de l'Asie du Sud, reléguant au second plan l'oppression de ces femmes par les hommes. Les deux méthodes expliquent mal l'oppression des femmes de l'Asie du Sud parce qu'elles ne parviennent pas à dis- cerner le caractère particulier de l'oppression que subissent les Canadiennes originaires de l'Asie du Sud.

As South Asian-Canadian women,[1] both immigrant and Canadian-born, struggle to transform gender rela- tions within the family, gender oppres- sion remains a serious issue in their lives. South Asian women often work 'double days' at paid and domestic work, face domestic violence in a society which of- fers little assistance, and struggle to raise children in a society hostile to South Asians. The task of identifying how gen- der, race and class intersect in the lives of South Asian-Canadian women, becomes important in order to formulate effective strategies for change.

In feminist theory, there are two ways to conceptualize gender oppression of South Asian women located in advanced capitalist countries.[2] South Asian wom- en's gender oppression is seen as being mainly determined by either patriarchy or

Sharon Fernandez, *Hands of Oppression*, 1992
Acrylic on Canvas, 24" x 18"

by racism. Both approaches are inad- equate, as both fail to identify the specificity of gender oppression for South Asian-Canadian women.

Capitalist patriarchy and culture

Feminist theory has understood the gen- der oppression of South Asian women mainly through two concepts: capitalist patriarchy and culture. Socialist feminist theory attempts to locate patriarchal rela- tions within the development of capitalist relations, specifically linking capitalist relations of production with the social relations of reproduction. (Coontz and Henderson; Lerner; Fox) The oppression of women from the Third World is attrib- uted to capitalist patriarchy, which is seen as integrating the world into a system of global exploitation and accumulation. (Meis; Muszynski) In this context, the oppression of women in and from South Asia has been linked to a universal form of patriar- chal relations.

The androcentric ideology of Pativratya is built into the social structure in the village. Women do not participate in the political arena. They are economically dependent on men since property is inherited by and transmitted through male heirs. Interpersonal relationships are structured to ensure develop- ment of hierarchical relationships between the sexes with men in the higher position and division of la- bour along sex lines is in effect with a stigma attached to women's work. Since the structures are rig- idly set without alternate viable options women cannot do anything but conform and accept the sec- ondary position accorded to them. (Dhruvarajan 277)

If all gender oppression is created by capitalist patriarchy, what distinguishes the oppression of South Asian women, both in the West and in South Asia, is the persistence of culture, or traditionalism. Studies on women in India suggest that the persistence of 'traditional cultural val- ues' maintains the institution of patriar- chy, thus perpetuating gender inequality. (Kapur; Kurian; Conklin)

Underlying these analyses is the notion that South Asian institutions, family for- mations, and culture are pre-modern; in- stitutions which have not *yet* undergone the social transformation to 'modern' in-

Or Gender?

South Asian-Canadian Women

dustrial forms. Thus, South Asian family formations, both in the West and in India, are perceived as having greater gender inequality then the 'modern' nuclear family. Implicit is the assumption that gender equality is a creation of modernity.

Studies of South Asian women in Canada, since they originate in South Asia, are dominated by similar assumptions of modernization and traditionalism. The issue, then, of the gender oppression experienced by South Asian-Canadian women becomes one of assimilation into the more 'modern' culture of greater gender equality. While women in India are dominated by patriarchal ideologies, South Asian women in Canada, given access to economic opportunities *and* "multiple ideologies including egalitarianism available through the media, have an egalitarian pattern of interpersonal relationships." (Dhruvarajan 284) Ghosh also points to changes in gender relations due to exposure to more 'advanced' institutions, but defines the consequences of these changes more ambiguously.

> South Asian women in Canada have moved from a developing society to an industrially advanced society, and this often necessitates changes in their economic roles.... The conflict between the traditional role of the housewife and the uncertainty of the roles involved in being a working wife subject women to ambiguity and conflicts in their personal lives. (416)[3]

Similarly, South Asian women in Canada have been described as in 'transition', characterized by a 'duality' in their world view:

> On the one hand the women are entrenched in the traditional values of

For South Asian feminists culture is not only important in creating oppression but also in the social construction of resistance.

their cultural heritage; but on the other hand, they exhibit contemporary, future oriented aspirations. They are deeply committed to family and home; but also reveal the potential for high achievement. (Naidoo and Davis 312)

According to studies on South Asian-Canadian women, the gender oppression of these women is thus located in South Asian culture.[4] It is only through exposure to modern institutions of economy and ideology (media) that Canadian South Asian women have been able to transform their gender roles.

Central to these studies is the use of culture to determine the specificity of gender oppression of South Asian-Canadian women. The concept of patriarchy in feminist theory has come to be defined in historically specific ways wherein the social construction of gender ideology is seen to articulate with the relations of production and reproduction. In the case of South Asian women, however, the specificity of their gender roles has been reduced to culture. Thus, the assumption

is that it is the past which restricts South Asian women lives. Present factors such as racism, classism, and the reproduction of gender ideology in the Canadian context are not emphasized. These studies thus fail to identify the specific ways by which gender oppression in the South Asian-Canadian family is created and maintained.

Racism versus gender oppression

South Asian feminists[5] have challenged socialist feminist analyses. They argue that underlying their analyses is a racist stereotype of South Asian women as passive victims of oppressive family practices.

South Asian feminism begins as an attempt to locate the historical and race/ethnic specific characteristics of the construction of gender. The challenge for South Asian feminism in advanced capitalist societies is to "locate the Black family more firmly in the historical experiences of Black people—not in the romantic idealized form popular with some anthropologists." (Amos and Parmar 11)

Furthermore, South Asian feminists argue that the major tenets in feminist theory are based on the experiences of white middle class women, and do not reflect the experience of South Asian women. (Bhavani and Coulson; Ramazanoglu; Lees) In identifying the historical specificity of South Asian women's gender oppression, South Asian feminism focuses on the impact of racism in the construction of gender relations in advanced capitalist societies.[6] According to South Asian feminist thought, the institution of the family is transformed in the context of a racist society. "Relationships within the Black community are structured by racism and it is a denial of racism

and its relationship to patriarchy to posit patriarchal relations as if they were not contradictory." (Amos and Parmar 9)

Gender oppression of South Asian women is thus seen as being defined by racism rather than patriarchy. For South Asian women, the family is not, however, simply a site of gender oppression but, as

Sharon Fernandez, Untitled, 1991
Ink on Paper

importantly, a refuge against racism.

Whatever inequalities exist in such households, they are clearly also sites of support for their members. In saying this we are recognizing that black women may have significant issues to face within black households. Strug-

gles over sexuality and against domestic violence, for example, have been important issues for all feminists, and have involved confronting assumptions about domestic relationships. But at the same time the black family is a source of support in the context of harassment and attacks from white people. (Bhavani and Coulson 88)

In evaluating the ways in which racism defines the social construction of gender relationships, South Asian feminist theory also integrates an analysis of culture. For South Asian feminists, culture is not only important in creating oppression, but also in the social construction of resistance. South Asian feminists have argued that, due to the racist attacks on cultural practices of the South Asian community, especially those which relate to the gender oppression of women within the family, these practices should be evaluated according to different criteria from those which apply to white culture.

There are two bases for this argument. First, in the context of racist attacks by the state on the South Asian family, such as the denial of the legitimacy of practices such as arranged marriages, the defense of these cultural practices becomes a form of resistance against racism. (Parmar 246; Amos and Parmar 15) The contradiction between gender oppression and defend-

ing South Asian families against racism becomes a difficult one for South Asian women to resolve. Thus, South Asian feminists argue that women need to continue to support Indian 'culture' in the context of racism.

Indian women are committed to their culture which idealizes the role of women as wives and mothers. But even if such a commitment becomes diffuse in the Canadian context as a result of exposure to discussions about women's inequality and the burden of dual roles, there are compelling reasons for women to conform to Indian ideals. Indian values and norms act as a catalyst in promoting intra-ethnic interaction and social networks.... The immigrant sub-culture promises comfort and security. (Agnew 71-72)

Secondly, it is important to challenge the notions of the 'passive' South Asian woman by demonstrating not only her resistance, but the social construction of that resistance.

Such sources of power are culturally specific and Asian women, in particular, have a tradition of struggle where they have used and converted their so called 'weaknesses' into strengths and developed gender and culturally specific forms of resistance. (Parmar 264).

In other words, South Asian feminism subverts the use of culture in feminist thought. Whereas socialist feminist theory perceives culture as defining South Asian women's gender oppression, South Asian feminism points to the importance of culture in the construction of South Asian women's resistance to racism.

South Asian feminist thought thus emphasizes racism as more important than patriarchy in the lives of South Asian women. However, by prioritizing racist oppression over gender oppression, especially in the family, South Asian feminism fails to capture the realities of many South Asian-Canadian women. While these women may see their families as a refuge against racism, they also see their families as the site where their paid and unpaid labour is appropriated, where re-

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strictions on their activities are enforced, and where gender relations are reproduced, at times with physical force. The emphasis on racist oppression obscures the importance of gender oppression in the lives of South Asian women. This is not to say that racism does not have a pervasive effect on the lives of South Asian women, nor that racism does not reinforce gender oppression in many important ways. Rather it is to argue that it is difficult to theoretically prioritize racist oppression over that of gender, or vice versa.[7]

Furthermore, by focusing so exclusively on racism, South Asian feminists have failed to explain how gender and race work together in the lives of South Asian women. For South Asian feminists, gender oppression within the family becomes reduced to 'struggles over sexuality and against domestic violence'. Yet the oppression of women in the family goes beyond a struggle over sexuality and violence (as important as these struggles are), to the struggle over the position of women in the relations of production and reproduction within the household and society. The links between the subordination of South Asian women within the household and their subordination in society and how these forces have been shaped by racism remain undeveloped. The historical specificity of the subordination of South Asian women in the West is thus reduced to racism. As a result, gender oppression in the South Asian family is seen as secondary for the lives of South Asian women.

Explaining gender oppression of South Asian women

Both socialist feminist theory and South Asian feminism fail to identify the historical specificity of the gender oppression of South Asian women. These analyses have reduced the gender relations to culture and tradition. While South Asian femi-

nism offers a more sophisticated analysis, it also fails to adequately explain gender oppression of South Asian women. By emphasizing racism over gender oppression, it fails to identify the relationship between race, gender, and class in the lives of South Asian women in Canada.

Culture is not history; to identify the cultural basis for oppression or resistance is not to identify the historical construction of gender relations, femininities or the relation of South Asian women to production and reproduction in advanced capitalist societies. The task remains for feminists to undertake such a project, in a manner which identifies how race, gender, and class articulate together in the lives of South-Asian Canadian women.

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[1] I am using the term South Asian-Canadian women to refer to both immigrant women from South Asia, as well as Canadian-born women of South Asian origin. While South Asia refers to India, Pakistan, Sri Lanka and Bangladesh, South Asian immigrants also come from Africa, Southeast Asia and the Caribbean. I realize that the term South-Asian women is problematic as it encompasses different ethnic, religious, linguistic, and national groups. The diversity of women included in this category indicates the importance of research that demonstrates both the similarities as well as differences in the experiences of South Asian women.

[2] The article draws on work on South Asian women in Britain and the United States as well as Canada.

[3] Ghosh's analysis of South Asian women is characterized by colonialist assumptions of Indian and Canadian society. These assumptions influence her definition of the traditional role of women in

South Asia, which she defines as that of the 'housewife'. Such conceptualization ignores the fact that women in South Asia have been and continue to be involved in productive activity. The invisibility of these activities has been seen as a consequence of gender oppression. Rather than exploring what the 'traditional role' of women is in South Asian society, Ghosh accepts a colonialist and sexist definition of women's activities.

[4] While Naidoo and Ghosh locate the dualistic self-image of their sample in Hindu philosophy, it is not clear if all the women in their sample are Hindu. The category of South Asian women include Sikh, Muslim, Jain, Parsee and Christian women. It is not clear how these women relate to Hindu ideology.

[5] It is important to note that South Asian feminist thought has often been called 'Black feminist thought'. However, as the term Black feminist thought has increasingly been used to refer to the work of African American writers (see Collins 1990), I use South Asian feminist thought to refer to a feminist body of thought on South Asian women in advanced capitalist societies. It is also important to note that much of South Asian feminist thought comes out of England, and the paucity of work within this framework on South Asian-Canadian women.

[6] In this case, Western South Asian feminism has differed from feminist thought in South Asia which identifies the historically specific form of patriarchy, the underdevelopment of the economy, and the Indian state as the central forces which have shaped oppression of women in India. See, for example, Omvedt (1984) and Desai (1985).

[7] It is interesting to note that in conceptualizing gender oppression within the family, Black feminist thought has taken a more critical position. Recently, Collins (44) has argued that more attention needs to be paid to Black women's unpaid labour within extended families as a form of

exploitation by men. Similarly, Lorde (1984) and Ritchie (1985) have challenged what they call the 'conspiracy of silence' about Black men's physical and emotional abuse of Black women as part of a larger system of legitimized violence.

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NUPUR GOGIA

My master's tongue

curls

unfurls

spits out

me

The English Language

Nupur Gogia is a brown activist who has been working with women of colour.