

# Book Reviews

## THE DARK SIDE OF THE NATION: ESSAYS ON MULTICULTURALISM, NATIONALISM AND GENDER

Himani Bannerji. Toronto: Canadian Scholar's Press, 2000.

BY LORRAINE HUSSEY

Although many feminist, Marxist, and anti-racist activists and scholars continue to stumble uncertainly through the maze of the "intersectionalities" of class, "race," ethnicity, sexuality, and gender, Himani Bannerji has once again pulled on her analytical hiking boots and gotten the job done. In this latest compilation of her work, she focuses her attention on official multiculturalism in Canada, on the white-supremacist undercurrents in the politics of recognition for "diversity" and on concomitant appeals to liberal tolerance.

[D]iversity discourse portrays society as a horizontal space, in which there is no theoretical or analytical room for social relations of power and ruling, of socio-economic contradictions that construct and regulate Canadian political economy and its ideological culture.

Bannerji exposes the inherent assumptions and the implications of state-sponsored national imaginings, as well as the supportive articulations

of Canadian nationalism found in the popular press, or the work of organic intellectuals such as political theorist Charles Taylor. She connects this "elite" Western project with the increasingly reactionary cultural essentialism of third world rulers and "visible minority" "community" leaders.

In "A Question of Silence," the final essay of this collection, she focuses on the powerful effects of the discourse of essentialized and racialized "difference" on non-white women in Canada. She begins by examining the complex reasons for public silence on this issue, including women's understandable reluctance to speak out given that they have little control over the "public and political domains of speech or ideological constructions." The complex pressures for silence within these communities, as she deftly illustrates, are related to the actions and policies of the Canadian State as much as they are to the much-touted role of "tradition." Carefully deconstructing the notions of "community" and "tradition," Bannerji reveals the complex external and internal power relations that have contributed to the construction of naturalized, common sense meanings for these terms. At this historical juncture, she asserts, women and their bodies become "valuable" as reified signs of "authenticity"—a gesture that merely disguises the "containment and control of women through the normative mechanism of femininity."

Demonstrating both her own flexibility as a theorist and the versatility of her approach, Bannerji exposes the rootedness of sexist-racism, heterosexism, and imperialism/glo-

balization with a mode of analysis she refers to in some instances as antiracist feminist Marxism, in others as antiracist Marxist feminism. The slippage in naming her position serves to accentuate what I perceive to be the principle feature of Bannerji's work: she has rewritten the oft-chanted "intersectionalities" refrain as an inter-constitutive set of social relations of power. Throughout she insists on contextualizing present conditions with reference to their historical development. This is her invaluable contribution to anti-oppressive politics. The significance of this paradigm lies in its ability to resolve the ongoing crises of articulation all fragments of the left appear to be undergoing.

I would like to highlight the role "experience" plays in Bannerji's work since the place of experience in theorizing has become a highly contested site, particularly among feminist academics. Once again, she is insisting on her own experience as the starting point of critical engagement and the locus of political agency. She models a self-reflexive and deeply engaged praxis of political conscientisation. The power of this collection resides not only with her incisive analysis, but also with Bannerji's remarkable ability to remind her readers, again and again, that the subjects of the oppressive conditions she illuminates are living, breathing, and deeply *human* beings. Without the methodological deployment of her own experiences as integral to her theorizing, this knowledge could not transmit itself so convincingly.

For feminists who wish to edit materialist analysis out of their interpretive models, or for antiracist ac-

tivists whose relation to reform is limited to lobbying the state for limited gain, Bannerji's work presents a challenge to reconsider the assumptions underlying their praxis and its efficacy. For self-styled revolutionaries Bannerji points to a clear pathway out of the dilemma of how to incorporate antiheterosexist feminist and antiracist politics with revolutionary socialism. In her own words, "If we can frame our critique and create organizations that challenge patriarchy, heterosexism, class, and "race" with even a semblance of integrity, we will create the bases for an embodied social revolution." Bannerji compellingly argues this claim, with great flexibility and in diverse contexts, in each of the five essays in this volume.

