

# The Hindu Woman's

BY ENAKSHI DUA

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*Ce papier est une première exploration des façons dont les politiques raciales d'un Canada qui se bâtissait à la fin du 19e siècle et au début du 20e élaboraient des notions sur ce qui constituait la sexualité des femmes de l'Asie du Sud.*

Recently, a central issue in anti-racist theory has been to identify the links between the projects of nation-building, discourses of race, and the institutional manifestations of racism.<sup>1</sup> In this context, Balibar and Miles have argued that the social construction of the nation-state is central to understanding the institutional forms of sys-

temic discrimination in society. As these theorists point out, there are two dimensions by which there exists a potential for an articulation between nationalism and racism. The first concerns the processes by which a sense of the "imagined community" is generated and reconstructed within the nation-state. The second concerns the processes by which the state permits and organizes the recruitment of labour from outside the nation-state in order to effect its central role as the guarantor of the reproduction of the capitalist mode of production. As Miles demonstrates, it is the contradiction between these two dimensions that can give rise to institutional forms of racism, particularly in allocating migrants from colonized countries to unequal sites in class formations.

In Canada, recent research has pointed to the interrelationship between Canadian nation-building and the discourse of race. Researchers such as Ward, Roy, McLaren, and Valverde have shown that Canadian nation-building and its concomitant moral order were tied to the discourse of racial purity. The social construction of Canadian nationalism was premised on the notion that certain races were suited or unsuited for citizenship. Thus, Canadian nation-building had a clear racial and ethnic discourse, as it favoured Anglo-Saxons both in terms of skin colour and social organization.

Furthermore, recent feminist research has shown that Canadian nation-building and its attendant discourse of racial purity has had a significant impact on the social

organization of sexual and gender relations for Anglo-Saxon women. As Valverde and Iacovetta demonstrate, the discourse of racial purity was intimately tied to the discourse of social purity, which regulated morality, sexuality, gender and family relations for Anglo-Saxon and other European women. These works suggest that nation-building, with its associated racial politics, played an important role in shaping sexual and gender relations in Canada. In particular, Canadian nation-building was tied to the social construction of Anglo-Saxon women as "mothers of the race."

However, missing in these bodies of work is the impact of Canadian nation-building and its discourses of racial and sexual purity on the social construction of sexuality, gender, and family relations for Asian-Canadian women. Beginning from the premise that experiences with gender are not universal, but vary according to class, race, and ethnicity, I explore the specific ways in which gender has historically been constructed for South-Asian Canadian women. The paper is based on a larger research project that investigates a public debate that took place between 1910 and 1915 concerning whether women from South Asia should be allowed to migrate to Canada, a controversy popularly referred to as the "Hindu Woman's Question." During this period, members of the Canadian public, politicians, newspapers, women's groups, and religious organizations all debated whether or not "Hindu women"<sup>2</sup> should be allowed to enter Canada. The issue also captured international attention—from the British Government, the Colonial Government in India, and anti-colonial activists in India. The debate has been recorded in a variety of Canadian, British, and Indian sources.

This paper is an initial exploration of the ways in which late nineteenth-century and early twentieth-century Canadian nation-building and its concomitant racial politics discursively constructed notions of what constituted gender for South-Asian Canadian women. The article is based on reports on the Hindu Woman's Question in *The Victoria Daily Colonist*. *The Daily Colonist* was chosen for the first stage of research as British Columbian newspapers offered the most detailed coverage of the controversy around Asian migration.

The focus of the paper is to examine the debates on the "Hindu Woman's Question" to determine how Canadians discursively constructed the category of "Hindu

# Question

woman.” In order to analyse the development of this discourse, I will employ Billig’s use of rhetorical analysis. Billig has pointed to the importance of not only understanding metaphors and language, but of understanding the construction of arguments. As he suggests, to understand a political text, it is necessary to understand its argumentative context. Thus, I will pay attention to the ways in which both sides in the debate (those in favour and those opposed to South Asian women’s migration to Canada) put forward their positions and how these positions are juxtaposed either implicitly or explicitly against counter arguments. As we shall see, while “Canadians” were divided on this question, through debating the advantages and disadvantages of allowing women from South Asia to enter Canada both sides formed a racialised and gendered understanding of the category of “South Asian-Canadian woman.” Thus, the “Hindu Woman’s Question” illuminates the ways in which South-Asian Canadian women have been racialized and gendered within the Canadian nation-state.

