PANEL PRESENTATION

Autoethnographic Reflections of Feminist South Asian Youth

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A FEMINIST IN THE MAKING

ABSTRACT

This paper presents an auto-ethnographic exploration of my journey of self-identification as a feminist in the making as a young South Asian immigrant woman. Socially constructed gender roles are significant in South Asian women's life trajectories; from childhood, patriarchal structures instruct them to behave in a quiet, shy manner, get married, and have children at a young age. By sharing my experiences in this paper, I demonstrate the importance of women challenging these roles by choice as well as out of necessity. My mother has been the most influential feminist figure in my life, as she has raised me to be assertive in the choices I make. However, when I became the main income earner for my family at the young age of 21, I was forced to reconcile social teachings about gender roles with the demands of my life. My natural inclinations towards feminist ideologies have undoubtedly been shaped by my experiences at work, where I witnessed the acceptance of my opinions. Feminism is understood in different ways by society; for me, it is the acknowledgement of women as equal human beings who have the right to follow any path they want and stand up for themselves. It isn't so much a battle for equality between the genders as it is a path of exploration where men can help women succeed and vice versa.

AUTO-ETHNOGRAPHY

Auto-ethnography is the understanding and critique of societal, cultural, and political beliefs through personal experiences. I believe that my experiences challenge the dominant South Asian ideology regarding the role of women. It is my contention that a majority of South Asian women are not allowed to pursue the opportunities that men are. Yet, at the young age of 21, I was forced to become the main income earner for my family, and being raised by a single mother has shaped and made me the human being that I am today. I am proud to call myself an independent woman, but on my path of becoming the person that I am today, I have witnessed and endured discrimination and ill treatment because of my gender, race, and class.

The culture and society into which a girl is born play a major role in how she will be allowed to express herself as a woman. In many cultures, to varying degrees, a woman is looked upon as an object to fulfil and satisfy the needs of men around her. She doesn't have a reflection of self because she never learns to focus on her desires. Her world revolves around the men in her life and her duties toward them. In this article, I connect the key concepts of gender, race, and class with a variety of other

issues in my life. I explore who I am and how I came to be the person that I am today, discussing the role of culture, society, and identity by connecting them back to the main themes of gender, race, and class. I also highlight how an intersectional approach has helped me on this self-healing expedition.

Likewise, it has been a learning curve for me to acknowledge that, being a woman, I have the power to shape my life with the choices I make. These decisions may or may not be appreciated by members of society or my family, but they remain my decisions. Living as a racialized, gendered person in a foreign country—one that I now happily call my home—I believe having my own opinions is necessary. While exploring myself and reflecting back on the past 27 years of my life, I believe that I have for a very long time unknowingly internalized sexism and misogyny. In this paper, I will systematically shed light on the internal battles I have waged against the cultural identity forced upon Sikh Punjabi women and decode my journey as a feminist in the making.

Being born as a girl in India is seen as a curse. As a basic definition, "sex" is "a term that denotes the presence of physical or physiological differences between males and females" (Little, 2016, n.p.). Thus, the biological organs and physical differences decide the designated sex of a child as him/her. In India, especially in Punjab, the sex of a child determines their destiny even before birth. I am lucky that I was the first-born child of my parents, because if I was the second, I would not be alive. My mother was forced to abort my younger sister before her birth. My father or grandparents were adamant in their decision of not having another girl born into the family. They had no emotions for the unborn baby or my mother. They were unbothered by the fact that something could happen to her during the procedure. My mother was helpless and could neither save herself from the cruelty of her husband or in-laws nor save her daughter. It has always been a taboo in our society for a girl to be born, as parents consider them a burden to care for until they can be married off. Projects like Pink Ladoo[29] are helping create awareness and eliminate gender-based customs by celebrating girls' births. I feel so blessed that my mother was ecstatic at my birth, and as I grew older, I learned that she was the only one who celebrated my birth by giving sweets to the staff at the hospital. I am thankful for the gift of life every day, as about "47,000 women die from complications of unsafe abortions each year" (World Health Organization, as cited in Hobbs & Rice, 2018, p. 532). I still wonder what I would have done if something had happened to my mother; I certainly wouldn't be the person that I am today and find it difficult to imagine what my life would have been like without her.

My parents, like a lot of Indian parents, believed that proficiency in the English language was essential to one being considered educated and sophisticated. This societal structure and way of thinking comes from a predominantly British ideology.[30] The school I attended from Kindergarten to Grade 10 was an English-speaking Catholic school, and I am certain that the school played a big role in my formation and

[29] See https://www.pinkladoo.org/

[30] This ideology could be defined as a principle of dividing and ruling Indians by indoctrinating them to consider themselves inferior to the British.

perspective towards Punjabi culture. I did my daily prayers at the school chapel, spoke English, and even cut my hair. Unknowingly, I practiced these choices ritually. Later, when I learned about the assimilation of Indigenous people and their culture, I realized that since childhood I was led to believe my Punjabi culture was somehow low-life.

