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‘Hyphenated – Existence’: A Study of South Asian Women Immigrants through the Lens of Mass Media in Canada

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Canadian multiculturalism has been a great proponent for an inclusive state, yet contemporary bombardment of images through mass media tools like television and newspapers create newer identities and perceptions of ‘self’ and the ‘other’ in especially after the act of terrorism of September 11, 2001 in the USA. While safeguards were definitely required, the implementation of certain immigration laws (like the implementation of the Immigration and the Refugee Protection Act, 2001) had immensely affected dependent women and child immigrants.

This paper would look into the post 9/11 Canadian scenario where South Asian Women immigrants become the sites of contestation, through contemporary literature of various genres like graphic novels, print media and advertisements. Questions arise as to whether these women are a part of the ‘national’ consciousness or whether they remain ‘aliens’ with ‘hyphenated’ identities, unable to integrate into the multicultural matrix of Canada.

‘Hyphenated’ existence and women immigrants:

The concept of a hyphenated existence has been in vogue since the time man has been exploring and traveling from place to place. Settling in foreign places and then trying to adapt to the rituals and practices of the place is almost imperative if one is to be considered a citizen of that place rather than be forced to remain in the peripheries of the majority. The popular belief attributed to St. Ambrose in the medieval age pointed out to the fact that one should live as Romans in Rome and like others elsewhere. If such be the case in the earlier times of civilization, then in the contemporary times of global and ‘Glo-cal’ cultures, it is almost mandatory that one should be able to adapt not only to the norms, mores and practices of the majority population, but at the same time adapt to the changing policies and laws that circumstances throw up from time to time. Canada has been a country of migrants since its inception. However, it is apparent that with time migration has now become both a provincial as well as a federal issue. While political exigencies and the need of the moment had earlier decided Canada’s immigration policies, in recent global issues have also dominated its immigrant issues. Through this paper I would like to look into the matter where South Asian women immigrants become the receptacle of the effects of these same policies, despite being majorly allowed entrance into the country as dependents of their male counterparts. It is upon them that these policies are reflected the most. The politics of their location is not only primary in their identity as citizens; it is also a factor in their situation in the larger picture of their presence in the multicultural mosaic. ‘Hyphenated’ identities not only point out to the country of their origins but also point out to the second country of belonging. Thus, location and geographical territory are also intermingled with the concept of identity, nationality and citizenship in the multicultural matrix of Canada.

Diasporic displacement and separation from the country of origin is often the reason why South Asian women (from India, Pakistan, Bangladesh, Sri Lanka, Nepal, Bhutan and even China) are left floundering when they are first put into the socio-political life of the society. Although trying their best to assimilate within the matrix of the social, political and economic matrix of the society, it is the cultural part of their existence that clash with that of the country of their adoption. At the same time, their children want to assimilate into the majority cultural life where the role of the mass media is one of the primary tools in their initiation into an alien society that progressively becomes their own through assimilation. Although the first generation of migrants often tend to be identified more with their country of origin, their children tend to adopt completely the nationality of their adopted nation. What does strike one though is that, in the case of south Asian women, culture often becomes an impediment to such assimilation, and this is being aided by official multiculturalism. Again, South Asian women coming as political asylum seeker are given state assistance, but what goes against their integration within the society is their inability to master a foreign language and communicate their own grievances.

It is the mass media which has opened up the world of these immigrant women to that of the dominant culture. While within the space of domesticity they are not the products of a hyphenated existence, the moment they step out in the public sphere, they assume a duality of national identity that is often questioned whenever they seem to deviate from the norm. This was further aggravated by the heinous act of terrorism in the US after September 11, 2011. The mass media has portrayed both their angst against the dominant forces of suppression (be it patriarchal cultural forces or those laws and policies aided by the socio-politico circumstances) or it has perpetuated the myth of the diaspora through women especially in the cultural context.