## Canadian nation-building and Asian migration: 1850–1920

Asian migration to Canada was shaped by the contradictory demands of capitalist expansion and nation-building. Migration from China began around 1850, followed by migration from Japan and South Asia. This was an important period in Canadian history, as a nation-state began to emerge out of a colonial formation. It was a period of capitalist expansion in agriculture and industry. The growth in commodity production led to an increased demand for labour.

The entry of Asian migrants was clearly linked to the demand for cheap wage labour. It is in this period that the Canadian economy would make an uneven transition from a staples economy dominated by the fur trade and fisheries to a peripheral capitalist economy dominated by agriculture and industrial production. As Laxer (1973, 1989) and Naylor have shown, the focus of the Canadian state’s economic policy in this period was a system of high tariffs designed to ensure the survival of industrial capitalism in central Canada. The tariff policy was supported by immigration and transportation policies devised to settle the West with a white settler class involved in the production of agricultural commodities for world markets. Cru-

cial to the state’s economic policy was the construction of the railways, in order to transport labour power and consolidate a national market in Canada. Together, these forces created a demand for labour.

As Canadian governments experienced difficulty attracting enough British and European migrants, they began to allow limited migration from Asia. Thus, in the second half of the nineteenth century more than 50,000 men from Asia would be admitted to Canada. However, from the very beginning these men were defined as “temporary” workers rather than potential citizens of Canada. Throughout these years, successive governments strictly regulated the entry of Chinese, South Asian, and Japanese men according to labour market needs. At the same time, the state enforced differential residency and citizenship status for Asian immigrants<sup>3</sup> (Bolaria and Li; Raj).

This differential residency and citizenship status was located in the post-colonial project of Canadian nation-building. As a white settler nation, the Canadian nationalist project was based on two dimensions: first, the marginalization of indigenous peoples in relation to the new nation-state, a historical process that was consolidated through the Indian Act (Dickenson and Wotherspoon; Ng; ); second, Canadian nation-builders faced the challenge of creating a sense of identity—an “imagined community”—among the new arrivals. As Balibar and Miles have pointed out, nation-building and the construction of an imagined community have often been based on the construction of racial and linguistic differences. In Canada, the creation of an imagined community hinged on the notion that Canada was, in the words of John A. Macdonald, “a white man’s country.” This notion of Canada as a white man’s country succeeded in simultaneously marginalizing indigenous peoples from the nation-state and unifying European newcomers to Canada. Thus, while capitalist expansion created a demand for wage labour, the contradictory forces of Canadian nation-building meant that the incorporation of wage labour was racialized in important ways.

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This discourse of Canada as a “white man’s country” would define the relationship of Asian migrants to the newly emerging nation-state. As Valverde, Roy, Ward, and Warburton demonstrate, the notion of an imagined community was also premised on a racist discourse of Chinese, Japanese, and South Asian peoples. According to this discourse, Asian people were incapable of assimilating into “Canadian” society. As the *Victoria Daily Colonist* argued in an editorial:

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objection to the Asiatic is that he does not and cannot assimilate with the white race.... More centuries than anyone of us can say have erected barriers between the two great divisions of the human race, and they cannot be pulled down with impunity. (*Victoria Daily Colonist* 9 March 1912)

Moreover, as the basis for the imagined community in Canada was whiteness, Asian migrants were seen as a threat to the very process of nation-building. Thus, another editorial claimed:

Under most conditions it will be difficult to blend the various races now here into a wholesome Canadian citizenship. To admit the Oriental, especially before a political and ethical reserve is built up in Canada, would make the task of Canadian citizenship almost a hopeless problem. (*Victoria Daily Colonist* 20 February 1912)

As the discourse of racial purity became tied to notions of citizenship and nation, the Canadian government justified its policy of restricting the entry of Asians and maintaining their differential status. This meant that, despite pro-settlement policies and a shortage of wage labour, Asian men were defined as temporary workers. Immigration laws and other legislation implemented this temporary status. Asian men were unable to vote, were denied naturalization, and were legally prohibited from owning certain kinds of property. Moreover, while all other migrants to Canada were allowed and encouraged to sponsor the immigration of their families, Asian men were forbidden to sponsor spouses and children. This restriction was enforced through a variety of regulations that differed according to nationality—ranging from head taxes, to the “continuous journey” stipulation, to outright prohibitions (Bolaria and Li). But while different measures were employed to regulate the migration of women from China, Japan, and South Asia in all three cases these measures operated to restrict female migration (see Bolaria

and Li; Raj for a more detailed discussion). Thus by 1912 there were no more than 2,000 Asian women in Canada (Bolaria and Li).

