Bridging Different Worlds

by Jaya Chauhan

L'histoire personnelle de l'auteure, une femme du Sud-Est asiatique, née au Kenya, élevée en Angleterre et vivant présentement au Canada, donne matière à réflexion. L'auteure nous fait part de la grande diversité de ses expériences en établissant les liens étroits qui existent entre races, classes et sexes et leur impact sur sa vie.

We were an "uncivilized" people. Our food was smelly, we practiced strange customs, and we could not speak English. On that basis we were considered unsuitable to live in Britain.

From the standpoint of a South Asian woman living in Canada since 1990, I am motivated to write about my struggle for autonomy and the accommodation and resistance of dominant, western social practices that have shaped me. The contradictions I struggle with are not surprising given that I work and live in a racist, sexist, and class-divided world. In my every-day life, I have to deal with being considered the "other," different and of marginal value at every turn. Although I possess a British passport (and an English accent), I have learned that I wear my passport on my face.

Thirty-eight years ago, I was born in Kenya, then a British colony. I am the youngest in a family of five girls. My parents and three of my older sisters were born in India. We lived in Kenya until the late 60s when we moved to England.

Like many other Asians, my father was encouraged to come to Kenya when imperial Britain was penetrating East Africa. Thousands of Indian workers were imported to East Africa by colonial rule to work on the railways. It was the first systematic labour input of the Indians into Africa.

The British did not use the indigenous African peoples for labour because the Africans practiced a subsistence economy and had not become sufficiently interested in the money economy. They could not be alienated from the land nor could they be lured by money to work on the railways. The British had hoped that the Africans would begin to purchase shirts, shoes and toothpaste, once the cloth, skin shoes and chewing gum appeared "uncivilized" (see Yandon and Raphael). As for the Indians, although trade had flourished between India and the East African coast for centuries, this was sporadic and did not generate an imperial relationship between the two regions as did the migration of railway workers.

My father was not a railway worker but a shoemaker. He came to Kenya when the money economy was introduced into the self-sufficient communal and feudal economy of the Africans. This was the time when petty traders came into East Africa to sell salt, sugar, silk, sandals, and soap, and a variety of commodities increasingly in demand with the expansion of the money economy.

Africa was a continent where white rule was a highly rational, intelligent system, written into the law and enforced systematically. Fyfe has documented how white skin in Africa conferred authority and the colonial system shaped the economic stratification of the races in East Africa, as well as in other parts of the continent. The British represented wealth and power, the Asians represented an alien and powerless middle class, owning some of the large industrial enterprises, most of the retail distribution, and providing necessary middle-level professional and artisanal skills. The Africans—the majority of the population and the original land-owners—were relegated to a subordinate position in the economy, and became the wage labourers, domestic servants, and future politicians.

For some of the same reasons that my father migrated from India to Kenya, my older sister with her family migrated to England from Kenya in the early 50s. This was a time when war-torn, labourless Europe was forced to recruit Asians and Afro-Caribbeans for purposes of post-war reconstruction. The promise of prosperity prompted many to migrate to Europe. In Kenya, my parents lived in poverty. To lighten their burden, in 1967, my sister and I, aged 13 and 12 respectively, left my parents and joined my older sister's family in England. In particular, my parents wished to take advantage of state-funded British education. Within six months of my arrival in England, my father joined us, quite unexpectedly, followed some months later by my mother.

Kenya obtained its independence from Britain in 1963 (although neocolonialist dependence on Europe and U.S. continues). In 1967, my father could not work as a shoemaker in his shop unless he forfeited his British passport and became a Kenyan citizen. This was part of the Africanisation policies adopted by many African countries. These policies created insecurity about the future of Asians in Africa. At that time, Asians were being criticized by the East Africans for "economic sabotage" and "social exclusivism" for not integrating with the East African people (i.e. not allowing their daughters to marry Africans).

Asians with British passports had a legal right to live in

Britain and immigration from the New Commonwealth to Britain was tolerated as long as the demands of British industries required it. In 1967, speculation mounted in East Africa that Britain was considering closing the doors completely against British citizens of Asian origin. The British Government did, in fact, pass an Act restricting the immigration of non-whites. It was in this context then, that my mother and father hurriedly left Kenya in fear that they would be separated from their daughters living in England.

My older sister's humble dwelling in England served many of our relatives who had to flee East Africa. I can vividly recall living in an alien world. As far as mainstream British society was concerned, we were an "uncivilized" people who did not believe in privacy and who lived in overcrowded conditions. Our food was smelly, we practiced strange customs, and we could not speak English. On that basis, we were considered unsuitable to live in Britain.