The Mass Media and South Asian Women Identity:

In old days men had the rack. Now they have the press. That is an improvement certainly. But still it is very bad, and wrong, and demoralizing. Somebody — was it Burke? — called journalism the fourth estate. That was true at the time no doubt. But at the present moment it is the only estate. It has eaten up the other three. The Lords Temporal say nothing, the Lords Spiritual have nothing to say, and the House of Commons has nothing to say and says it. We are dominated by Journalism.

(Oscar Wilde, *The soul of Man under Socialism*, 1891).

When Wilde talks about the debilitating effect of the media in 1891, he was, as a matter of fact, having a premonition regarding the growing all-pervasiveness of the media, which would in the true sense turn out to be a ‘mass’ media. Although talking only about the print media, one cannot deny that his trenchant observation on the effect of the media over the functioning of the democracy seems to point out to the loss of agency of the other three estates (the Judiciary, the Parliament and the Church) where the emerging public opinion shapes the views of the democracy. What Wilde seems to point out to, is the very essence of a modern democratic nation. Canada being a liberal democratic country is no different in its outlook regarding the importance of the media. What is even more important is that with the advent of the globalised economy, the State cannot deny the role of the media and the image created not only of itself but also that of the demography whereby, the identity created of the populace would linger into the consciousness of the people thereby leading to their creation as subjects of the State. These same subjects would then remain as loyal subjects where nation states would fall

under the ambit of what Benedict Anderson terms as “imagined communities”. Regarding this, the mass media is an indispensable tool of both the populace as well as that of the powers—that – be in counteracting the actions of each other and maintaining the checks and balances on each other in the ideal democracy. However, as with all things in this convoluted world of power and economy, it cannot be denied that market economy has driven this power of ‘checks’ into the hands of a few, whereby the balance is disrupted in their favour and a skewed perception of the self is created in contrast to that of a healthy subject. South Asian immigrant in Canada, over the ages have been prone to these kinds of ‘image’ creation and the perception of the women in from this category are perceived wholly as products of media creations.

What is to be noted that in the globalised world of easily accessible technology, we find that the south Asians women immigrants in Canada are greatly influenced by satellite channels from their native countries. These channels are freely accessible to them and they are often in the language of their own countries. However, this in turn has a regressive effect for this does not allow the women to be free from their native cultures and try to endorse the new culture of the host nation. On the other hand, for the second generation women immigrants these channels are often seen as an authentic source of their native cultures and they internalise certain tropes of these native shows. This is often a bad influence as the shows of these channels are more often than not cut off from the reality in their own countries and sell a spurious ‘reality’. An example would be the various television series that are aired on the Zee networks. These are often based on cultural nostalgia and have little to do with the reality at home. Yet for the immigrant woman the images shown by these regional channels become a kind reality to the women and even for those watching these shows who do not belong to the south Asian immigrant community, they keep on presenting a picture of the immigrant society that *they* think the immigrant has lived and still wants. These viewers often mistake the spurious reality shown as the reality of the immigrant when the immigrant is *twice removed*¹ from it — firstly, through a physical distance from their countries and secondly, through a psychological difference from the ground level ‘reality’ of their cultures that would effect their cultural behaviour.

We can therefore see that reality regarding south Asian women on television become a pastiche of events rather than having a historical reality in the context for it leads to a random cannibalization of all the styles of the past creating a whole historically original consumers’ appetite for a world transformed into sheer images of itself and for pseudo-events and ‘spectacles’. A ‘spectacle’ would follow Plato’s concept of the simulacrum where the image becomes the original and where the identical copy of the image does not exist. It is here that Jameson points out the most glaring and obvious association of television for the south Asian immigrant woman regarding visual culture when he goes on to point out that out of the rigorously non-fictitive language of the video, commercial television manages to produce the simulacrum of fictitive time. (Jameson 18). This in turn would have disastrous effects for south Asian women as television forming a part of the culture industry, tends to make itself the embodiment of authoritative pronouncements, and thus the irrefutable prophets of the prevailing order. (Adorno and Horkheimer 147). Thus, South Asian women despite living the remainder of

¹ As a matter of fact Plato has pointed out that art (in this case culture) is twice removed from reality as it is a mimesis of the creator’s imagination. So while the creator first sees the object then imagines it a distance from reality is created. The second is in the mimesis of the imagined art where the imagination is the original.

their lives as immigrants are prone to the duality of their hyphenated existence as they are being constantly bombarded by images of their home in what they consider to be 'real' time.

