Birds of a Feather

by Nashira Keshavjee

Témoignage personnel d'une jeune fille de l'Asie de l'Est, arrivée au Canada dans les années soixante-dix.

I remember that it was on the eve of Claire's departure for an extended tour of India that I asked myself, "What's wrong with this picture?" Surely, it should be me—the Canadian immigrant of East Indian origin—who should be curious enough about India that I'd spend my life savings to travel there, rather than my best friend, the WASP Canadian. But it wasn't so. I had arrived with my family as an immigrant to Canada at the age of ten, part of a group of displaced East Indians from East Africa; and by the age of 20, I had learned to dislike and deny the ethnicity I represented.

How it aches to remember standing among my friends, and, burning with shame, pretending to ignore the taunts of a group of boys shouting, "Paki! Go back where you came from!"

This happened so subtly, so discreetly, that I needed the mirror of Claire's experiences, her freedom to be and explore the questions of life with seemingly no limits to realize my own self-sabotage. Yet how could something so fundamental, so basic to my being, occur without my knowing it? It's actually painful to search my soul for answers. I see a sensitive adolescent, cowering among family and community nurturers who pointed to anecdotal experiences, media reports, and current wisdom about racial tension in Canada in the '70s as even more reason to make like "birds of a feather, and stick together." But on looking inward, I also see a young girl who was simply open and affectionate and funny, who just wanted, like all young girls in the world, to be accepted by my peers. And certainly there was acceptance. *Some acceptance.* How it aches to remember standing among my friends, and, burning with shame, pretending to ignore the taunts of a group of boys shouting, "Paki! Go back where you came from!" My friends provided me with the extent of principled rebellion that 13-year-olds can provide, they looked angry and embarrassed and sorry for me, and duly labelled the perpetrators of the crime, "ignorant, stupid," and "full of shit." Such loyalty is touching now, in retrospect, but oh, in my anguish all I could think of was how my pitying friends could possibly like me in all my humiliation!

We all find our suits of armour, and I found mine in being funny and quick-witted. Confronted with the haughty, sneering, "What does a name like Nashira mean anyway?" I could come back quickly with all the force of 13-year-old wit and laughingly reply, "It means the cows are in the kitchen." But all the hurtful jibes that I could easily turn to humorous banter served to make dents in my armour; so that when I looked into the mirror of Claire, most glaringly in her departure for India, I discovered my misshapen armour. One that I thought was intact.

As I grew into adolescence and then beyond, I gradually began to dislike all that my ethnicity represented, and to acquire an equally gradual and glowing admiration for all things "Canadian"—and this, Claire represented. She seemed to view our alliance simply, and with an acceptance, an affection, and a fierce loyalty to boot. Fortunately, my "condition" wasn't pathological enough for me to question Claire's worth for liking me. As a young teenager, I remember constructing a dichotomy in my mind between the different lifestyles Claire and I represented. I saw the fact of set meal times and portions for each person at meals, in Claire's home, as the epitome of discipline, civility, and restraint. I died a thousand deaths when Claire ate at my place, and was faced with seemingly bottomless tureens of curry and overflowing dishes of rice, always being warmly exhorted to "have some more." At the time, my uncompromising and judgmental eyes didn't acknowledge Claire's delight in being treated so hospitably in my home. This withering embarrassment also extended to the fact that my fairly westernized mother (much to my exaggerated and adolescent relief) occasionally donned a *sari.* With gritted teeth, counting the seconds as they waded through molasses, I would usher Claire away from the scene of my mortification and into my bedroom. Again, I could not see the genuine aesthetic pleasure that Claire experienced on seeing such an unusually beautiful piece of clothing. Today, as adults, I can safely say that Claire has worn *saris* more often than I have.

Now I have the maturity to shake my head in wonder at this. It is my turn to be delighted, even wistful, at Claire's familiarity with Indian spices, Indian cooking, Indian shops—with India in general. And now, too, I have to question myself about why I don't use so many different Indian spices with such ease, approach Indian cooking with such curiosity, why I don't have an enjoyment of things Indian. I had as much—no, much more—of an exposure as Claire.... And I must answer, a little sadly, that I made a choice. I made the choice of shunning anything ethnic and embracing everything "Canadian."

Many immigrants from a strong ethnic background, I have found, do indeed make this choice upon arriving into

have found, do indeed make this choice upon arriving into a new culture. I feel that the choice is between a sin of commission and a sin of omission. I committed a sin of commission. I denied my existing culture and tried to adopt the new one as much as possible. Why did I do it? Perhaps, in my mind, I would be shielded more effectively in my suit of armour if I became more like those kids who so enjoyed humiliating me for being different. Or perhaps, in some dim, developing consciousness, I instinctively realized that there was a whole world outside the cocoon of my ethnicity where I could blossom and realize my full potential as an individual; sacrificing my ethnic identity seemed such a small price to pay. Maybe I'm rationalizing this choice that I made, from which I've reaped all the fruits, because I am now suffering some regret, because in the process I discarded a rich tradition that may well be of some comfort to me as I grow older.