By the turn of the century, Chinese, Japanese, and South Asian men began to challenge the restrictions on the migration of their spouses. In the case of the South Asian community, the issue became a matter of public debate when two men initiated a court case that challenged the restrictions imposed on the immigration of their spouses. In 1911 Bhag Singh and Balwant Singh, residents of Canada returning from a trip to India, left Calcutta with their wives and children. Despite trying in Calcutta, Rangoon, and Hong Kong they were unable to secure passage to Vancouver. They were able to purchase tickets from Hong Kong to Seattle, but were denied entry into Canada through the United States. Finally, in 1912 after embarking from Hong Kong to Canada, they arrived in Vancouver. Since the men previously had been landed, they were allowed to enter Canada. However, the women and children were detained and ordered deported (Johnston). At this point the two men, with the assistance of the South Asian community, filed a court case—challenging the restrictions on the entry of their spouses.

“The Hindu Woman’s Question” quickly became a subject of heated public debate. “Canadians” were divided over whether South Asian women should be allowed to migrate to Canada. Members from virtually all sectors of Canadian society would participate in the debate<sup>4</sup>—members of the public, politicians, women’s organizations, trade unions, and religious groups. Moreover, the debate drew national and international attention as it captured the interest of Eastern (including Quebec) and Western Canada, as well as England and India.

One of the most interesting and salient aspects of this debate is that the question of South Asian women migrating into Canada was limited to the entry of the spouses of Asian men already residing in the country. This premise reflected and reinforced existing immigration policies. While single women from certain European countries were allowed to enter as independents, and in some periods were encouraged to do so (see Van Kirk 1981, 1985; Roberts; Valverde), single Asian women or those Asian women with spouses elsewhere were prohibited from entering Canada. It is important to note that the South Asian community failed to address these barriers, as South Asian men focused their challenge solely on the legislative prohibitions against the entry of their spouses—not on the prohibitions against the entry of all South Asian women. It was in their role as wives of South Asian men that South Asian women were seen as either dangerous or desirable to Canadian society.

#### **Racial dominance and South Asian women: linking gender, communities, and nation-building**

The overwhelming majority of groups and individuals

recorded as speaking on this matter were opposed to the admittance of South Asian women. According to these individuals and groups, allowing South Asian women entry into Canada threatened not only the entire process of Canadian nation-building, but the process of empire-building. Thus Martin Burrell, federal minister for agriculture, stated in a speech to the Canadian Club in Toronto:

The question of Hindu women immigration is not only a great question with us in British Columbia; it is the dominant question of the whole empire. It is a question of ultimate dominance between the Far East and the West, of the final supremacy of the yellow or the white. (*Victoria Daily Colonist* 4 March 1912)

The question that arises is: why was the migration of South Asian women more threatening than the migration of South Asian men? What was it about South Asian women's racialized gender that threatened to tip the balance in the contest for "ultimate dominance between the Far East and the West?" How was it that the migration of Asian women was connected not just to Canadian nation-building but also to the British Empire? In answering these questions, we see a layered interaction between race and gender.

In the ensuing debate, the primary reason that South Asian women were seen as a threat was in their perceived relationship to South Asian men. Several recorded speakers argued that the presence of South Asian women would encourage increased migration from India and other parts of Asia. For example, Frank Andrews, in a public meeting in Victoria, argued:

let the wives in, and in a few years no one could tell the results. Either Japan or China, if emigration was unrestricted, would flood the country [and would lead to] a gigantic problem such as the United States has to face in their Southern States. (*Victoria Daily Colonist* 10 February 1912)

The Canadian Government shared the view that easing immigration restrictions for South Asian women would increase the migration of South Asian men. According to *The Victoria Daily Colonist*, F. C. Blair, who was appointed as a special commissioner to investigate the subject of immigration of Hindu women into Canada, in his report to the federal government held the same position:

it is understood that the Report is adverse to opening the door to the Hindu people, and states that the admission of the wives of men now in Canada will be a step in the direction of reopening the whole issue. The contentions of Sundar Singh and his associates are not upheld. (29 February 1912)

Several writers and speakers argued that the danger of South Asian migration was that it would lead to the establishment of ethnic communities. The editors of *The Victoria Daily Colonist* predicted: "If they were permitted to come in limited numbers they would set up communities distinct from white communities" (9 March 1912). In other words, according to the majority of Canadians, the entry of South Asian women was particularly problematic in that *as women* these migrants would facilitate the emergence of ethnic communities.