South Asian women and Print Narrativization:

South Asian women have been better represented in the print media in Canada, both as a subject as well as an author. We find women finding a voice at the professional level of non-fiction in universities and in newspapers; they are also a part of the fictional producers as a part of diasporic literature. However, here again we see the dominance of the majority culture where south Asians are relegated to the space of the deviant multicultural groups where their presence is not often given serious thought or consideration. In this portion we would be dealing with non-fictional representation of south Asian women through newspapers and magazines and fiction through the literature that they have evolved over time forming a part of the diasporic literature in Canada.

Newspapers form an important thread in the fabric of everyday cultural life of the people. As has been mentioned in the beginning newspapers form the fourth estate of a democracy. It is more often than not used as an instrument to garner public support and can be seen as a tool by both the government as well as non-governmental agencies to generate consent for their actions. In the contemporary society, culture is used in such a way that it not only leads to the subjectivization of the individual through the use of the institutional modes of control like newspapers and magazines for as Adorno and Horkheimer explicitly stated that life in the late capitalist era is a constant initiation rite. Everyone must show that he wholly identifies himself with the power which is belabouring him. (Adorno and Horkheimer 153). Thus we find, these popular mediums being used as to mould popular perceptions thereby garnering support for governmental agency in public policies, especially those affecting immigration. As a matter of fact, newspapers and magazines seem to unintentionally act as instruments of cultural surveillance by their ever changing connotations of cultural signs and symbols. It is the mobilisation of these signs that are likely to inspire trust that makes cultural negotiation and normative regressiveness possible. It is the use of such cultural and behavioural signs that decide whether the surveilling gaze will be attracted or suspicion be raised, and determines which threshold of legitimacy will be applied and what will be the nature of any likely sanctions. (Lianos 421). An example would be the immigration of Sri Lankan Tamils in Canada where they have been given refuge on the grounds of political asylum. It cannot be denied that a large part of these immigrants are women and children fleeing from their land of ruthless political strife. Yet a recent article in *The Globe and Mail* on August 17, 2010, pointed out the use of newspapers as tools for garnering public support. The article reads:

The war of rhetoric ignited by the arrival of 492 Tamil asylum seekers on board the Sun Sea vessel should have no bearing on the outcome of their claims.

Each case must be decided on its merits, based on Canada's refugee laws, and the precise definition of who is in need of protection.

The nature and length of the passengers' voyage ought not to be deciding factors in their cases. Nor should their view of the ongoing violence in Sri Lanka, where there was a bloody, 26-year civil war until May, 2009. The failure of the Sri Lankan government to investigate alleged human-rights abuses committed at the war's end is lamentable, but is not grounds for an asylum claim.

... This hasn't stopped government ministers, advocacy groups and refugee lawyers from trying to shape a picture in the public's mind of who these Tamil claimants are.

Public Safety Minister Vic Toews declared last week that smugglers and terrorists were aboard the ship. Peter Showler, a former chair of the IRB, disputed this. The Canadian Tamil Congress released an unsigned letter, purportedly on behalf of the refugee claimants, saying they are innocent civilians. "We have travelled for almost four months with much suffering and pain," the letter says. "We have come here to protect ourselves from the murders, disappearances and violence that still exist in our native country."

