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JASBIR K. PUAR

**RESITUATING  
 DISCOURSES OF  
 "WHITENESS" AND  
 "ASIANNES" IN  
 NORTHERN  
 ENGLAND**

**second-generation sikh women  
 and constructions of identity**



A South Asian friend of mine born in Guyana, raised in Canada, and living in England once said to me, "It always comes down to the same one question: 'Where do you come from?'" The psychological impact of encountering this question for those of us who do not necessarily come from anywhere, or perhaps more precisely, come from many places, should not be underestimated. As a second-generation South Asian Sikh woman born and raised in the United States, I, along with many others, have struggled long and hard to answer this question satisfactorily—to no avail. In time I began to see that it is actually the question, not the answer, which is problematic. Exclusionary and ultimately racist through its

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denial of self-definition, this question imposes criteria on its respondent: you must come from somewhere. Some *one* where that is most probably not from here.

Immigration is not a onetime movement; it is a complex shifting of physical, mental, and emotional states, which begins much before and extends far beyond the actual event. As children of immigrants we are denied these realities by Western society, yet constantly reminded of them. The actuality and validity of our displaced "outsider" identities are hence negated. Why else would this question be asked? It is to remind us that we do not really fit in: "*When a white person asks a Black woman where she comes from, the implicit assumption is that she does not belong here. The implicit threat is that she should go back to where she belongs.*"<sup>1</sup>

As theoretical positions often stem from autobiographical history, I feel it is important to clarify my self and my influences. I write with a sense of urgency, fueled by painful definitions that I did not create, understand, or fulfill. This pain was exacerbated when I arrived in Britain, and my relationships to racial constructions shifted from what they had been in the US. My politicized identification against racism, imperialism, sexism, homophobia, and classism has remained clear; however, my positioning relative to the differing terms of struggle has undergone many changes. The necessity to relocate was eye-opening; the denial of self-definition was inevitably familiar.

I began this project to examine racism in the lives of second-generation Sikh women within the British context.<sup>2</sup> I felt that my "outsider within" position as a Sikh woman raised in another Western country would provide me with an unusual combination of access and critical distance.<sup>3</sup> It became more clear as my research progressed that notions of identity provide an important way to evaluate the binary constructs within which white, Western, and feminist thinking is still constructed, despite attempts to theorize otherwise. This essay attempts to illuminate why Western dichotomies of white/black, East/West, and oppressor/oppressed consistently rein-

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scribe "identity" as a fixed, static, and bounded state. Such an understanding of identity continues to define qualifiable "difference" in terms of "sameness," as in "not the same as." Such definitions remain fixed in comparative, never absolute constructs and maintain the focus on exclusionary politics by marginalizing those with multiple alliances.<sup>4</sup>

### WHAT IS "ASIANNESSE?": THE SOUTH ASIAN OTHER

The construction and maintenance of an oppositional South Asian stereotype that is mutually exclusive of white British society is facilitated by the reluctance of dominant white gazes to acknowledge some form of interdependence on the other. The use of the term *white gaze* is not to suggest that whiteness is a monolithic entity devoid of multiple ideologies and configurations. Rather, the concept of gaze acknowledges the power that voyeuristic positionings have to define modes of objectifications and delineate "difference" as the most different difference possible. The insistence upon oppositional boundaries clearly marked and upheld as mutually exclusive realities mythologizes a cohesive white identity.<sup>5</sup> The privileging of the white side of the binary ensures that the other is consumed, assimilated, cannibalized, and left unable to claim subjectivity.

Dominant white gazes facilitate the discourse of the relational difference of Asianness in Britain in three ways. First, perceptions of "brownness" imbue South Asian communities with a false homogeneity—particularly compared to dominant white society.<sup>6</sup> Second, extreme culturalist explanations deny "sameness" (*vis-à-vis* white society) by preempting the possibilities of drawing parallels, for example, along the lines of class, gender, and migratory experience. Finally, the second generation is constructed as "cultural conflict-bound." Substantiated through theories of assimilation, supposed cultural conflict places this generation within an either/or framework.

The perception of a homogenous brownness leads to a reduction-

ist "color equals culture" equation that denies specificity. Tariq Modood points to indications that South Asians are the most disliked "group" in Britain today because "they are insufficiently inclined to adopt English ways"; South Asians are associated with fear-based ideas of a unified and "alien" culture.<sup>7</sup> In turn, the link between racial discrimination and socioeconomic disadvantage is fixed, ignoring vast economic distinctions between Muslims and other South Asians, for example.<sup>8</sup> Modood points to the usage of the word "Paki" and the Salman Rushdie affair to illustrate how South Asians suffer from generalized discrimination.<sup>9</sup>

Through color equals culture, the Black woman becomes a victim of her own repressive, "sexist" culture.<sup>10</sup> Chandra Talpade Mohanty refers to this construction as the "monolithic 'Third World Woman.'"<sup>11</sup>

For South Asian women this construction is manifest in stereotypes of passivity, docility, and helplessness. This image is signified by the wearing of the *salwaar kameez* (the customary South Asian long blouse and baggy trousers) and veil, arranged marriages, domestic violence, female educational aspirations (or lack thereof), and sexism (seen as a wholly cultural phenomenon) in South Asian communities.<sup>12</sup> The histories and nuances within each of these practices are ignored. For instance, an image of the "universal" arranged marriage, from the most traditional modes of partnership matching in working class communities, does not indicate the diversity of actual practice dictated primarily by class; this in turn is highly shaped by such factors as religion, migratory experiences, and regional settlements. A focus on cultural practices, in conjunction with an essentialized concept of culture, allows dominant white gazes to perceive Asianness as more patriarchal. Although this perception is problematic for many reasons, it specifically fixes culture outside the impact of immigration and racism. These factors influence the desire to reconstruct notions of home, to reaffirm religious and ethnic identities within communities that offer protection, as well as mediate the ways in which class disadvantage limits economic and hence life options of

**A focus on cultural practices allows dominant white gazes to perceive Asianness as more patriarchal.**

South Asian women. Culture is thus understood as only a source of oppression and the only source of oppression.