Importantly, it is in establishing the connection between South Asian women and South Asian communities that the gender dimensions of the debate begin to crystallize. In this discourse we can see how the gender of South Asian women (and indeed other Canadian women) becomes linked to their communities. First, the entry of South Asian women was feared because it would lead to South Asian men maintaining a permanent residence in Canada. Second, it was assumed that it was the presence and the labour of women that led to the creation and maintenance of communities (and nations). Notably, the gendering of South Asian women as creators of ethnic communities paralleled the gendering of Anglo-Saxon women as reproducers of the nation. However, while the work of Anglo-Saxon women in reproducing the Canadian nation was to be valued, South Asian women were seen as a menace to that same nation—threatening to spawn the kinds of communities that would imperil the nation-building project.

Writers and speakers suggested that the presence of the women would lead to alternative ways of organizing social and family life. Major Simonds asserted in an article that:

The question will arise, are the wives and families to come here under the Indian social laws ... as they are exercised among various sects, or are they to come under our system? ... Polygamy is a part of the sociological conditions of the Hindu, so the question comes up as to whether all or only one or two wives of each person is to be admitted ... with the advent of family life among the Indians here how are the laws to be administered among them? Are they to have native leaders and the joint magistrate system, or will the matter be left in the hands of the police? These are all questions to be considered before Hindu women are to be allowed to come to British Columbia. (*Victoria Daily Colonist* 9 February 1912)

Significantly, underlying this argument was the

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acknowledgement that the social basis for Canadian nation-building was indeed racialized—that Canadian nation-building was premised on a racialized definition of a moral and social order, one that was defined as “Anglo-Saxon.” In addition, this discourse gendered South Asian women; underlying this reasoning was the assumption that it was women who were responsible for maintaining social and cultural mores, that it was women who were the bearers of tradition. According to the majority of Canadians in this period, it was as bearers of South Asian social mores that South Asian women posed a greater threat to Canadian society than South Asian men.

Along with the fear of a cultural challenge to Anglo-Saxon “traditions” was the fear of the sexuality of South Asian women, particularly of their fertility. Thus, an editorial in *The Victoria Daily Colonist* claimed that:

If they were permitted to come in unlimited numbers, they would in a short time so occupy the land that the white population would be a minority. If British Columbia is not kept “white,” Canada will become Asiatic. (9 March 1912)

Furthermore, some writers and speakers objected to the acceptance of South Asian women on the grounds that the products of their much-discussed fertility—their children—could not be assimilated into Canadian society. As Frank Andrews argued in a public meeting in Victoria:

“white peoples” children, of whatever race, could be put through the schools, and made into Canadians; not so with the Hindus or other Asiatic. (*Victoria Daily Colonist* 10 February 1912)

To summarize, newspaper reports on the “Hindu Woman’s Question” in the *Victoria Daily Colonist* suggest that the majority of Canadians opposed the entry of South Asian women into Canada. The most striking feature of this debate was that it was limited to those South Asian women who were spouses or children of South Asian men residing in Canada. The question was not whether South Asian women should be allowed to migrate, but whether the wives and daughters of South Asian men who were residents of Canada should be allowed to migrate. (I will return to this point.) South Asian women were seen as a threat to Canadian society because their presence would facilitate the permanent settlement of South Asian men, and thus the emergence of South Asian communities. In the context of the imagined community—the white man’s country—the presence of such communities was defined as a threat to the nation-state.

**South Asian women, patriarchy, and morality: “So that a man could be seen at his best”**

Not all members of Canadian society opposed the entry

of South Asian women. Some writers and speakers spoke out in favour of allowing South Asian women to enter Canada. While these individuals were definitely a minority, they formed a vocal minority. A clear pattern can be identified among those who supported a less restrictive policy. Those favouring the admittance of South Asian women were often members of women’s groups (especially the International Daughters of the Empire and the Ottawa office of the National Council of Women), adherents of certain religious organizations, and residents of Eastern Canada, especially Ontario and Quebec. But what is most notable here is that, despite their position, these speakers and writers shared a common world view with those who opposed the entry of South Asian women.