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But I'm not blind to the spectre of the sin of omission either. All those "ethnic ghettos," where what I consider "everyday life" is viewed as "other," an unpleasantness to be tolerated. And when I use the term "ethnic ghettos" I don't just mean working-class highrises, replete with *dhoti*-clad men and Punjabi-suited women wandering about—admittedly, delicious smelling hallways—at ease. I'm talking about the mental ghettoization of the middle-class Indian immigrant who functions quite well in the "Canadian" world by day, only to return at the end of the day to a beautiful suburban home, breathing a sigh of relief, and welcoming a sorely missed mode of life, made up of smells, sounds, languages, food, and music that make daytime life pale in comparison. The only intrusion of that "other" life into this one might be a discussion about school with the youngsters.

When I find Indian music too jarring, when I find Indian food too spicy, when I can't understand the language of my own ethnic community, I pester myself with the question: did I make the right choice? This constant dialogue between my ethnic self and my "Canadian" self is an enquiry into the choices I made, the compromises I devised. The dialogue represents a search for a way to exist in peace with myself and my conscience. This line of enquiry also prompts me to ask how other immigrant women feel, what choices they make. And again, I wonder if I could have done something differently.

My long-standing connection with Claire, other than providing me with the substantive stuff of life—enduring friendship, comfort, and affection—has given me a forum for exploring my thoughts on the larger conceptualization of women world-wide, sharing the experience of being women. Women's increasing realization that we stem from the shared experience of living life in a particular way that has been determined by our gender, makes the bridge between women of the North and South that much smaller. Women do not hail first and foremost from developed countries or undeveloped countries, we originate in the common experience of having to make choices and compromises—sometimes fighting to make these, and sometimes watching helplessly as our sisters exist without the luxuries of choice or compromise. I realize now that elements like ethnic/cultural differences are merely incidental, and that more to the point is the question: can we establish rights that guarantee our acknowledgement as distinct individuals in current social systems? The most effective way to establish these rights, I feel, is to no longer ask how our differences make us different, but rather, to see how, as a strong, organized body, we as women can change current political systems so as to ensure a clear enough voice, and then with that voice, speak out for global education, fairness in the work place, fairness in the home, and fairness within political structures.

If women, as a global group, begin to function this way, then they convey the important message to all—true freedom is a condition that exists within all of us and is manifested in the ability to act on a principle like common cause. In the face of all the confrontation and confusion of ethnic difference, and the seemingly natural course towards the assimilation of an ethnic group in a new culture, the idea of absorbing the best of both worlds within the context of a global community is a worthy notion. It is only through my youthful preoccupation with distinctness that I realized that global movements to improve society can accomplish a great deal when the emphasis is on common strengths rather than differences.

This is not to say that sameness in the guise of homogeneity is to be the panacea of all societal ills. On the contrary, the myth that peace and happiness can only result from the homogeneity of all peoples holds no currency. Those in the world who strive for sameness do so from the misguided notion that homogeneity as a functional construct equals an efficient construct: not so. The efficiency that would result from sameness would be devoid of humanity and the vibrancy and dynamism that is the power of the human race. Cultural diversity makes for the rich tapestry of a national identity, but a reassessment of the divisive elements of national identity, and a more goal-oriented approach to global issues will, when ingrained in the global psyche, enable people to freely choose cultural identity within the context of a world community.

As a young immigrant transplanted into North American culture, I internalized—as if by osmosis—the idea that ethnicity represents backwardness, and that it can only function inefficiently in a transplanted context. This

erroneous idea was, and is, dangerous, if only in its blinding of people—whether the hosts or the recently emigrated—to the potential energy to be found in differing ways, differing philosophies, differing cultures. My association with Claire and her "Canadian-ness" showed me that one culture can indeed enhance another, and vice versa; and that the result of such a so-called "complex" union can be something enduring, rich, and positive. In an adult reconsideration of the choice I made for assimilation at the cost of my ethnic culture, I repeatedly wonder if this choice did not come at too high a price. With a mature view of the harmony possible in distinctness, I would have to say that the "economics" of my choice was that I made a more expensive decision than if I'd kept at least the best of my ethnicity, my difference.

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JOAN BOND

Ladies of Eaton

Mid-afternoon
you see them in Eaton's restaurant
seamless women, fifty-ish
wearing New York labels on knitted suits
diamonds woven on long fingers,
nails and mouth lacquered fire-hydrant red.
Their throats are filled with the gravel
of lost children, abandoned lovers
husbands with gray faces.
You hear the conversation
dangling in the air like weathered chimes.
Cigarettes cocked, the smoke
drifts past their rippled skin
their auburn hair, rises in a rivery haze
disappearing
like girlish dreams.

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