When I was 15 years old, my parents, brother, and I moved to Canada. I thought that we had moved from Punjab for a better quality of life, and thus our move would lead to improved circumstances at home. I did not know that my father's extreme, cruel behavior would stay the same. He got angry at us and would scream at us and torture us. One snowy and freezing cold December night that same year, my dad stormed outside of the house in his shorts. My mother started to panic and cry, begging my father to come inside. We apologized in the hopes that he would stop acting out, even though we hadn't done anything wrong. He was angry because of his own nature. That night I told my mom, we aren't living here anymore. We have to move away for ourselves. My mother, brother, and I left that environment in the hope of finding a peaceful home. Suddenly, life was different; I could breathe and live freely. This freedom was short-lived, however, as I struggled through school in Canada. I was bullied and made fun of for my clothes and appearance. I did not know how to handle my emotions, and constantly wondered why all of this was happening to me. I often wondered how this new, unforgiving country could be seen as a land of opportunities.

After the separation, my mother raised us on her own without much financial support from my father. At this time, I naturally believed it was my duty to help my mother. Punjabi culture and Sikhism teach us to be independent and hard-working. My mother often shared holy recitations from the scriptures to motivate me so that I never lost hope. We were new to Canada and didn't know very many people, and housing for women in Canada has been an ongoing struggle. Of the women in Canada who have dealt with homelessness, 91% have been victims of sexual assault (Sadie, 2018). I now understand that, in addition to our gender, our experiences were also the result of our racialization: "the social process by which certain social groups are marked for unequal treatment based on perceived physiological differences" (Little, 2016, n.p.). Essentially, people of colour are treated differently than and seen as inferior to white people. Being racialized women in Canada, we faced a distinct lack of structural support and social benefits from the government (Sadie, 2018).

I still remember waking up early in the morning and starting work at 4am to make coffee and greet customers at the corner store. My mother always woke up to walk with me to work each morning. I finished work just close to 8am and then quickly ate breakfast and started school at 8:30am. I also used to work some evenings and all weekends. I learned to work hard from a young age and it gave me strength that motivates me to this day. It wasn't the money that gave me this fortitude, but rather working with the right people and having intense, life-changing conversations along the way. At that time, I had been in Canada for only 3 years and didn't have many relatives or friends. People from my workplace became like a family. I remember being dressed for my prom and going to the corner store where I worked because my manager had promised me that he would take my pictures since he had a camera and I did not. He was a 65-year-old gay Caucasian man who was such a wonderful soul. I remember

having conversations with him at work about changing things in society for the betterment of people; he told me, “you can even be the Prime Minister if you work hard for it.” Until then, I hadn’t seen genuinely supportive people who could encourage others.

As a racialized immigrant and a single parent, my mother had a tough time getting hired despite the fact that she was university educated. According to Statistics Canada, women like my mother are called “visible minority women”; these women experience one of the biggest wage gaps due to their gender, race, and lack of Canadian job experience (Stienstra, 2018, p. 646). She was consistently paid less than her coworkers. I now understand that being a visible minority isn’t a neutral description; rather, a minority is “any group of people who are singled out from others for differential and unequal treatment” (Little, 2016, n.p.). After a while, my mother stopped working and stayed at home as she dealt with depression and loneliness because we had been away from our relatives and friends and hadn’t made any new friends in this country. I related to my mother as I had experienced loneliness in high school. When older women migrate from India “without developed English language skills, and a minimal understanding of the host culture and social system,” they are lost in the transition from their home country to foreign land (Alvi & Zaidi, 2017). They are confused and aren’t able to express themselves freely. Despite being a teenager, even I wasn’t able to adapt myself to a new culture, so I knew it must be even harder for older immigrant women like my mother to get used to a new way of living.

As my mother couldn’t continue working due to her health, I started working two full-time jobs around the age of 22. I worked Monday to Friday as an Education Assistant at elementary and secondary schools around the city, and then worked at Fido in the evenings and weekends as a salesperson. I was older than my brother and thus saw it as my responsibility to help my family in every possible way. Yet distant relatives or acquaintances in Canada often said to me, “You are a girl; it’s not your job to earn for your family.” These antiquated views regarding gender roles irritated me. Little (2016) classifies gender as a “term that refers to social or cultural distinctions of behaviours that are considered male or female” (n.p.). A person’s actions, feminine or masculine, help define their gender. Prior to such comments on the part of relatives and acquaintances, I hadn’t realized that humans have to play a certain role in life depending on their gender. I was happy to be helping my family, and to be independent at a young age was even more satisfying. I had seen my mother struggle financially, emotionally, and mentally. I made her struggles and hardships my source of strength. When I was little, I often heard my mother say that she wished she were a man. I never fully understood what she meant. Yet her adult life was filled with difficult times which were the opposite of her childhood. She was the youngest of all her siblings so she was pampered and loved like a boy. She was allowed to dress up in boys’ clothes, which was unheard of in her time. She was given all the same privileges as her elder brothers, which none of her other five sisters had ever benefitted from. After a loving and happy childhood, she was put into a situation of abuse, torture, and trauma with my father. My mother’s struggles made me strong, and I knew from a young age not to depend on others for my happiness. Happiness, for me, is the knowledge that I can earn a living,

