Now Arun Mukherjee has done the work for us: she has edited a book that brings together these previously silenced voices and she does so in a format that it uniquely appropriate to the material being presented. *Sharing Our Experience* is just that, a sharing—through the letters that women write to each other—of the most intimate and revealing experiences. And it is all achieved in an unpretentious form that completely demystifies what could be a very complex and intricate web of cultural ideologies and social practices. Across cultures, women have kept diaries, notebooks and journals; they have exchanged advice and warning, they have asked for help and offered it. And they have done this most often in letters and notes that have gone around the glove and just around the corner. So this epistolary form, so natural and easy for women to use, is the form that the Advisory Council selected when they put out the call for "papers." We must be grateful for such common woman-sense.

What is impressive about this new volume of cross-cultural voices is the scope and the diversity of experience that Arun Mukherjee has woven together. Not only are the women who write here scattered across Canada, living from north to south and east to west; in addition to women of the first nations, they represent women of African, Asian, Caribbean and Middle Eastern descent who are all Canadians. And the letters also cross the boundary lines of age, boundaries that too often allow only the young and vigorous to have a voice. Instead, we listen to old women talking to each other, to their granddaughters—and to their granddaughters talking back. Sometimes we have a letter written by a daughter for a mother, and we hear the shared voices of two generations of women, their experiences differing sufficiently to invite analysis of societal/cultural changes that have taken place in the lives of women in Canada across several decades.

The letters provide us with a new perspective on Canadian institutions and on the "rituals" of being a Canadian. We get to see ourselves through the eyes of women who have been marginalized. And not surprisingly, these women have much to teach us, not only about systemic and inherent racism but also about environmental issues, about actions we might take to ensure world peace and about communication, listening to the wisdom of the elderly and sharing the joys of the very young.

One aspect of the book is especially important for women's studies classes, where I intend to introduce the text. Mukherjee provides a thematic index as an epilogue and here we find the writers listed under 51 separate headings that run alphabetically from Aboriginal Values through Anger and Ritual to Violence and Work.

A category that I find particularly interesting is that of "Language Issues." Under this heading I find that Anna Woo is writing her therapist. Yet her letter is about language; we are made aware of the difficulty that women from other cultures have when they are forced to conform to our idea of "good English." Setting up rules and standards makes it easy to eliminate the voices of many women—and these are the very voices that we need to hear. But while this letter deals with language, it also deals with anger and racism. Woo is devastatingly honest in remembering "with guilt about my Indian friends. We grew up as allies because we were outcasts. Yet I always felt relieved when they were picked on rather than me. 'Thank God my skin isn't dark!' I thought. It gave me a sense of being the 'same': being white."

This intersecting of language with issues of gender, race and class will provide an excellent take-off point for class discussions. These topics may be analyzed in other books that we use in women's studies classes, but I have yet to find them spoken about with such clarity and honesty—and never have I found them interwoven with the life experiences of women in such a way that each specific concept: gender/race/class/language cannot be considered as a separate "problem." Each impacts on all of the others This is the sort of integration that feminist analysis works towards. Here we have it in a gathering of letters written by women to each other. We can only be grateful to all of the women for sharing their lives with us and to the editor and the Advisory Council for their work in making this book available to us.

This book is available, free of charge, from: The Canadian Advisory Council on the Status of Women, 110 O'Connor Street, 9th floor, Box 1541, Station B, Ottawa, Ontario, K1P 5R5. Tel: 613-992-4976, Fax: 613-992-1715. Quote no. 93-G-200.

RETURNING THE GAZE: ESSAYS ON RACISM, FEMINISM AND POLITICS

Himani Bannerji, ed. Toronto: Sister Vision Press, 1993.

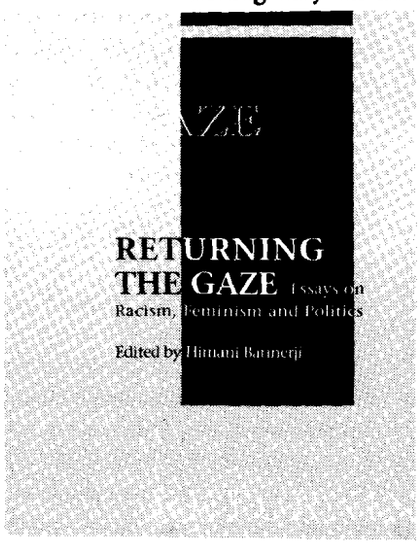
by Shirin Kudchedkar

"These texts begin," says Himani Bannerji in her introduction to this important book, "from a 'rift' or a 'fissure,' from a disjunction between what we know ourselves to be and what the social and intellectual environment where we are 'raced' tells us."

Women of colour, whether they constitute minorities in predominantly white societies, or whether they belong to countries in Asia or Africa, have increasingly expressed dissatisfaction with the universalizing stance of a feminist theory which has its roots in the experience of white middle class women. Bannerji refers to the attempts to compensate for this evident lack in "mainstream" feminism through what she terms the "parenthetical" appearance of topics such as race. She points out that terms like "black poetry" situate or construct difference through the very gestures of inclusion and multiculturalism. Even this token presence represents a space seized from an

all-obliterating essentialism but obviously remains a limited achievement. In *Returning the Gaze* thirteen scholars, all women of colour, analyze how "subjectivity and agency link with the institutions and structures within which they arise and subsist." Some unusual formats are employed such as the dialogue between Anita Sheth and Amita Handa or Aruna Shrivastava's "afterwords," further amplifying a paper she had already written.

The book begins with essays in which the focus is on personal experiences and perceptions. May Yee writes of growing up in Canada and realizing only on her first visit to China at the age of twenty-five how bound she had been by racism, displacement and a painful search for identity, knowing for the first time what it felt to be "at home in one's skin." Anita Sheth and Amita Handa analyze their first responses to each other, each having seen the other as less Indian, more Westernized than herself, the one because she had grown up in India, the other because her family had continued, though settled outside India, to observe Hindu practices.



Of the essays that deal with praxis, Sherene Razack's is concerned with the use of story-telling in critical pedagogy and law to reveal an experience of the world not admitted into dominant knowledge paradigms. Through her work with groups of activists she has come to realize the need to examine critically what we share and don't share and to accept that we come from different subject positions and must therefore question our point of departure at every turn. Linda Carty and Dionne Brand underline the dangers of women's organizations becoming too closely involved with the state, whether they are set up by the state or are grassroots organizations which have accepted state funding. These writers argue that since the state itself does not operate within the interest of the working class, the capacity of any state-sponsored organization to do so is limited.

Two essays take a critical look at books which have been regarded as seminal works in the feminist movement. Cecilia Green notes the important insights provided by Angela Davis's *Women, Race and Class* and proceeds to note some issues she would have liked to see discussed at greater length, among them sexism among Black men and Davis's assumption that the Communist movement is non-problematic both as regards racism and sexism. Arun Mukherjee on the other hand exposes the racism evident in Charlotte Perkins Gilman's *Herland* and the failure of the white female reader to notice it. Readers concentrating on the Utopian elements in the book fail to note the references to "slaves" and "savages" in the narrative past and the narrative present. The establishment of Herland dates from a slave rebellion in which all the males and the older women among the slave-holding class are killed by the slaves in self-defense. Gilman omits to mention what happens to the slave women; apparently some at least survive to fulfill a kind of "black mammy" role. There are also references to the savages that inhabit the forests outside the bounds of Herland and the male narrator is among those whom his Herlander lover sees as engaged in the noble task of civilizing the world. No wonder Mukherjee says that Gilman has "constructed me and my kind as the dreaded other" and that this text, held to be life-giving for women, is life-denying for some.

Essays by Himani Bannerji and Aruna Shrivastava examine popular images of South Asian women and South Asian women writers, Makeda Silvera and Dionne Brand provide studies of Black working women in Toronto while Lee Maracle and Roxanna Ng trace the links between sexism, racism, capitalism and Canadian nationalism. While some of the arguments and analyses that the book contains may be controversial, it offers challenges and new perspectives which may require feminists to rethink their positions.

MUMSAHIB

Anne Montagnes. Fredericton, New Brunswick: Goose Lane Editions, 1992.

by Gabrielle Collu

The title *Mumsahib* immediately brings to mind images of colonial India; an India where a small group of Anglo-Indians (British living in India during the colonial period) lived comfortably as the masters and administrators of a land not theirs. Memsahib (mumsahib, I suspect, is a word play on memsahib and mother) is the term used to designate the wives, mothers, daughters of the British colonizers in India, and the word suggests a particular type of white woman who had lived in India long enough to have become jaded, bored, and particularly disagreeable to Indians. One only has to think of Rudyard Kipling's and Sara Jeannette Duncan's satires of memsahibs to get the picture.

This said, I came to this book expecting something very different than what is found in Kipling or Duncan, partly because of the political changes that have occurred in the past hundred years—India no longer being a British colony—but also because of the changes in theories of representation, particularly with the advent of postmodern and postcolonial theories. Postmodernism and post-colonialism have questioned and criticized, in their very different ways, dominant modes of representation for their privileging of certain ideologies at the expense of others. Although postmodernism and postcolonialism are in turn being questioned for their