ANGLO-INDIAN WOMEN: IDENTITY ISSUES

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This article is an attempt to deal with both the issue of race and gender. Much of the discussion about race pretends that individuals are either black or white, when large numbers are not. The Anglo-Indians are both. This article tackles this complex issue and suggests a theoretical perspective from which to view a group such as the Anglo-Indians.

Communities such as the Anglo-Indian community have been relegated an in-between space in theoretical discourse. In the everyday lives of Anglo-Indian women they are categorised as the other. I will discuss these two assertions within the context of race and feminist identity politics. This discussion will draw on interviews I have had with ten Anglo-Indian women who now live in Western Australia. It needs to be stated at the outset that the women I interviewed were positive about their identity as Anglo-Indian women and that I am an Anglo-Indian woman myself (1). I argue that Anglo-Indian women have access to a theoretical space that allows for a creative construction of identity. This process resists the assertion that the West has the power to make us see and experience ourselves as "Other" (Rutherford, 1990: 225).

The point of intersection of self and other is the theoretical space wherein rests the identity of groups such as Anglo-Indians. Anglo-Indian women use this space to create their identity. However, this same space is not recognised by other sections of the population. I question whether there is any such space in terms of how Anglo-Indian women are perceived. Instead, I suggest that they are perceived as other despite the melding of cultures and the acknowledgment of both the West and the East in their lives.

Said (1985 : 2) recognises that:

> a very large mass of writers, among whom are poets, novelists, philosophers, political theorists, economists, and imperial administrators, have accepted the basic distinction between East and West as the starting point for elaborate theories, epics, novels, social descriptions, and political accounts concerning the Orient, its people, customs, "mind," destiny, and so on.

The responses of Anglo-Indian women suggest that this reflects the attitudes of the people they relate with now. They too think in terms of West or East as is revealed in their comments that if a person migrated to Australia from India, they were, in fact, Indian, especially if they were dark-skinned. The melding of West and East in the person of the Anglo-Indian woman is not easily grasped by other people. This melding is demonstrated in the attitudes and lifestyles of the Anglo-Indian women I spoke with.

SnejaGunew (1985: 174) alludes to this in the Australian context as "The Migrant as Construct of Australian Culture." The migrant is construed in a particular way, and the Anglo-Indian woman does not match this construction. We come from India, but we speak English well. We come from India, but we wear a Western style of dress. We come from India, but we are usually Christians. We can have white, brown or black skin. Indian food is a part of our diet. Certainly, I am simplifying here. However, I wish to emphasise that mainstream culture needs to construct the migrant as "different", as "other". To do otherwise, is to jeopardise "Australian" images, both of the migrant and of the Australian. There were times when Anglo-Indians represented a threat to the colonising powers during the years of British rule in India (Anthony, 1969; Gist & Wright, 1973). They also challenge the image of the stereotypical immigrant which incorporates, in the main, only difference. Trinh Minh-ha (Ferguson et al., 1990: 330) explains:

Yet, they do not seem to realize the difference when they find themselves face to face with it - a difference which does not announce itself, which they do not quite anticipate and cannot fit into any single varying compartment of their catalogued worlds: a difference they keep on measuring with inadequate yardsticks designed for their own morbid purpose. When they confront the challenge "in the flesh," they

naturally do not recognize it as a challenge. Do not hear, do not see. They promptly reject it as they assign it to their one-place-fits-all "other" category and either warily explain that it is "not quite what we are looking for" and that they are not the right people for it; or they kindly refer it to other "more adequate" whereabouts such as the "counter-culture," "smaller independent," "experimental" margins.

The Anglo-Indian community was one of the results of the colonisation of India. How is the Anglo-Indian woman place in terms of the coloniser vs. the colonised? She manoeuvred her situation between the two, adapting as she went along. She occupied an "in-between" space in the post-colonial debate. The critique of colonialism on an ideological basis and the emphasis on the coloniser/colonised duality excludes hybrid communities. Hybrid communities which developed as a consequence of colonialism constitute a powerful sign of domination and exploitation. They are "the third party" that comes into being. They are neither this nor that. They belong neither here nor there. They have to fend for themselves and create their own identity. Over the years, Anglo-Indian women have done just this.

CREATIVE SPACE

Anglo-Indian women claim both an "Anglo" and an "Indian" heritage. They make it clear, in the interview situation, that they do not perceive themselves as either "Anglo" or "Indian" solely. This racial hybridity is extremely important to them (2). They constantly refer to this basic notion of racial hybridity in their discussion about their identities. This biological factor challenges the binary of the west vs. east and self vs. other. Anglo-Indian women self-identify with both sides of these binaries with a simultaneous affirmation of their Anglo-Indian heritage.