Again, we find that whenever there is a backlash on Muslims in the popular media in Canada and the rest of North America, it is held to be responsible due to the deeds of 9/11 and the subsequent "war on terror". What one seems to forget is that these kinds of reports foster islamophobia at its worst resulting in xenophobia in a country promoting immigration for the fulfilment of its need for skilled domestic labour. Newspapers have been awash with articles whereby Islam as a religion has been demonized through the lingering effects of Orientalism where the followers of this religion has been termed as the "other", and looked upon as a threat in popular perception. As a matter of fact, all south Asian women also fall under this ambit for the impressionistic understanding of the wearing of the veil, the custom of arranged marriages, generational conflicts and bodily mutilations were used as indictments of non-western lifestyles. Indeed, it is women's bodies that became the marker for cultural difference and therefore diasporic connectivity. (Kalra et al 56). This can be amply shown by an article that came out in the *South Asian Observer* titled "Niqab for Muslim women banned in Canada province" on March 25, 2010. The article read:

Toronto: After France, Muslim women have been banned from wearing niqab in Canada's French-speaking Quebec province.

A bill tabled Wednesday will not allow government services to women wearing the niqab.

The bill comes after protests triggered by an Egyptian immigrant's refusal to remove her niqab in her French languages classes in Montreal, forcing the school and the provincial government to throw her out.

Apart from this we find that a major representation of south Asian women has been in that of fictional literature belonging to the diaspora. What sets apart the women writers of south Asian origins are the twin concepts of 'memorialisation' and 'marginalization'. Vijay Mishra goes on to say that located at once in memorialisation ('an easy recourse to origins') and in the social reality of living in the here and now ('an anti-essentialist presencing') diasporas require us to keep in mind an analytic of two kinds of exclusion: exclusion from the nation-state as a group as well as exclusion of women, gays and lesbians from inside a heterosexually defined and patriarchal diaspora. (Mishra 133). Publication houses such as TSAR situated in Toronto have

done a lot in recent years in bringing out the literature of south Asian women like Uma Parameswaran, Sheniz Janmohamed, and others. Other independent writers would include Anita Rau Badami, Rukhsana Khan, Himani Bannerji, Nurjehan Aziz, Salima Binning, and a plethora of other female authors. As a matter of fact, these authors seem to appropriately fulfil Taylor's contention that at the heart of the politics of multiculturalism is the demand for recognition and at the heart of that recognition is the subject of the diaspora. (Taylor, 1994). However, there are still mainstream publication houses that are hugely popular in the global context regarding women that have had little representation of south Asian women. Publishing houses like Harlequin, which is a Canadian concern and has been in business in producing novels of the romantic genre since 1953, we do not find south Asian women characters in the novels despite their presence in the country for a long time.

Again, bloggers like Farha Khan, however, have broken the mould when she talks about the feeling of emancipation that she encounters within the public sphere but which get challenged in the domestic sphere due to the cultural restrictions of the nation of her migration. In her comic *Zuby*² she portrays a young girl.

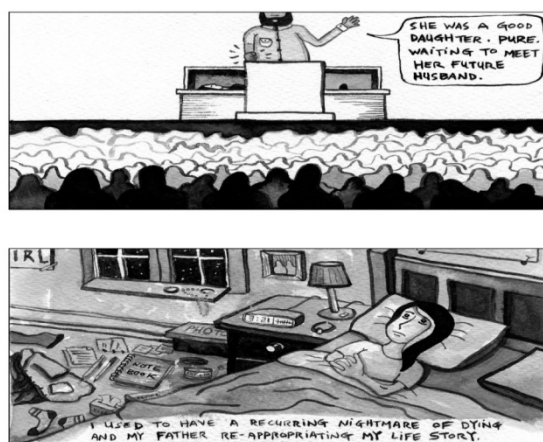


Figure1. *Zuby*

The Technological Net and South Asian women diaspora:

The south Asian diaspora has found a level field for the voicing of its assent and dissent in the greatest tool of the globalised world— the World Wide Web, or as it is popularly known as the Internet. Through the internet, equality has not been just a virtual reality but has in many cases been a reality for empowerment of south Asian women. It has helped women form the south Asian minority community in two ways— firstly, as an inexpensive tool which can be used as a sounding board for its opinion and which can be used from home, offices and even

2

<http://www.farrahkhan.ca/2013/06/women-of-colour-comic-creators-graphic-novelists/>

cafes, and secondly, in providing these women an anonymous identity whereby if they are arrested by their cultural propinquity, they can resort to a faceless person who nonetheless has strong opinions. Social workers like Uzma Shakir and others have used it, along with that of south Asian women politicians like Ruby Dhalla, Nina Grewal, Yasmin Ratansi, Juanita Nathan, Rathika Sitsabaiesan, etc.

A recent example of the use of the internet as a sounding board for south Asian women would be found in the blog of Uzma Shakir. She retaliated against the new booklet of Canadian citizenship that had been released by the Conservative Stephan Harper government titled *Discover Canada: The Rights and Responsibilities of Citizenship*. It states that in a special section that “In Canada, men and women are equal under the law. Canada’s openness and generosity do not extend to barbaric cultural practices that tolerate spousal abuse, “honour killings,” female genital mutilation, or other gender-based violence. Those guilty of these crimes are severely punished under Canada’s criminal laws.” These have been seen as an insult to many immigrant citizens and Uzma Shakir had protested in her blog by questioning:

“...What is the Canadian government doing to address barbaric forms of spousal abuse, incest, rape, sexual assault, stalking and human trafficking that are pervasive across Canada. Perhaps Citizenship and Immigration Canada should fully inform immigrants seeking citizenship of the potential risk of gender-based violence facing women in Canada. That half of Canadian women have experienced at least one incident of sexual violence since the age of 16.” She goes on to opine that “The new guide for immigrants who wish to become Canadian citizens shows us that Canada has taken a strong stance on gender-based violence, but only on those forms that can be marked as foreign.

Newer initiatives are being taken by women of the South Asian immigrant communities that have been working in tandem with South Asian immigrants in the US, who want to get rid of the hyphenated existence. They point out how this dual existence both at home as well in the public sphere is a tool of intellectual and often physical repression. One such group is *Heartbeats: The Izzat Project*. Through graphic story telling these women point out the repression faced from not only within their own communities but also from outside. Their promotion page is self-explanatory in its display.



Figure 2- The Izzat Project

Advertisements and the Creation of the Self:

Advertisements through the mass media have been the very core of the globalised economy and Canada is no exception. Through the ages Canada has been Eurocentric in its approach to every aspect of its social, cultural, political and economic life. Again, it has for long been dominated by the images from its economically and politically powerful neighbour, that is the USA. Yet here again, we see that south Asian women have been conspicuous more in their absence than in their presence. Although the presence of south Asian women have become more pronounced since the *Immigration Act* of 1976, Canadian mass media is yet to come up with advertisements that feature the multicultural. Yet it cannot be denied that advertising is one of the most powerful mechanisms through which members of a society assimilate their cultural heritage and cultural ideologies of domination. Ideologies refer to images, concepts and premises that provide the frameworks through which we represent, interpret and try to understand some point of view of social life. (Hall 1981). What we see with Canadian advertisement is generally the image of a patriarchal Eurocentric society which has little to do with multiculturalism. It was only after the act of 1988, that media moguls started to think seriously about multicultural advertisements. Yet, it cannot be denied that these advertisements are made with already perceived notions of what the south Asian woman is and therefore often has stereotypical notions of cultural images. Conversely, non-representation suggests the powerless status of the groups that do not possess significant material or political power bases. (Cortese 15).

South Asian women are generally portrayed in Canadian advertisements as brides-in-waiting or as 'Auntyji's' willing to follow their husbands throughout life. Print media advertisement is strewn with images of bollywood and the Punjabi culture. A common example would be the following advertisement for bridal-makeup and arranged marriage groupings.