The support of many of these speakers and writers came from their concern over the international dimensions of the debate. Nationalists in India had begun to use the prohibitions against South Asian women entering Canada as an example of the unfairness inherent in the Commonwealth system and the unjustness of British Rule in India<sup>5</sup> (Huttenback; Johnston). Indeed, Indian nationalists helped to organize the legal challenge and provided some funding for it (Johnston). The British government, fearful of the possible repercussions, in turn pressured the Borden government to resolve the matter before it became a major international issue.

Some in Canada were sympathetic to the concerns of the British, and called on the federal government to allow South Asian men to bring their wives into Canada. President Falconer of the University of Toronto argued that South Asian men should be allowed to sponsor their spouses, pointing out that “imperial interests were concerned, and that their exclusion might create trouble in India” (*Victoria Daily Colonist* 9 January 1912).

Others protested “against denying to Hindu fellow subjects a privilege granted to Chinese and Japanese foreigners,” pointing out “that Hindu women were excluded because of the regulation of a continuous journey.” These writers and speakers pointed out that because the continuous journey stipulation was mainly oriented towards prohibiting migration from South Asia it was discriminatory.

Finally, a few writers argued that, as citizens of the British empire, South Asian men and their spouses should be allowed to enter Canada and deserved special consideration. At a public meeting in Vancouver, Mr Boggs objected to “the exclusion of fellow subjects of the Empire” (*Victoria Daily Colonist* 10 February 1912).

While raising these issues, the pro-side put forward one major argument in favour of allowing the wives of South Asian men entry: South Asian women should be allowed to enter Canada on the grounds of morality and fairness—however this fairness was referenced to South Asian men. The assumptions underlying this argument, therefore, further racialized and gendered South Asian women in the Canadian context. The pro-side argued that “morality”

dictated that South Asian men be allowed to live with their wives. In a debate in the Vancouver local of the National Council of Women, Mrs Hannington stated:

that it was not a question whether Hindu immigration should be allowed. The men are here. They are British subjects. The attachment of Sikhs to their wives and children is well known. Christianity and morality alike forbade that they should be allowed to live in the Province without homes. (*Victoria Daily Colonist* 23 January 1912)

Interestingly, these arguments shared a number of similarities with the earlier arguments that opposed the entry of South Asian women. None of those advocating that South Asian women be allowed to enter Canada were arguing that *any* South Asian women be able to enter the country; rather they were arguing only that men residing in Canada be allowed to have their wives with them.

The motivation for arguing that South Asian men deserved the right to have “families” was not simply based on notions of fairness, but was premised on the racial and gender politics underlying nation-building. Underlying the argument that South Asian men deserved the right to have families was the fear of the sexuality of South Asian men—particularly the fear of sexual relations between South Asian men and white women.

Several of the speakers and writers who were advocating the entry of South Asian women were doing so only because they were opposed to all-male migration. For example, the National Council of Women called on the federal government to “end the present state of affairs by either allowing Sikh women to enter Canada or by sending Sikh men back” (*Victoria Daily Colonist* 29 May 1912). Several churches took the same position, with the Ministerial Association of Winnipeg declaring that:

speaking of the Sikhs in British Columbia, who are separated from their wives ... the Government owes it to these people to either let their wives come or to buy them out and let them get away home. (*Victoria Daily Colonist* 9 April 1912)

Thus, while for most Canadians the sexuality of South Asian women represented a danger to the racialized nation, ironically, South Asian men posed the same hazard for the pro-force. The white man’s nation required racial purity. In this context, South Asian women were desirable in that they represented a barrier between South Asian male workers and the racialized nation.

Second, the argument that South Asian men deserved the right to have families was also based on a desire to ensure that the social and moral order underlying the Canadian nation was maintained. As can be seen above, a recurring theme in the discourse was that “the moral order” dictated that South Asian men be allowed to live

with their wives and families. As Mr Boggs argued, it “was not just or moral, having admitted Hindus to bar their wives and families” (*Victoria Daily Colonist* 10 February 1912).

The desire to ensure that South Asian men were included in the moral order underlying the project of nation-building was quite complex. As I suggested, in part it was based on the desire to ensure that a racialized nation was reproduced. However, it was also based on fear that South Asian men would undermine the gender politics of nation-building. Recently, several theorists have noted that in the racial politics of nineteenth-century nationalisms, the family was defined as a central institution (Balibar). In Canada, Valverde’s work also suggests that the racialized project of nation-building led to regulating familial and gender relations such that heterosexual, nuclear, and patriarchal relations were imposed. In this context, South Asian men not only undermined the project of nation-building through their race, but also through their status as single men. Without the presence of their wives and children, South Asian men threatened the centrality of patriarchal relations in Canadian society.