The acknowledgment of racial hybridity in the lives of Anglo-Indian women is combined with their identification of sociological factors which affect their identity. They acknowledge a process of change in their identities through their experience of life. I concur with Diana Fuss's (1989 : 104) comments on Jacqueline Rose's notion of failure of identity when she states that:

> Such a view of identity as unstable and potentially disruptive, as alien and incoherent, could in the end produce a more mature identity by militating against the tendency to erase differences and inconsistencies

in the production of stable Such a view of identity as unstable and potentially disruptive, as alien and incoherent political subjects.

Unlike Gloria Anzaldua's (1987) situation Anglo-Indian women did not live within an actual physical borderland. However, as she states:

> the Borderlands are physically present wherever two or more cultures edge each other, where people of different races occupy the same territory, where under, lower, middle and upper classes touch, where the space between two individuals shrinks with intimacy.

Anglo-Indians could not identify with any land, borderland or not. Secondly, not only are they situated in the space where two cultures edge each other, but they embody this phenomenon, not only in biological terms, which Anglo-Indian women see as being an important aspect of their identity, but also in many social aspects of their lives such as their relationships with family and friends, diet, dress and religion. The tenuous theoretical space allocated to Anglo-Indians goes hand in hand with the lack of geographical space that they can call "home".

The characteristics of hybrid communities such as Anglo-Indians who embody both the East and the West are invisible. In the discipline of ethnography, Rosaldo (1993 : 209) observes that:

> the borders between nations, classes and cultures were endowed with a curious kind of hybrid invisibility. They seemed to be a little of this and a little of that, and not quite one or the other.

Anglo-Indian women acknowledge that they are not British or Indian. The resultant identity is one that acknowledges both in varying degrees for different women and this is reflected in the diversity of opinions Anglo-Indian women expressed to me. In their perceptions of themselves Anglo-Indian women demonstrate a refusal to adhere to the dominance of binary oppositions. They explain their values and lives not in terms of binaries, but as independent agents. They acknowledge their racial hybridity and grasp the opportunity to create their lifestyles. They resist complete identification with the Indian and with the British, and claim their own space and subjectivity.

Anglo-Indian women have put the theoretical space between self and other to good use in their lives. The use of this space is reminiscent of de Certeau's (1984: xvii)

notion of creativity which is attributed to marginal groups. Anglo-Indian women do not see themselves as fitting neatly into either Western or Eastern societies. They can identify with both the self and the other. They sense both the West and the East in themselves and acknowledge their differences from Indian people. As one of the participants said:

> I can still identify with my Anglo-Indian heritage. I don't disregard the fact that I am Anglo-Indian. I'm very firm about the fact that I am Anglo-Indian and not an Indian. To me they are definitely different, and whether I'm white or black, people just know you're not from here. You can pass off for Australian if you are white with blonde hair. People don't tend to ask where you're from. Whichever way you look at it, there's something that other people know is not Australian whether it be an accent or your colour or the way you dress or the way you bring up your kids or whatever. So, I'm very aware that I am Anglo-Indian and I'm proud to be Anglo-Indian.

In a sense, Anglo-Indians are not given the choice of crossing boundaries. They see this as being biologically imposed on them, but have also accepted it as common ground for identity. Indeed, there were/are those who choose to ignore this common ground and this was expressed by one of the participants when she said that there were those who wanted to actually disintegrate into being someone else, anything but Anglo-Indian. If they can pass as such, they take on identities that preclude that of the Anglo-Indian. Although some Anglo-Indians may have chosen this path, my focus has been on women who have taken this embodiment of "crossed boundaries", acknowledging both its biology and social/cultural implications.

Lynne Alice (1994: 192), in her discussion on Anzaldua's book Borderlands/La Frontera: the new mestiza, states

> This recognition of boundary crossing is simultaneously the recognition of boundary dwelling and resistance. But for subjects who are marginalised the simultaneity does not undo the resistance so much as affirm an internal contradiction that is inevitable in being both the subjugated and the emancipated subject.

For Anglo-Indian women, the agenda is somewhat different. They are accepting of their hybridity. They do not resist it. However, the tensions and negotiations they experience are real and continuous. The internal contradiction exists and Anglo-Indian women work with this contradiction in their everyday lives. Anglo-Indian

women use this creative space in different ways, using different mechanisms in different situations to express themselves.

FEMINIST IDENTITY POLITICS

The concept of "a creative space" that permits agency and choice sits uncomfortably with the black feminist movement which has, in recent years, endeavoured to redress the omission of black women's perspectives by using the concept of skin colour as the basis of difference from the perspectives of white women. The thoughts and experiences of Anglo-Indian women do not reinforce the theoretical basis of the black feminist movement. The term "women of colour" also, fails to acknowledge Anglo-Indian women as a group, since they can have white skin.

Black women have used their colour as the foundation for their fight for equality. Bell Hooks (1984 : 15) states this in her comment that:

> It is essential for continued feminist struggle that black women recognize the special vantage point our marginality gives us and make use of this perspective to criticize the dominant racist, classist, sexist hegemony as well as to envision and create a counter-hegemony.