I think that the terms "Kenya Asians," and "Uganda Asians," hid the fact that these Asians were the full responsibility of Britain. They had always been British but were in a unique position of living temporarily outside Britain. That these immigrants lived in the most run down areas of Britain and held the worst-paying jobs was not addressed. Instead, their cultural and social practices were attacked and presented as problems. Enoch Powell suggested that "rivers of blood" would flow because, however "tolerant" the British might be, they can only "digest" so much alienness. Lawrence suggests that this cannibalistic metaphor fits in well with the assumptions of assimilation: if blacks could be "digested" then they would disappear into the mainstream of British society and no longer be visible or different, and therefore, not a problem.

Dita Shehu

Institutionalized racism must be held responsible for not presenting the social context of the migration of Asians and blacks to Britain and hence creating anti-Asian and anti-black hostility. It is important to note that these same racist sentiments are currently being expressed in Canadian society with respect to refugees entering Canada. From my perspective, the media does not make it clear that in many third world countries today, refugees are created by repressive political regimes installed and/or maintained by western powers to ease the path of foreign capital, multinational corporations, International Monetary Fund and World Bank depredations. Free market economics create ecological devastation, population displacement, and poverty. Poverty creates political strife and repression which results in political refugees. How long can the west go around the world robbing people blind without the world arriving at its doorstep?

At the same time as living with racism, as a girl-child, I also lived with sexism. Growing up in a low caste-class, father-dominated household, I lived in the face of male violence and I think male authority contributed to the thwarting of my creative development. As my mother before me, I was socialized at an early age to preserve female honour at all costs. On finishing school, my parents anticipated that I would be married and the authority of my father would be transferred to another male, my spouse.

There are many different groups of Asians and cultural codes of marriage may vary greatly between them. In my community, most marriages are arranged: a suitable partner of similar caste would be located through community networks and then an introductory meeting set-up. It is generally accepted for the male to meet as many eligible females as available in the community and choose one. Three of my older sisters had their marriages arranged in this manner. With the influence of western culture, there are some love marriages, where the respective partners court each other prior to marriage. Today, many young Asian women do challenge the institution of marriage and have as much say in choosing a partner as the men.

Going against my parents' wishes, my sister, one and a half years my senior, resisted marriage. She wished to attend university and had she been a boy-child, my parents might have encouraged her. On the contrary, my parents were adamant that a girl/woman must live under the paternal eye until marriage and this would be impossible since there were no universities in my home town. From their perspective, education was of little value to females, since their primary role of homemaker required no qualifications. An educated woman posed a threat to traditional gender relations. Thus, education for women was not encouraged.

In my sister's case, the teachers at school were supportive and they encouraged my parents to take advantage of

state-funded education. After much deliberation and negotiation, they agreed to my sister attending university to study mathematics. Thus, she paved the way for me, and in 1974, I left home for university to study nutrition/food science. In contrast to my peers, parties, dances, and boyfriends had not figured into my life during my teenage years and I had no friends to speak of. School life in Kenya had been different: I attended an orthodox Hindu (Arya Smaj) single-sex school. I had several friends with whom I could banter freely in my mother tongue, Gujarati, although English was the official language of the school. In England, I learned to accept my differences from my peers.

Living with the social practice of racism that worked to denigrate my culture, my history, I struggled to find a space where I could be myself, where my differences would be affirmed rather than devalued.

The authority of my parents ensured that I lived my life in accordance with my gendered role and cultural code. Emulation of western values in dress and other social behaviour was discouraged. At that time, I did not understand that my parents were reacting against the pressures of cultural assimilation and the process of acculturation. Thus, living with a dominant ideology and the social practice of racism that worked to denigrate my culture, my history, I struggled to find a social space where I could be myself, where my differences would be affirmed rather than devalued.

Given these circumstances, it is hardly surprising that books were my haven, that I did well at school, and was encouraged by my teachers. My relationship with my sister was my solace: we nurtured and supported each other as the brunt of racism took its toll on our lives. On one occasion at school, she was wrongly accused of stealing. Often, we were made the laughing stocks of our classes.

I left home on the condition that I would absorb myself in my studies with no participation in extra-curricular activities. Above all, my behaviour had to conform to tradition such that female honour would be maintained and my family name protected. Nevertheless, with the support of another Asian classmate (the two of us were the only Asian women in our year, whereas there were at least a dozen Asian men), I began to indulge in activities previously barred to me. In exercising my own authority, making new friends, having no curfews, I found joy. However, I could not comprehend how for so many students, university was one big party with "alcohol and sex" taking hold of their lives. I soon realised that I had really not missed-out on anything by not going out to parties and dances in my early youth.

I was ignorant of my sexuality. What I had learned about my body, I had learned in silence, since my parents never broached this subject. If anything, I grew up despising my body. I was constantly cautioned that my dress and behaviour should not draw male attention. The ideology that good girls are virtuous and virginal and that stepping out of line would result in severe physical punishment was highly stressed. Consequently, I developed an anxiety about my sexuality and about being a woman.