share a home with my mother and brother, and enjoy meals together as a family. The credit for my values and good upbringing goes to my mother. Each child is different; my brother and I have different personalities but something that we both have in common is a good heart. We always care for people and respect everybody. I would guess that my brother has probably washed more dishes than I have because my mother was adamant that both of us be treated equally in our home.

In 2012, when I started working as an Education Assistant for the Surrey School District, new knowledge came my way. I learned about the history of Indigenous people in Canada, which led me to understand my role as a settler on their land. It is very important for me to respect the people on whose land I have achieved so much. Learning about the injustices faced by Indigenous women in Canada reminded me of the overtly racist remarks I overheard in high-school. Overt racism can include name-calling, physical violence, and excluding people on the basis of race and ethnicity (Morris, 2018, p. 274). I was victimized by other girls in high school as I looked different and my accent wasn't "Canadian." They often made fun of my clothes, excluded me from group discussions in class, and called me names. Canada presents itself as a country free of racism and sexism to attract immigrants from other parts of the world. Upon arrival in the country, however, people find themselves separated into different classes (Morris, 2018). Class differentiates between rich, working-class, and lower-class people depending on their wealth and social circle. I am a working-class woman in this country, and it is vital for me to work to pay my bills and mortgage and put food on the table for my family.

Women in developed countries believe they understand other women's emotions because womanhood is a shared emotion. Yet the fact that women come from different backgrounds with different cultural and belief systems changes the dynamic of each woman (McKenzie, 2018). This topic has been very sensitive to me as a South Asian woman. Many different sets of ideologies are forced upon women in my culture, but I have always raised my voice against anything that I didn't feel was right for me to do. I always question instances where I am expected to do something just because societal gender roles dictate that a woman should do that task. Since I was a little girl, I have heard people around me say, "The best way to a man's heart is through is his stomach; give him good food and he will love you." However, I have never really had the time to stay home learning to cook. If I am hungry, I know how to cook a meal for myself. A man should love me for my personality and not my cooking skills. Another topic on which I have had many conversations with family and friends is fair skin. In Indian and South Asian culture, when deciding upon marriage proposals it is considered very important for a woman to be fair. It is a must for a girl's family to mention that she is fair. Even advertisements perpetuate this injustice by portraying the girls with darker complexions as dull and sad, with no partner and no prospect of a love life. However, in the western world, Caucasian woman spend money to go to tanning salons to get the perfect tan. It is believed to be a symbol of class and status, showing they have money to afford such services. The beauty standards in the modern world have led to us always judging ourselves and wanting to lose weight, get fair skin, straighten our hair, and not be content with ourselves. It is important to understand that white women view the

world with a completely different lens, so the oppressions of women of colour are unknown to white women.

During my early days working at Fido, I remember my store manager always proudly telling his regular customers that I (his new employee) was doing so well for myself. He remarked that despite being so young, I was working with the school district along with this job. I had never seen traces of feminism in a man before. I had never felt so good about myself, especially because someone was happy for me without a personal motive. He and I worked together for only a few months; little did I know, 7 years later we'd be sharing a bond much deeper than friendship. I certainly know that because of the way my personality has been shaped, I can only be with a man who respects women and understands that I have a voice and a right to my opinions too. Equality is not even something I have discussed, because in South Asian culture men are raised very differently than women. Patriarchy is a deep-rooted social concern in many cultures in our society. Even in the contemporary world, a lot of men believe they are superior to women, and women are still facing issues that have carried over since the late 1960s and early 1970s—such as wage inequality and preference being given to male employees over women, especially married women or young mothers. So, in my culture, there is still a long way to go toward achieving equality for women. It is important to start looking at societal issues with an intersectional approach, as women need to stand up for themselves and make themselves heard.