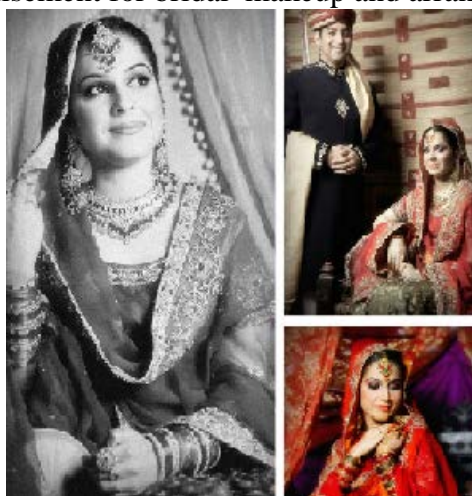


Figure 3.

However, women of the first generation south Asian women are generally shown as passive followers of the males in their families. This can be seen in the institutional advertisements of the TD Group of finances that finance loans and that of Walmart. What is striking is that while the first one tries to evoke cultural values of the south Asian woman as

associated only with the family and the community as an ‘Auntiji’, the second advertisement of Walmart tries to juxtapose the Indian family with Canadian values. Thus, we see the father in the family talk about the snow as beautiful thing from “heaven”, while the mother is only concerned about the family and its inexpensive clothing. What is striking is that in the advertisement the mother is given less screen presence than the father and she talks less. Again, the tussle between the multiple identities of the south Asian woman as a migrant in Canada can be seen in the following advertisement for a music album. What is striking here is that the advertisement seems to affirm existing social arrangements (Cortese 13). In fact, not to conform means to be rendered powerless, economically and therefore, spiritually. When the outsider is excluded from concern he (she) can only too easily be accused of incompetence (Adorno and Horkheimer 133). This is the same dilemma that we find etched in the face of this girl from the south Asian community.

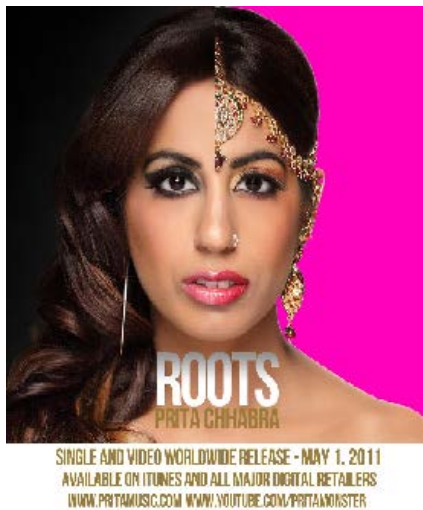


Figure 4.

Till date Canadian advertisement has been marked by a degree of nostalgia for the white nation that its policy makers had envisaged. Advertisements like in Figure 6 would point out to technology as being seen and used only by the white populace of the country. On, the other hand advertisement that were meant to reach out to the global audience would , as in figure 5, would point out to a predominantly white populace where the visibly different person is seen in the background hidden from view except that of her black hair, patently pointing her out as the outsider and therefore the guest.



Figure 6



Figure 5

Conclusion:

Representation of south Asians have been a moot point in Canada, where the stereotypical notions of them have been perceived as a result of global advertisement. We find that ready-made clichés are slotted everywhere and they never do anything more than to than the purpose allotted to them in the overall plan (Adorno and Horkheimer 125). Globalisation has made the access to these cultural images a matter of norm and both the south Asian women as well as the rest of the Canadian populace are subjectivized based on that. However, with the advent of 9/11, the perceptions of south Asians changed, especially that of the women and women from the Muslim community. In Canada we find the mass media being instrumental in changing the perception of refugees and women after 9/11, having being bombarded by images from the USA leading to the alteration of the *Immigration Act of 1976* into that of the *Immigration and the Refugee Protection Act, 2001*, thereby also affecting the fate of south Asian women immigrants.

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