I was twenty-one years old, in my final year at university, when I became sexually active. A platonic relationship with a male friend whom I had known since my first year, developed into a sexual relationship. I allowed myself to experience sexual pleasure and the bonding of heart and skin. We shared our Indian ancestry, and both spoke Gujarati. He lived in Kenya where he would return on completing his university education. Our major difference was that I was raised as a Hindu and he as an Ismaili, a progressive Moslem sect. We naively thought that our relationship would be temporary, and that on leaving university, we would return to our respective families. Our relationship developed into something I could not let go and I was in an emotional tangle that I was not prepared to deal with. The thought of betraying and hurting my parents if I were to publicly announce my relationship, caused me anguish and despair. I knew that if I came out with my relationship, I would jeopardize the options of other young women in my community who had desires to attend university. I was acutely aware that I would only bolster the insecurities and fears parents harboured about their daughters adopting western cultural values and subsequently becoming "fallen" women. Furthermore, a Hindu marrying a Moslem was a taboo. The challenge I faced began to weigh on me.

I was forced to make decisions about my career that put me on a different course for the rest of my life and which I later regretted. I achieved the highest marks in the final examinations for my year and I was offered a grant to pursue a Ph.D. But I needed to critically reflect on my relationship and the connection I had experienced. I returned home and shortly afterwards, ended up in a different Ph.D. program that took me to another town.

Once separated, the religious differences between my friend/lover and I could not be reconciled. He wanted me to change my religion so that I would be accepted by his family and community. Our long-distance relationship continued for almost two years, seeking to cross class-caste and religion and the distance that separated us.

The relocation I experienced had a profound impact on me. I lacked motivation to pursue my academic interests. I yearned to be in the Ph.D. program that I had earlier rejected. I didn't have a safe space where I could begin to talk about the anxieties I was experiencing about locating my place in this world.

It was at this time that a non-Asian woman, a social activist of great compassion and integrity, came into my life. She was a research assistant in the department where I was doing my Ph.D. She identified herself as a "feminist," which meant little to me then. I was introduced to con-

sciousness-raising groups in the women's community and the development of a critical consciousness began. I was forced to think anew about my relationship, my life and my place in the world. The alienation and isolation I had experienced at school, university, work, and in my everyday world could be explicated by existing social relations and social order: the disadvantaged on the periphery with the advantaged in the centre. I was beginning to understand that I was living in a world organized to differently benefit race, class, gender, and sexuality interests. That my parents were afraid of losing their cultural heritage is hardly surprising when fear, control, and containment of those who are different from the dominant group is the order of the day.

My mother has lived with patriarchal values (colonialism supported and even promoted the subjugation of Indian women by Indian men) that have ensured a repression of her self. I, too, am a product of that culture, but I am in the process of understanding the world from a feminist perspective. In 1988, I defied my parents' wishes and married a non-Asian. Unlike my father who did not allow my mother an authentic expression of herself (and my mother did not demand this as her right), my partner empowers me in my search for my own voice. There is a mutuality of recognition in our relationship. For the most part, we have found sources of energy that speak to the best of what we can be for ourselves and each other. In challenging my parents and living with a non-Asian, there are losses to bear. I am becoming increasingly aware of these losses as I continue to live in Canada, away from my family. I miss family traditions, rituals, and ceremonies that provide a connection to my family, my people, experiences in a different language that cannot be adequately articulated. However, the onus is on me to create new rituals to satisfy my soul born of eastern roots.

I think that my lived experiences, the contradictions, and struggles informed by a feminist discourse, have guided me in the development of a critical consciousness. In telling my story, my intent is to define my own reality and to suggest how I think selfhood for women like me is mediated: how our female invisibility results from our marginality in a male-dominated culture. I understand this work to be making a contribution to the subversion of dominant social relations and practices that have the effect of homogenizing experiences rather than critically supporting differences.

This paper is dedicated to the memory of my dear and cherished sister Niru, who passed away tragically on May 21/93 after struggling with her health for some twenty years. She sacrificed her own desires and was the dutiful and virtuous daughter of my parents that I never could be.

Jaya Chauhan left academe in 1991 to join her partner who has always lived in Edmonton. Currently, she is working for Dreamspeakers, an international aboriginal cultural, artistic and film festival.

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NADIA HABIB

Postcards from the Middle Kingdom

The Middle Kingdom is the period in Ancient Egyptian history between the First Intermediate Period and the Second Intermediate Period. It is said to have lasted between the years 2000 and 1786 (B.C.E.).

In a newspaper editorial, a reader writes that in the "Dark" Ages, the Middle Kingdom referred to women's genitals.

But these postcards are from another Middle Kingdom not found in history books or newspapers. Here, it refers to the place we inhabit when we leave our homeland, and settle in another land. This place is not outlined on a map, although it resonates with geography, history and physiology. It's the cartography of genealogies.

This Middle Kingdom renders us strangers in our distant homelands, and distanced in the lands we cannot call home. In this Middle Kingdom, "home" is an impossibility.