Another equally important problem being faced by South Asian girls is that they are told to stay away from premarital dating, whereas boys are given complete freedom in these areas of life (Nichols & Tyyska, 2018). Double standards between boys and girls have a huge impact on girls' development, as girls are victimized at a young age by their parents' controlling behaviour; too often, this dynamic continues into adulthood, with women being abused by their husbands and eventually mistreated by their sons. South Asian parents constantly worry about their sons getting involved in drugs and gang violence, but this has remained a very sensitive topic within the community (Nichols & Tyyska, 2018). It is high time that South Asian parents and other community members help address the underlying factors that draw these young boys toward the glamour of gang life with little understanding of dangerous real-life consequences. In Grade 11, my brother was enticed by his friends to drink with them after school as they were going to Vancouver to watch a Stanley Cup playoff game. Since it was his first time drinking, he fainted and police brought him home. Fortunately, he ended up not going to Vancouver in that state, as the city was marred by riots following the Canucks' loss. Had he been in that environment, I can't imagine how he would have taken care of himself that day. It was a life-changing experience for my brother, as he realized the dangers of intoxication and learned his lesson. With appropriate discipline and advice from my mother, he began to distance himself from the company of his high school friends and didn't get into drugs. Many of his classmates from high school have faced criminal charges related to drugs and weapon possession. Some of these people have been in custody and a couple have even lost their lives. I believe Punjabi pop songs and the music videos associated with them glorify violence, drugs, and a gangster lifestyle. These influence the minds of young boys who see illegal activities as a quick means to obtain flashy,

materialistic things. Another factor in South Asian youth getting attracted to drugs and choosing gang life is a lack of open communication at home. A conservative and orthodox ideology isn't a facet of good parenting, as it pushes teenagers away because they feel misunderstood in their own homes. Some Indian parents choose to maintain relationships only with their upper-class relatives and do not associate with their working-class relatives, and therefore their children believe money is a symbol of societal acceptance. Thus, they crave that luxurious lifestyle, even if selling drugs is the quickest way to achieve it. Domestic issues between mothers-in-law and daughters-in-law, along with a lack of parental presence at home, mean that children's behaviour gets neglected on a day-to-day basis. Parents need to create a better work/life balance to ensure they provide their children with adequate family time. Punjabi men need to adopt better habits in regards to drinking alcohol at home and treating their wives with respect so their children can have role models in the family and feel loved and supported.

In the meantime, everyone in our country needs to understand that the oppression faced by racialized women is different from that faced by white women. Women of colour from different ethnic backgrounds face daily challenges such as unemployment and a lack of support in learning English, which holds them back from integrating into the Canadian work system (Hobbs & Rice, 2018). Since I have been in Canada, I have unconsciously learned to pronounce my name with a Canadian accent. I always believed that Caucasian people wouldn't be able to pronounce my name correctly. After watching a satirical YouTube video of a substitute teacher mispronouncing students' names,[31] I realized that by pronouncing my name wrong for all these years I have internalized racism. A person's name should be pronounced the way it is supposed to be pronounced in that person's native language or culture. I now make a point of saying my name in the right way, and if other people can say it correctly that's even better. Intersectionality is the inclusion of women from all races and backgrounds. Women shouldn't feel marginalized due to their race and class.

In this paper, I was able to accomplish my goal of providing a clear understanding of who I am and how my mother and brother have always fully supported me by not putting restrictions on me. I was able to explain concepts like gender, race, and class and how they intersect with one another in women's lives. Marginalized and racialized women don't share their opinions a lot because they have learned that their opinions don't matter and they shouldn't voice them. Until people stand up for the rights of those who have been oppressed, we cannot see a world of happiness for all. The freedom to choose whether to have children, to work, and to defy gender stereotypes can only be accomplished by empowering women and providing them with structural support. I am proud to be a woman. I am happy to be myself and wouldn't want to change a thing about my life because those rough experiences have made me a strong-willed woman. Writing this paper was for me a process of healing, as I was able to let my emotions flow without fear of judgement. As I began to write this

[31] https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=zRpsRKuyi3Y

paper, I realized that sharing my most emotional memories would be a process of self-discovery.

As an immigrant living in Canada, I was constantly aware of my position as an outsider. The actions of my high school peers reminded me of my distinction from them. Beginning my career with the school district drew my awareness to the removal of Indigenous cultures and populations, and this new awareness of the oppressions faced by Indigenous people in Canada created an understanding of my own past trauma. This in turn brought about my awareness that I need to continue to strive to fulfill my dreams and ambitions without expecting support from anyone else. Feminism indigenously develops from oppressive circumstances; women don't need white saviors. All of these lines of intersecting macro-social oppressions that I have experienced as forms of trauma and violence in my everyday life have actually shaped the understanding of feminism that I have now. I have been confronting societal issues within my culture, which has helped me identify the feminist hidden somewhere deep in my soul. My story is a reflection of strength and the potential of South Asian youth to create social change in a world that limits or stops us by saying, "You are backwards." In fact, it is because I experienced these oppressions that I am a powerful feminist.

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