

# Blanching Over Corporate Margins

## The Experiences of a Brown Woman in a Navy Blue World

by **Rekha K. Lakra**

*L'auteure raconte son expérience de femme noire qui travaille dans un Canada corporatif.*

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I have been invited to write on the interface of women and work primarily, and to tie in issues of race where applicable or relevant. This is almost an impossible task. Race and gender are inextricably bound and braided into one's identity, so that they shape, and are shaped, by personal experience. Consequently, the telling of an experience which ignores either the dimension of race or gender inevitably resonates as hollow. Therefore, I write both as a woman and as a person of colour<sup>1</sup> raised in Canada by parents of South-Asian descent. I recount my experiences making no attempt to separate the female from the brown skin. After all, I am always a coloured woman; never a woman first and then India/n, nor am I India/n first then a woman (Sheth and Handa). As a woman of colour in Canada, I will not likely have the privilege of distance from myself, my pain, and my uncertainty.<sup>2</sup> And since I cannot step back from something I am not sure I understand, I also write without aiming for distance between myself and my experiences.

Perhaps even aiming to write with distance while laudatory is self-defeating. Distance separates oneself from experiences, allowing one to tie them into neat little packages of words ordered on paper, which can be

shelved and forgotten once the words are exhausted. Relating experiences in this way becomes a fruitless exercise. One wastes resources explaining situations to those in power who use professed ignorance as a tool to main-

tain status quo. In endlessly attempting to educate, one becomes like a rat in a cage madly circling to find different ways to explain the cage.<sup>3</sup> This way.

And then that way. And all the while

things stay the same. So one is let "in" to the world of one-way communication, of elaboration until exhaustion. And then one is shelved, the efforts to step out of the cage into a world of two-way dialogue subverted. One remains on the periphery unable to directly address the racist patriarchy.

Raised in Toronto, and only thrice returned to India for short durations, my sense of ethnicity was deeply imbued by my mother. Only in kindergarten, however, when I was first called Paki, did I realize I was viewed as different from the largely homogenous, white, Protestant neighbourhood population. Around the same time I began draping my mother's shawl on my head when playing dress-up, so that its honey-coloured fringes covered long, black, curly locks that my mother tightly tied back into two oiled braids. Other girls had straight bangs and open, silky hair. I could not comprehend why my family did not attend church service. All I knew is I desperately wanted Sunday School lessons like the other children. My mother, a recent immigrant, did not understand. Our worlds became factioned—she spoke in Hindi and I stubbornly answered in English. She cooked Indian food, and I was acutely embarrassed by its lingering smells. My initial sense of South-Asian self

was defined by shame, by the feeling of other, by uneasiness in my brown skin.

Although aware of my otherness, I possessed a naive optimism prior to my first contact with the corporate sphere. I thought race and gender were merely identity issues contained within the personal realm. But my navy blue suit and "Canadian" accent have not fooled anybody. I am just as much an other in corporate Canada, as I was in my kindergarten class. Today, racial slurs and sexually pejorative statements are seldom voiced in the contemporary academic domain or business workplace; so I am no longer called Paki. At least not openly. On the quiet surface one hears little evil, but below the "deep-structural power"<sup>4</sup> dynamic still bubbles. Racism and sexism have simply shifted to an insidious form of marginalization.

I sit uncomfortably on my cushioned chair in a corporate tower on Bay Street. Our class has been relocated downtown. We now meet in the heart of Canada's business centre, which most of us will join upon graduation. Before me stands a successful investment banker. Male. Approximately 80 per cent of those enrolled in this corporate-oriented program are male. White males mainly. Myself and two others are the only women of colour. The investment banker castigates a lawyer-turned-investment banker—returned-lawyer's comparison of prostitutes and investment bankers. He laments such comparisons misrepresent the profession and then jokes, "Besides prostitutes work better hours." The class laughs. Laughs impervious to my alarmed silence. My disbelief. At a later time, he refers to a female student recruited by his institution. He expresses that he feels sorry for the man that stands in her way. He assumes her heterosexuality. Does it even occur to him that the

recruited female may be a lesbian? Naturally, he makes no mention of women that may "stand in the way" of recruited males.

I wonder if the other few females in the class are equally shocked. Perhaps. Likely the white woman and I do not always see things the same way. As a woman of colour, I am burdened with a "triple jeopardy"<sup>5</sup> which not only encompasses gender, but also race and ethnicity. White

calculated in relation to sacrificed merit. What is worse still is that the successful enlisting of candidates satisfying diversity criteria will be used as proof that discrimination does not exist; that the institution is gender and race-neutral.<sup>6</sup>

But corporate institutions in Canada are hardly neutral. Even when I work in corporate Canada, my brown skin renders me an outsider. I attend a meeting in a corporate tower.

