

# Living as 'Other'

By Kish Qureshi

*Cet article fait une rétrospective de ce que l'auteure croit être les difficultés et les pressions auxquelles font face les jeunes élevés dans les familles indiennes au Canada. L'auteure a dû surmonter des sentiments de déplacement et de solitude avant d'accepter sa difficile situation. Elle passe en revue certains des incidents indicatifs de ces pressions.*

Sometimes I wonder when the precise moment is that a woman realizes she is different and that she will have to be twice as patient, twice as strong, and much more tolerant than her male colleagues. And then it occurs to me that the discrimination and isolation felt by a woman is doubled and tripled depending on her place of origin and positioning in society. I've decided that it is unique for every woman—her life experience may be similar to another woman's, but it is never quite the same. Indeed, the pain she suffers is much like another woman's pain—but differs if only because *she* feels it.

Growing up, I knew that I was not like the other children. At a very young age, I began to understand that in my city and my country, people celebrated religious holidays that were not a part of my household. I vaguely remember questioning my parents about it (obviously before children are taught not to question the things around them), and realizing that such rituals were not only absent from my life, but *were not* to be discussed.

So I listened to the stories of the morning after the Christmas gifts, Easter egg hunts and turkey dinners. And I remember this: I felt small pangs of jealousy, but mostly just curiosity—a curiosity that I could not curb because I was never to bring up the subject.

When I grew older, the experiences worsened and my life, at times, became unbearable. It was one thing to wonder about the strange rituals my friends and their families partook in, but it was definitely another to be excluded from the social activities. My room became a cell and my parent's house a prison.

Looking back, I came to understand that my parents felt that I would be tainted in some way if I were to allow myself to associate with the Canadian children. Anglo-Saxon, Black, Ital-



Sharon Fernandez, Untitled, 1991, Ink on Paper

ian, German or Spanish made no difference; they were *Canadian* and they were an unwanted, unclean, corrupt influence that I was to be protected from. It was then that I began to feel like the “displaced person” I was accused of being. It was only much later that I began to save myself from those feelings.

I covered up my discomfort by giving excuses and explanations to my schoolmates. At times, it was a chore because I just wanted them to understand and not be so curious about exactly why I couldn't attend or what was the big deal about being in a school play or going to a dance. At other times, I would cover up my situation by making up some phony reason about why I couldn't participate, and those were the times when I felt ashamed. If I had nothing to fear from these people, then what were they so afraid of? I began to understand that there was nothing but fear and dislike behind their reasoning and no substantial basis for their distrust. The more incidents that occurred, the clearer it became to me that the paranoia behind the closed fist and harsh words was the real enemy. My anger, however, made me strike out at them, and as a result, despise the only people who truly mattered to me.

I was eleven years old when I had my first period. Interestingly enough, I was also on the first and only trip I had ever been on, visiting my “aunt's” house in Toronto. A friend I had met on the trip helped me break the news to my aunt (actually, she helped me spell it out since neither one of us could actually *say* the word). My aunt told my father. This was something we never discussed: my femininity, my sexuality. It was the most frightening part of me to him, the part he could not put a stop to, the part he could not *control*.

Of every other aspect of my life he was in charge. Decisions,

even if I did not go to him, were made by him. The constant influence he had over my life was overwhelming and was indeed the part of myself that I detested. I let him exert power over my decisions and eventually, over my whole life. The punishments, physical and psychological, only became worse as I moved beyond puberty and into adolescence and adulthood. My sexuality was an immense threat, like a giant beast who would devour me and shame him if I allowed myself to give in to it.

As such, wanting to live my life apart from the confines of the house became my only desire, one that fueled my ambition and kept me sane. As I continued to learn about the things around me, I came to understand the reality of my situation and more importantly, the idealistic notions that I had lived by. I believed that someday, I could leave this all behind and that my family would just be a confused and muggy part of my past, not something that would affect me for the rest of my life. The spouses and the children that were to come from my brothers' marriages were to be ignored as I lived on in peace without a backward glance to my childhood. Soon enough, however, I knew that as hard as I tried, this would never be the case; I didn't count on *caring* about the wives and children, and I certainly didn't count on forgiving my father.

I realized that as far away as I went, I could never stop caring about the people who surrounded me with their concern, even as it became more harmful to me. Their consideration and their version of the "best things" for me left me angry and alone. I knew then that whatever decision I made to live my own life would be rejected by them and that I would be striving for happiness without their support.

In retrospect, I cannot truthfully say that I am aware of just how this upbringing or the conflict in cultures has affected me. I was told by my father that I should not trust Canadians, especially not Canadian men, who, if given the chance, would corrupt me beyond redemption (always assuming that I could not think for myself). However, my Canadian friends, the ones who listened to my problems and tried to understand the sorrow, made me believe that my father was wrong. It took a very long time for me to believe them or

my own mind: how could the most powerful man in my life be wrong? How could I believe that it was hypocrisy and fear that made him give me such harmful advice?