If they are visible, South Asian women are seen only in Eurocentric ways, through the critique of problem areas like arranged marriages, clitoridectomy, and the veil. This in turn fixes these women as "naturally" passive because their modes of resistance are not understood within the economic, political, social, and ideological structures that shape their lives within Britain. Rarely are South Asian women portrayed in the context of their own self-agency, of resistance constructed and functioning within specific social contexts.

### THE SECOND GENERATION

How is the victim image altered, continued, reinforced, or dismissed for second-generation South Asian women? Much of the literature on second-generation South Asians either ignores or does not differentiate the experiences of girls and women.<sup>13</sup> Additionally, there is little written by second-generation South Asians. Media representation and academic scholarship invariably return to the question of cultural conflict. Most portrayals characterize second-generation South Asians as involved in intense, soul-searching battles over their identities, loyalties, and feelings of belonging. Many representations locate them floundering between opposing definitions of white/black, East/West, South Asian/British. The assumption is that these polarized identities are mutually exclusive and that eventually anyone struggling with cultural conflict must choose either one side or the other, primarily for the sake of mental and emotional well-being.

For the second-generation South Asian woman, her assumed identity conflict constructs her as a victim, this time not only of her oppressive, patriarchal, backward culture and "extended" family but also of her supposed longings to assimilate into white society and the racism she faces within it. This Eurocentric view is applied particularly to perceived restrictions on dating and relationships, suggesting that "it is a source of desperate frustration" that she is denied

the "intense experiences" her (white) friends are having.<sup>14</sup> She is seen to crave all that the West has to offer, but according to dominant white gazes, her culture holds her back, and only the "rebels" succeed. Naturally, the rebels are perceived to be far more emancipated than their dutiful counterparts, who "lack the courage to face the risks and responsibilities that go with an independent existence."<sup>15</sup> Whereas the first-generation immigrant South Asian woman may identify primarily with her birthplace, the second-generation South Asian woman is completely and directly "identified" by relational discourses of difference—white/black, South Asian/British, East/West, and timid/independent and freedom/security.

Thus, the oppositional poles of white/black, East/West, South Asian/British acquire social significance and meaning through an assumed experience based on dominant representation, thus rendering the second-generation South Asian other without voice, space, or autonomy in terms of class, religion, culture, and history. She is either repressed by her patriarchal culture or co-opted by a racist white society into benefiting from the so-called freedom of the West, despite the loss of familial support and protection. The either/or equation freezes the South Asian other without political or social agency or the room to negotiate subjectivity.<sup>16</sup> The South Asian other is thus the object, not the subject, of her own cultural identity. The South Asian other's identity is thus defined as directly oppositional to white culture—defined not by the self but by the dominant white other.

Assuming that the experiences of the second-generation are inadequately reflected by the oppositional either/or constructs, how do second-generation South Asian women function strategically in the politics of everyday life? Recent literature points to a growing South Asian "subculture" that synthesizes South Asian and British culture. *Bhangra* music, a combination of Punjabi folk music and house/dance music, has arisen entirely from British-Asian culture.<sup>17</sup> Parinder Bhachu points to another form of synthesis between "black"

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music, such as reggae and hip-hop, and Bengali lyrics to create another innovation of British-Asian culture, *Bangla* music.<sup>18</sup> She also maintains that a constant "engagement with and transformation of cultural frameworks" results in internalization of material and regional cultures; some examples include new styles of *salwaar kameezes* that mix Eastern and Western fashion trends, a growing population of Sikhs with yuppie consumption patterns, and the changing contents of the *daaj*—the gifts of the dowry.<sup>19</sup>

Cultural conflict resolution through synthesis may not always be possible or desirable. The presumed preoccupation with conflict resolution for second-generation Sikh women overlooks the fact that generational conflict exists in all cultures.<sup>20</sup> The emphasis on conflict resolution also assumes a final, fixed end—a finite solution—when the ability to transcend duality is actually facilitated by flexible and fluid notions of identity. Thus the tension of contradictions is neither resolved nor dissolved; instead, it is played with, manipulated (for empowerment and subversion), and enjoyed.<sup>21</sup> Mutuality and interdependence replace oppositional difference and exclusivity.

### **BARGAINING WITH RACISM: OPPOSITION-ALLY ACTIVE "WHITENESS"**

Racial and cultural identity that is not merely assimilatory must be strategically reactive. I term such identity formation "oppositionally active." Such a notion of identity suggests a complete alliance with neither South Asian nor white society; rather, it resists both. It is oppositional in its unwillingness to be consumed by the white pole; activity in this arena results not from racism or rejection by white society. It is instead the product of critical evaluation and appreciation of one's own culture. Furthermore, it entails a strategic comprehension of the fractures, disjunctions, and intersections of "whiteness," as well as which constructions are predominating, and when.

Moreover, the deconstruction of polarized identities allows a reexamination of traditional ideas of resistance—those equating con-