The topic of discussion is the institution's future image to be presented in advertising. For inspiration, we examine various brochures and advertisements of interna-

tional counterparts. "This one is great," states the white man across the table from me, holding up a booklet. A Hispanic man is on the cover. "Naturally," he remarks, "we need to Canadianize the image, but otherwise its great." "What does Canadianize mean?" I ask with a trace of bewilderment. The white man gazes at me across the table. "We need to use a white man." His tone implies he is stating the obvious. He chooses to forget white men stole this land called Canada from First Nations people, preferring the comfort of his self-inflicted amnesia. Does he consider that I was born here; live here; study here; work here? Does he recognize that I with brown skin am Canadian? These questions run through my mind even though I know that to him I do not look Canadian. Ironically, to others I do not look Indian.

The white woman interviewer looks at me across her mahogany desk, her back facing the office window in a Bay Street skyscraper. "Your name," she asks, "how do you pronounce *that*?" I tell her. She repeats it incorrectly. "Well is that not ever an interesting name." She knows the rules forbid inquiries about ethnic or racial background. We both know. I wait. "Where is *that* name from?" I reply its South-Asian. She looks at me quizzically,

eyebrow raised. "Indian," I clarify. "Its Indian." "Oh, so *you* are Indian. I would not have known. You don't look Indian." What, I wanted to ask, should an Indian look like? Does she really expect that almost a billion people of a sub-continent appear homogeneous? What about children of those emigrated? I wonder what template informs her notion of Indianness. Maybe it is the Canadian stereotype of traditional-lazy-odorous-dirty. Maybe she subscribes to the dichotomy normed on white and western (read progressive/modern) versus non-western (read backward/traditional) (Mohanty). Perhaps I ought to have painted a navy blue dot in the centre of my forehead to match my navy blue suit.

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<sup>1</sup>I use this term with caution, acknowledging it is problematic since it positions people of colour in relation to those of white skin. In this way, white is viewed as the norm, and white people are depicted as devoid of colour. However, references to white people/people of colour is perhaps less problematic than the terms majority/visible minority, which have been perceived negatively. By grouping individuals under the term people of colour the author does not mean to downplay the diversity, or to suggest homogeneity within this social category.

<sup>2</sup>Similar sentiments are expressed by others; see Yee.

<sup>3</sup>This is known as the Pendejo Game; see Hurtado.

<sup>4</sup>The term is Pat Bradshaw's. She explores two different paradoxes of power: personal power or agency versus organizational structure and surface/conscious vs. deep/unconscious.

<sup>5</sup>The term is E. Joy Mighty's.

<sup>6</sup>Rekha Karambayya makes reference to this practice (22).

## References

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women, by contrast, often do not look at the world through the filter of racial awareness. Instead they enjoy the privilege of ignoring their race, which affords them a societal advantage (Grillo and Wildman). As a result, I often cannot identify with white women in the corporate domain. They do not seem to identify with me either.

I wander from station to station at the recruitment/career fair. From white face to white face. Mostly male, sometimes female. I ask a question of one woman representative. She replies and encourages me to apply because "well ... um ... well ... we need ah ... well we want to reflect ... a more ... well ... uh ... diversity. Yes diversity like the ... the new ... the new population of Toronto." She forces a smile. Would she be more interested in (enlisting) me if I were a white woman? What if I were a white man? Recruiting me to satisfy diversity quotas is indecorous. Skin colour ought to be irrelevant. Individual merit should be the sole consideration. At least this seems to be the acknowledged Canadian position (see Henry *et al.*). In reality, though, white (male) dominated institutions seemingly frame diversity and merit as bipolar strategies where diversity translates into an opportunity cost

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## PATIENCE WHEATLEY

### Ars Longa

That painting in the dining room  
the lady with inclined head  
fan and gloves in her lap  
tiers of ruffles rising from her  
neat kid boot:

her patient eyes are typical of  
everything expected of a woman  
in those years  
of the last century  
dying.

Mother always said  
that lady had been stood up, that really  
she was waiting for Fred  
who wasn't around to claim her  
when the estate was settled.

They sold the other paintings  
in Boston, but only got  
a few thou' for them  
"School of ..." Mother said bitterly  
then moved

that lady to the sitting room  
in place of a better picture  
gone to pay bills. Then Mother  
stumbled and was no longer sure  
coughed and shrank. And we all waited.

As Fred was no where to be found  
we banished that lady to the museum  
where she hangs, biding her time  
right where the stairs throw you into  
a maze of columns and cases of silver,

a little black and white ruffled hat, like a bird  
perched on her brow, smooth hair lying close  
to round shining skin.  
Dark eyes look out  
watching,  
expecting

Fred and the twenty-first century.

*Patience Wheatley's poetry appears earlier in this volume.*