Without knowing how confused it would make me, he tried to protect me from this society, when what I desperately needed was the strength to face the inequities that I knew I would one day have to confront. If I knew what I was up against, I could fight and try to succeed; if I was ignorant and naive, I would only turn out to be what they thought I should be: another illiterate foreigner.

So I educated myself. Taught myself that there were no barriers to either my success or my happiness. I rebelled in the only way I could; by arming myself with

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the only important tools that I needed: the knowledge that I was able to accomplish everything that crossed my mind, and the education that was a base and a support for my convictions. Slowly, I began to trust my own mind.

Toward the end of high school, I began to understand that I was not only a woman and a member of a visible minority, but that I was also a victim of my own fear. If my father succeeded at nothing else, he did succeed at making me a prisoner of my own desires. Even if I wanted to break free from the mould, my mind would not allow it. I was afraid of the consequences that could result in his anger. His anger was the threat and my complacency was what warded it off.

The horrible, traumatic moments when

I approached the front door knowing that I was late (by his definition and not mine), made coming home a dreadful occurrence that took place every time I attempted to join in the activities of my friends. The front door became a dreaded sight that often meant punishment in some way. At first, the punishment was physical, but later it was a different kind of attack. My father never was an affectionate man and he certainly never showed love; so he took away the one thing he could: my presence. He would carry on and pretend I did not exist. Nothing could have been worse.

This became a pattern in my life. Something would trigger his denial of my existence and the next time I deviated, it would re-occur. I always found it fascinating how people *adjust* to their surroundings, even though it would seem absurd to an outsider. I began to know my ghosts, my fears and my limitations when I should have been exploring my options in life without so much resistance.

So when the time came for me to move on to university, I expected some kind of transformation in their way of thinking. Surely, they would be proud of my success, wish me well and support me. After all, I was accepted at the University of Toronto and Carleton University, and I had graduated from high school with good marks. Hadn't I proved my maturity? Was it so wrong to believe that they would trust me to move away to attend school and receive the best teaching in my chosen field?

I will never forget the day I approached my father with my OSAP application and acceptance letter from University of Toronto. He took it out of my hand and read it. Then he threw it back in my face. Literally. He told me that the only university I was attending was one in Ottawa, where I could live at home until I was to be married. He said that he would not sign the OSAP application unless I changed the university to Carleton or Ottawa.

In that one moment I felt all the pain, all the tears and all the mind-numbing hurt raging through my body for all the years of refusals. I watched him sit there and look out the window, away from me, and I hated him. Never again have I felt such hate for another human being. Because I knew that what I was asking for was not wrong; I was asking to enhance the most precious part of my being: my mind. As he

was denying me that, I could no longer fool myself into believing that he would change in any way or allow me to uncover my own potential.

Once again, I was on my own. I went to Carleton University and graduated from a three-year Film Theory degree in April of this year. As I had prayed for, I found my life's desire and career, and I strive to attain my goal to become a filmmaker. I've also decided that little by little, I will work to tell this story and other stories like it by women who have experienced the same double discrimination and denial.

Even as I sit here, still looking forward to the day when I will be established enough to be on my own, I know that the final decision to do so is not one fuelled by anger, but by a natural progression in which I have come to terms with my feelings and the reality of my options. What I hope to accomplish will take time and a tremendous amount of effort, but I doubt that I will ever give up.

If anyone is capable of patience and perseverance, it's women like us, who can come out the other end with both feet on the ground.

*Kish Qureshi has just completed a 3-year Film Studies degree at Carleton University. Her goal is to become a scriptwriter and filmmaker, concentrating on providing a voice for women of visible minorities living a double-cultured lifestyle in Canada.*

## NILAMBRI GHAI

### My Daughter

There were no gifts offered when I was born  
No blessings called upon, no hymns sung.  
My birth was a secret, veiled and hidden  
under the commiseration of friends.

Perhaps because, almost too naked, my form,  
too easily betrayed, too vulnerable,  
lacked well wishers—  
or else, my womb, too easily exposed,  
could not conceal the end-signs of pleasure—  
or else my tears, too ready to flow,  
made me fit only for stone altars in cold temples—  
or else, I was not clean with each moon, and could  
only be accursed for that time—  
or else, I was not to be, but came along,  
somehow, no matter what,  
to tempt, to tease, to seduce, to nurse,  
to feed, to please, but not to live.

Soon, I became a shadow, and grew  
to love my own dark profile,  
and watched  
till another shadow appeared—  
one who held my hand across the dark,  
and cried, "My mother has a Mind!"

*Nilambri Ghai is from India. She teaches functional literacy to adults in Montreal and is active in community women's groups and the theatre.*

#### CORRECTIONS

In our Summer 1992 issue, *Women in Poverty*, Kim Fraser's article entitled "Trading Abuse for Poverty" contained a several incorrectly attributed references. In the text of the article, all references to "The National" should be attributed to *Balance the Power*, a background report to the 1990 lobby of the Ontario Association of Interval and Transition Houses (OAIH).

CWS/cf apologizes for this error.

## CALL FOR CONTRIBUTIONS

***For An Anthology of writings of  
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