## IS MULTICULTURALISM BAD FOR WOMEN?: SUSAN MOLLER OKIN WITH RESPONDENTS

Joshua Cohen, Matthew Howard,  
and Martha C. Nussbaum, Eds.  
Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1999.

BY COURTNEY  
FAIRWEATHER

In posing the question, *Is Multiculturalism Bad for Women?*, Susan Moller Okin opens the door to many complex and controversial issues. At the core is the crucial discussion about how areas of conflicting interest arise between multiculturalism and feminism, specifically how special group rights, granted to protect minority groups from the dominance of majority cultures, may perpetuate discrimination against women within those groups. Fifteen leading thinkers on multiculturalism and feminism respond to Okin's thought-provoking essay, sometimes

answering her directly; other times developing a particular strand of the debate in a thought-provoking and extremely readable collection of essays. Following their responses, Okin replies to each and further defends her position.

Many of the questions surrounding the interface of special group rights for minority cultures and the right to freedom from discrimination by individual female members of these groups will be familiar to the reader. What gives this work its particular vitality is the sense of a lively debate afforded by the format of a forum. This assemblage of different voices allows us to compare points of view and test our own opinions against those spread out before us. Susan Moller Okin's fiery arguments certainly cause the sparks to fly.

A number of the provocative assertions that Okin makes in her essay, which first appeared in *Boston Review*, are bound to offend and outrage even some who are basically in agreement with her position that gender discrimination, carried out in the name of preserving the cultural identity of minority groups, should not be permitted to infringe upon the individual rights of female members of those groups. Many strong claims can be made to support this position and Okin certainly focuses on some of the more controversial customs, such as clitoridectomy, polygamy, forcing children into marriage, and other forms of coerced wedlock. But she also makes sweeping generalizations about the inherently patriarchal nature of many religions, basing her argument upon a somewhat superficial reading of what she sees as the "founding myths" of Greek and Roman antiquity, Judaism, Christianity, and Islam. None of the respondents commented on her interpretation of the Classical myths, but challenging those of contemporary religions hit a nerve with such people as Cass R. Sunstein, Bonnie Honig, Robert Post, Azizah Y. al-Hibri, and Martha C. Nussbaum. Those responses took a number of

different directions. Sunstein supports the contention that the same laws which govern other areas of sexual discrimination should also be applicable to religious institutions. Others take umbrage at her claims, with Honig and Post, for instance, pointing out that many women may feel privileged by the position and protection accorded them by religious practices. Al-Hibri attacks Okin's inadequate understanding of Islam, claiming that the basic tenets of Islam, as laid out in the Qur'an, do indeed guarantee gender equality and that more restrictive attitudes are a result of later, jurisprudential interpretations. Nussbaum also reacts to Okin's blanket condemnation of religion, claiming that she should give a more balanced picture of the good, as well as the bad, aspects.

Okin responds to these criticisms, accusing both Nussbaum and Honig of having weak support for their arguments. She acknowledges the strength of al-Hibri's appeal to the Qur'an, but points out that current practice often does not support gender equality. In her response to Post's claims that Orthodox Ashkenazi Jewish women feel that they have equal dignity with men, Okin states that "surely they would be deluded." One may argue that she here exhibits the kind of offhanded insensitivity to the position of "the Other" which her critics accuse her of.

Indeed, Bhikhu Parekh, Homi K. Bhabha, and Nussbaum find her attitude patronizing and disrespectful, both in regard to religion and to her assumption that liberal values are necessarily applicable to all cultures. Okin ably defends herself, but in response, for instance, to Parekh's defense of the limited practice of clitoridectomy by adult women who wish to focus on motherhood or make a religious sacrifice, she suggests that they "go talk to a psychiatrist or marriage counselor."

One statement which Okin makes toward the end of her essay had a seismic impact on many of her respondents: