

Women and Ethnicity: A Self-Portrait

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This article was initially presented for both students and teachers as the keynote address, at the Women's Forum: Women and Ethnicity, Vanier College, March 2, 2005. We are pleased to present it to VCTA Newsletter readers in its entirety.

Consider yourself a painter. You've been asked to paint a portrait which puts into images the combined terms "women" and "ethnicity". So what do you see? Well, you're naturally predisposed to thinking in COLOUR. So, colour is the first thing you see. A woman of colour.

Now go further. What do you see? Beauty comes to mind. Something exotic, sensual. A woman with jet black hair brushing the end of her seductively exposed tawny-skinned back. A Pocahantas, maybe. Or Salma Hayek. Or maybe even that beautiful Greek actress on *CSI Miami*. You know the one: she's the most useless chief of police you've ever seen but she's a hot ethnic prop, more decorative than a Florida sunset.

Or maybe your mind's eye shifts to other kinds of goddesses. Like one who's draped in a vibrantly sequined sari. Her slender brown wrists adorned with glittering glass bangles of every imaginable shade and hue. Is this what you see? Yes, but not only this.

You close your eyes and picture ... A face, black as an African midnight. Yes, that's more like it. She's walking down a hot dusty road. No, better yet. She's walking barefoot along an arid savannah under the sweltering heat. And with effortless skill, she's balancing a round straw basket on her head, a basket that she herself wove by hand the week before; a basket filled with cassavas, okra, taro root and other alien-seeming vegetables that she will sell, at the risk of life and limb, at the edge of some dirty, unpaved road in some faceless, nameless, poverty-stricken, war-torn country like the Congo, Rwanda or Zimbabwe. No? That's not the image you see?

Perhaps this is what you see, then? A woman—at least the silhouette of a woman—covered from head to toe in what looks like an over-sized black sheet, only her eyes peering mysteriously through a shadowy veil. You can't tell if she has a face as black as night or bangles the colour of a rainbow, because in fact you can't so much as see her face! Your heart goes out to her. What must life be like living in virtual anonymity? You move on, dissatisfied, angered.

Are all these women too foreign, distant, far-removed? You live in Canada, not Zimbabwe or India or Greece or Iran or even Miami. Maybe you're sliding off-track in your mind's eye. Maybe you don't have to leave your own backyard because, after all, you live in a "Canadian

mosaic": now, the last time you checked, that meant that there were plenty of colourful women to look at right here; plenty of things that fell under the category of "different," "other," "ethnic"; like those other women who put the "multi" in "multi-cultural"!

Yes! Now you've hit it! Well, that kind of imagery calls for a different set of paints and brushes altogether! Yes, a different woman even. Not the foreigner out there, but the foreigner in our midst. The insider/outsider. Your neighbour? Your hairdresser? Who knows, maybe even your teacher? And, for the sake of argument, maybe even the woman you call "mother," or "grandmother" or "sister" or "aunt" or "girlfriend"; a woman who taught you the first and perhaps the only words you remember of your native language; a woman who talks of her own childhood in a country you have never known or perhaps only visited once in your life; a woman who looked "different" perhaps, to the other mothers in your school; a woman who didn't bake cookies and grill hamburgers for your birthday parties but prepared moussaka, tamales, pierogies, samosas or Jamaican patties. Maybe this is the woman you see.

But now you're getting ahead of yourself. Carried away with inspiration. Even a bit dazed and confused. Because you've come full circle, haven't you? That woman you left back in the African savannah selling her goods at the roadside, or that Indian woman in her sari with her glittering ornaments, or that faceless, nameless woman behind the veil ... well, those women over there and your women over here are beginning to look a lot alike.

The paint fumes are getting to your head, no doubt. For how can it be that those foreign women in foreign clothes bearing unpronounceable names from countries you only hear about on the news as places of disaster, famine, human rights violations or war ... how is it that those women out there are beginning to take on the same features as these women over here? The features of the mother you love, the grandmother you miss, the girlfriend you have come to know, the teacher who inspires you (or, let's face it, that teacher who gave you an insultingly bad mark in your last essay assignment!)... maybe even the woman whose reflection you sometimes catch from the corner of your eye as you pass the display window of *GAP* or *Le Chateau* ... the same features as the woman who greets you from your bathroom mirror each morning ...

So now that the picture of your ethnic woman is becoming clearer, it is paradoxically becoming somewhat blurred, because these individual portraits are merging into one full-blown portrait in your mind's eye. Those women, these women, are becoming "This Woman."

So you paint this woman as if she were all women. What would she have to say, this woman, on behalf of all women? How do you capture the expression of one woman and all women simultaneously? Is it possible?

You close your eyes again; a shape begins to take form. No, not so much a shape as an area of darkness, an opaque edge, a sinister undertone, a visage in crisis. Yes, you must be in the heat of inspiration now because you can almost hear this woman, this woman who

is coming to represent the plight of all ethnic women, maybe even all women.

You can hear her because she's calling your name, begging you, beseeching you, imploring you to look at her more closely; she's beckoning you to hear her silence, to feel her suffering, to see her quiet imprisonment, to assuage her torment, to release her from bondage, to paint her victimhood. And now this is your all-consuming, totalizing impression of her. So you feverishly paint paint paint.

And as your portrait begins to crystallize, you realize you have seen this image, this face, this expression somewhere else. You sigh, because this might suggest that you are hardly an original artist. Almost a copy-cat, one could say. Not so much an Impressionist as Impressionable. For how many times have you passed a news-stand or turned on the TV only to see this same woman's sad, sullen, pathetic, pained expression captured in a *National Geographic* cover page or a *Times Magazine* centerfold or a *CBC Newsworld Special*? How many times have you seen this face below headlines that read: *Victim of Domestic Violence; Victim of Sexual Harassment; Victim of Rampant Honour Killings; Victim of Forced Marriage; Victim of Crimes of Passion; Victim of Growing Sex Trade; Victim of Child Labour; Victim of Ancient Sadistic Rituals like Foot-Binding, Witch-Burning, Self-Immolation (Sati) and Genital Mutilation; Victim of Unequal Pay, Unequal Voting Rights, Unequal Voice, Unequal Choice . . . Victim of Being a Victim.*

Yes, you've seen it all before. You've met this woman before. You know this woman, you tell yourself. And you pat yourself on the back, because you realize that in painting her, you have given a voice to the voiceless, given a face to the faceless. And now you are so much more than a painter. You are a visionary, a spokesperson, a hero.

But when the portrait is complete and your mind begins to shift to the other more important things that fill up your day, you (being the perfectionist that you are) begin to have a nagging suspicion that your portrait has revealed only half the story concealed by your "ethnic woman's" gaze. The story of another woman you did not paint.

But what is the other half of the story? you ask yourself.

No one's ever told you the other half of *this* story. You've never seen it covered on the news. You've never heard its voice in your head.

So instead of turning your attention to the business of the day, you are filled with a longing for this other woman whose identity you can't place, whose story you can't tell. You can't, won't rest till you see for yourself this other woman. But where will you go to find her? How do you even begin to recognize someone you feel you've never met?

Well, don't give up just yet, because this is where I step in to your picture. And where each of the women sitting in this audience today, or gracing the halls of this college, or walking down these cold Montreal streets, enter this picture. We will help you, if you care to listen. Let us walk you through the canvas of this other woman's story. Let us help you imagine and visualize and materialize this other woman.

This other woman's story begins in a simple question: "What is the opposite of victim?"

The opposite of "victim" is a woman who knows she doesn't live in a black and white world of simplistic binaries like bad and good, tradition and modernity, primitive and progress, darkness and light, east and west, land of the subjugated and land of the free, dictatorship and democracy. This woman knows that the woman you first painted, the one who lives in that nameless African country, may seem oppressed to you, but for all you know she had gained the right to vote and the right to run for the highest government post way before you did, here in the West.

Yes, in fact the last time she checked, Swiss women (women who probably wouldn't come to mind as being either "ethnic" or "oppressed") had been denied the right to full citizenship—had been "silenced" in the way your voiceless ethnic woman seemed silenced—until 1971, the year in which Switzerland finally granted them the right to VOTE (Johnson 2004). Can you imagine that? A woman in Northern Europe not being allowed to vote till the late twentieth century!

And this is just an aside, but you know those Afghani women we see on the news a lot these days as women who have been purportedly emancipated by western liberalism? Well, believe it or not, but they had full suffrage six years before our Swiss maiden and thirty years before the Afghan invasion!

So this woman would ask you: does being denied a basic human or civil right (like the right to vote and participate in government) automatically make one "ethnic"? Conversely, does having the right to vote automatically grant a woman her freedom?

This woman also knows that the other woman you may have painted—you know, the one looking all exotic, passive and sexy in her sequined sari, may have been an "Indira Gandhi," the Prime Minister of India; or perhaps even Benazir Bhutto, the head of Pakistan, an Islamic Republic.

And since we're moving in this direction, this woman will ask you: how many elected women heads of state can you name from the twentieth century? Having trouble? Well, there's Sirimavo Bandaranaike, elected three times as Sri Lanka's President; there's Khaleda Zia, former President, and Sheikh Hasina Wajid, the current Prime Minister, of Bangladesh (another Muslim country); there's Maria da Lourdes Pintasilgo of Portugal; there's Tançu Ciller of Turkey; there are the those two—count them, "two"—Filipina Presidents, Corazon Aquino and Gloria Arroyo, and the list goes on (Johnson 2001).

This woman may point out to you that for every European woman leader (the U.S and Canada don't even enter the picture here for they can make no such claim ... well, does Kim Campbell's 1993 default appointment really count?), there are most likely five women heads of state from those countries that we like to categorically dismiss as the biggest violators of women's rights.

Which leads this woman to ask, once again: why is it that even though womanhood, ethnicity and leadership have historically meshed, time and time again, to create some of the world's most powerful heads of state, do we tend to envision women as wearing Armani skirts, being native English speakers and sprouting from Western metropolises? And

why is it that we rarely question why, in countries that are symbols of women's rights and feminism, we have never had women leaders?

Maybe Hilary Clinton is on her way to changing this. However, the last time our formidable neighbours down south were polled, they generally deemed Laura Bush (over dear Hilary and John Kerry's "far too outspoken" wife)—Laura, the woman who obediently "stands by her man"—to be the better role model for North American women because, in fact, she would never dream of running for President!

Is this why we still tend to think of women leaders as an intrepid dream of tomorrow rather than a living, breathing reality of today?

And don't get this woman wrong: she is well aware that these other countries where women have come to power are hardly innocent of the crimes against women, crimes against humanity, that they are accused of committing. Nor are the women leaders themselves always elected for their own particular merits or contributions, but, like all leaders, they often rise above the fray given their own class privilege, familial ties, personal ambitions, corporate holdings, and their oh-so human proclivity to self-aggrandizement and greed.

Which leads this woman to another set of questions: Does a powerful woman necessarily signify an egalitarian? Does womanhood automatically make one more sensitive to or predisposed to championing women's rights? Are women leaders (everywhere) not susceptible to the same ills as male leaders? What does (or ideally should) it take, then, to implement women's rights, starting with the right to vote and the right to self-representation? Does it take a woman? (Apparently, it doesn't take imported models of western feminism!) Does it take hard-won political clout or unwitting descent from a long line of aristocrats or autocrats or technocrats? Or does it take a collective consciousness that is driven by the force of conviction for human rights across gender, class, race and religion?

This woman also knows that that other woman you painted: you know the one wearing a *chador*, a *hijab*, a *burkha*, covered from ear to ear, or head to foot: well, she's wondering what is her say in all this?

Let's, for the sake of granting a few stereotypes their due, say she's from Iran. (Iran: the country singled out as part of the tri-stellar axis of nothing less than evil). The last time I checked, Iran is a country where, according to a U.S. scholar from Brown University, "women in the Islamic Republic are better off today than they were under the Pahlavi regime." How can they be better off, you wonder? Well, this very American scholar tells us that the Islamic Republic has ensured "women's equality in education, employment, and politics as a matter of national pride"; that "there are more women in the current parliament than ever served under the Pahlavi regime"; that "Education for women is obligatory and universal"; that "literacy for both men and women is well over 90% even in rural areas. University enrolment is nearly equal for men and women. As women's education has increased, Iran's birthrate has fallen steadily"; that "a class of female religious leaders has even emerged. They have attended religious

training schools and have the title 'mujtahedah' the female form of the word 'mujtahed,' or 'religious judge'" (Beeman 2001).

Now, this begs another series of questions: while France just passed a law to deny Muslim girls the right to wear *hijab* in public schools, these Irani women in *hijab*, in *chadors*, in *burkhas*, are leaders in political, social, intellectual, cultural, professional and even religious spheres. Now this woman is neither romanticizing the veil as one would Spiderman's mask or Batman's headgear (in other words, she hardly considers the veil as bearing Super-Hero or, should I say, Super-Heroine properties), nor is she idealizing Iran, one among a global village's worth of creatively flawed nations. She is merely providing a few facts that are too often concealed by other kinds of veils (the veil of propaganda, the veil of the western media, the veil of that most contemporary of oxymorons: fundamentalist secularism).

She is merely suggesting that as strong participants and educated voices in their community, surely Irani women are in the process of defining their futures as proud, productive, professional citizens. Surely, it is they who are fully capable of actualizing a future in which women's liberation, human rights, culture, tradition and sacred religious beliefs coalesce in a dialogue of mutually self-affirming rights, policies and laws. Surely, to interrupt this process is to deny these women the right to self-determination, not only as women but as Muslims and as citizens of both nation and world.

So, now that the picture is getting a bit larger, the lens a bit wider, the view not so much more global as more cross-referential, cross-cultural and comparative, this woman would tell you that the opposite of "victim" is a woman who knows that she lives in a world of shades of grey, of complexities, of nuance, of a hundred billion ways of imaging what terms like "women's emancipation" or "women's liberation" or a "woman's world" or "women's rights" or "gender equality" means as it is articulated through her particular love for her family, her culture, her history, her civilization, her individual sense of identity, integrity, autonomy, desire.

She will also look you in the eye and tell you, without batting an eyelid, that women are as much responsible for perpetuating and participating in systems of exclusion, exploitation and injustice as the men who may or may not dominate them.

She will tell you that women are as likely to feel superior to other human beings based on the superficial trappings of the car they drive; the jewelry they keep locked up in their private safes; the house they live in; the gadgets they own; the designer shoes and matching handbags they don; or, for that matter, the clothes they choose not to wear in the illusion that calling attention to themselves as sexual objects is somehow the greater expression of free will and choice!

She will tell you that women are as likely to indulge in racist name-calls or even cheat or begrudge their own daughters out of a better future if that is what they have grown up to believe is normal or right.

In other words, she will tell you that sadly it is often we women who perpetuate and maintain the systems that exclude, oppress and victimize us. And thus, change has to begin not in a law, not in a banner with a catchy slogan, not in a tirade nor an outrage, but in a woman's own consciousness: a consciousness that aims, first and foremost, for "human" equality: the right to see a world without hunger, without class discrimination, without child labour, without forms of apartheid, without caste divisions, without a corroding ozone layer or a polluted sea.

And while looking at this kaleidoscopic picture, she will tell you that when she is made to feel like an outsider in her own world—be it as a Canadian of Irish or British or German or Jewish or Muslim or Buddhist or Haitian or Greek or Mohawk or any other name, shade or origin—it is this world that needs liberating, not she.

For it is this world that has closed itself off to the wealth of experience that she brings to make this world not a more tolerant place—because "tolerance" is merely a euphemism for racism with a politely accommodating face—but a more humane place, one that has not been created "in spite of" its diversity, nor because it has "politely accommodated" this diversity, but with and through the intricate and indispensable fabric of its diversity: its diversity of opinion, diversity of dissent, diversity of influence, diversity of living, seeing, knowing, speaking, listening, being.

This is the portrait that this woman would paint of herself.

A portrait of our shared humanity.

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Mariam Pirbhai has been teaching English at Vanier since the New Millennium, specializing in Post-Colonial Literature and Theory. Born in Pakistan, Mariam's family eventually settled in Canada in 1987 after a circuitous detour across England, the United Arab Emirates and the Philippines. With a sigh of relief so profound that it could be heard across the three continents that she has inhabited, Mariam obtained her Ph.D. in English Literature at the University of Montreal, where she was also awarded the Governor General's Gold Medal for Academic Excellence. Mariam has published numerous articles in academic journals, which reflect her interest in the history, cultures and literatures of the South Asian, Caribbean and African Diasporas. Since she also dabbles in creative writing, however, she often

finds the academic and poetic voice vying, in her culturally schizophrenic head, for verbal supremacy!