Such a stand gives rise to other omissions.

The notion of "black women" as delineating the boundaries of the alternative feminist movement to white feminism leaves non-British non-black women unaccounted for politically (Anthias& Davis, 1983 : 63).

The use of these binaries as the basis for difference is challenged by Anglo-Indian women who may be black, brown or white in terms of skin colour. This is not to discount that Anglo-Indian women have found their skin-colour a source of discrimination as well and this was made clear in the comments Anglo-Indian women made in the interviews. This demonstrates the need to look past skin colour or perhaps the necessity of not prioritising one aspect of a cultural and historical background. Even among black women or women of colour such prioritising can detract from issues such as class. This prioritising can be a useful tool for the instigation of social action. However, it needs to be acknowledged as such and as a reflection of the current consciousness of that group of people.

The development of communities such as Anglo-Indians has influenced our notions of "race". Yinger (1986 : 21) expresses this in her comment that:

> Complex physiological measurements that go well beyond the gross morphological variables by which races were previously divided, continuously change, as genotypes interact with new environments, and millennia of miscegenation have left earlier conceptions of race in a shambles.

Anglo-Indian women, as a group, cannot speak from a position that gains its validity from a focus on skin colour. The segmentation of women according to skin colour is called into question by Anglo-Indian women. Indeed, according to Yinger (1996 : 21), Anglo-Indians do not constitute an ethnic group and therefore cannot speak from that position either.

Lisa Tessman (1995 : 59) states that

> Blackness is more than a covering; it represents an identity with a particular history, experience, perspective, and set of values.

Not all Anglo-Indian women are black, yet they still share a history, an experience and perspective and a set of values. Tessman's statement prioritises blackness, whereas Anglo-Indian women as a group do not prioritise skin colour because of the diversity of skin colouring among them. The category that they prioritise is racial hybridity. This is not to say that coloured Anglo-Indian women have not experienced racism or oppression. They share parts of their experience with other communities. I do not dispute the interweaving of their situation with that of others. There are areas of overlap as well as those of difference among and between women, and it is necessary to value both. There is a need to balance commonalities with differences and to address both in the area of identity politics. Definitions of gender and gender identity have reflected the subjectivity of those who constructed those definitions. The issues identified by Anglo-Indian women as important for their identity emphasise the difficulties that arise in self-representation as a result of the differences that exist among Anglo-Indian women, the main difference being skin colour. This acknowledgment facilitates a greater understanding of identity issues.

Anglo-Indian women are neglected when theorists (eg. Visweswaran, 1994 : 20) speak of women of the coloniser vs. women of the colonised. Indeed, Anglo-Indian

women were subjected to the domination of the ruling power. However, they also identified themselves, to some extent, with the coloniser (Anthony, 1969; Gist & Wright, 1973). Theorists who perpetuate the dialectic of West vs. East exclude hybrid racial groupings such as the Anglo-Indian community. The dismantling of these binaries is elusive. In the meantime difference must be acknowledged, but it needs to be a difference that is flexible and fluid: one that doesn't categorise, but one that opens up possibilities.

Anglo-Indian women have generated and utilised the space they encounter as a result of their racial hybridity and their experience of migration. Homi Bhabha (1990: 211) suggests a "third space" of identification which, I think, Anglo-Indian women use in establishing their subjectivities. It is a space that comes about through a hybridity which is racial, historical and cultural. Anglo-Indian women have a generous space of "culturality" within which they can operate as individuals. This space allows for much diversity and flexibility in identity.

Anglo-Indian women continue to exercise choice in all situations. Choices vary from person to person. These choices have been affected by the migration experience. The choices increase, and greater opportunities are available for diversity and adaptability in a society which incorporates a range of cultures. Indeed, many Anglo-Indian women see themselves as being adaptable. They see this adaptability in terms of creating their own identity. As one of the participants said:

> I've done all my growing up here. I had to work out my own feelings, ways of thinking, without identifying with my Anglo-Indian home and without getting into the Australian - I had to work on picking out the best of both.

Another said, "I feel like I have to make my own belonging now". Diversity and agency are demonstrated in the lives of Anglo-Indian women. Living out the hybrid/migrant experience has brought to the fore many strategies that reflect this diversity and agency and demonstrates a creative construction of identity.

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NOTES:

(1) When I refer to Anglo-Indian women in this paper, I am referring primarily to the women who talked with me in interview situations. However, I do not exclude the notion that it could apply to the majority of Anglo-Indian women. Any assertion or statement relating to the perceptions of Anglo-Indian women is based on the interviews I had with them. I also assume an understanding on the part of the reader of the historical background to the development of the Anglo-Indian community.

(2) I am not suggesting a homogeneous or static identity that can be applied to people who may be referred to an "Anglo", "British", or "Indian". These terms are used to express the perceptions that Anglo-Indian women had of their own identities rather than as an indication of the complexities of "Anglo", "British", or "Indian" identities.

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