Therefore, the efforts on the part of some Canadians to allow South Asian women to enter Canada can be seen as an attempt to maintain the gender politics of nation-building by ensuring that South Asian men also participated in patriarchal relations. The emerging discourse repeatedly referenced the entry of South Asian women into Canada in terms of the rights of South Asian men—as opposed to the rights of South Asian women. As Reverend Dean Doull argued in a public meeting in Vancouver, the question of Hindu women entering British Columbia was:

an imperial question and they owed it to their fellow subjects of the empire to consider their welfare. It was even more than that: it was a question between man and man, and of the rights of their brother man. (*Victoria Daily Colonist* 10 February 1912)

Significantly, the desire to ensure that South Asian men were able to participate in familial relations also ensured that these relations were patriarchal and heterosexual. At a public meeting in Vancouver, Mrs Gordon pointed out that “a man to be seen at his best must be surrounded by his wife and family” (*Victoria Daily Colonist* 10 February 1912). As this speaker implied, the crucial issue in maintaining the social order of Canadian nation-building was not so much ensuring that familial and gender relations were organized through the nuclear family, but rather that familial relations were organized through heterosexuality and patriarchy. The entry of South Asian women into a racialized nation ensured that the centrality of patriarchal relations was not undermined.

## "The Hindu Woman's Question": Canadian nation-building and the social construction of gender for South-Asian Canadian women

My preliminary investigation into the "Hindu Woman's Question" suggests that this debate provides a unique opportunity to explore not only the links between Canadian nation-building and the racialization of gender for South Asian Canadian women, but moreover to further our understanding of the interconnections between late nineteenth- and early twentieth-century Canadian nation-building and the discourses of race and gender. Like nineteenth-century nationalisms in other metropolitan and settler nations, nation-building in Canada was constituted on a discourse of race and gender. As this paper suggests, the discourse of Canada as a "white man's country" was intimately tied to racializing gender for both Anglo-Saxon and South-Asian Canadian women.

This discourse of nation defined the relationship that Asian migrants would have with the emerging Canadian nation-state, economy, and society. An imagined community based on whiteness meant that, unlike European migrants, Asians in the Canadian nation-economy threatened the very process of nation-building. As a result, a racial discourse emerged of Asians as incapable of "assimilating" into Canadian society, and the Canadian state moved to legally define Asian migrants as temporary workers to Canada. Thus while Asian migrants were important to economic expansion in this period, the racialized discourse of Canadian nation-building defined them as outsiders to the nation-state.

Not only was the discourse of the nation racialized, it was also gendered. In effect, the construction of Canada as a "white *man's* country" gendered the entire nation, as it required the reproduction of a white population. This had significant implications for both Anglo-Saxon women and for women of colour. As Valverde's work suggests, the racialized project of nation-building both constructed Anglo-Saxon women as "mothers of the race" and led to the regulation of sexual and gender relations of Anglo-Saxon women.

Significantly, this discourse constructed gender and familial relations for South Asian women that were remarkably similar to those devised for Anglo-Saxon women. While Anglo-Saxon women were constructed to be "mothers of the nation," South Asian-Canadian women were constructed as creators of ethnic communities.

Underlying this construction was the gendering of women as responsible for maintaining culture and tradition in a community or in a nation. Thus, while Anglo-Saxon women biologically and socially reproduced the nation, South Asian women biologically and socially reproduced "communities." Depending on one's point of view, these communities were either the ruin or the salvation of the nation-building project, the "white man's country."

## Further Study

As this paper has been based on the coverage of the "Hindu Woman's Question" in one regional newspaper, we need to be careful not to generalize the discursive construction of South Asian women in the *Victoria Daily Colonist* to all those who were involved in the debate. This paper does raise the importance of a detailed investigation of the racial and gender politics that premised Canadian nation-building. Several questions remain. For example, to what extent are there regional differences in the discursive construction of South Asian women? What role did Quebec play in shaping the racial politics of Anglo-Saxon nationalism? In what ways did the conquest of First Nations people shape the rhetoric of Canada as "a white man's nation?" What influence did imperial policies and the imperatives of empire building have on the racial politics of Canadian nationalism? How did each of these forces shape gender relations in this period?

In addition, this paper raises the importance of investigating the relationships between Anglo-Saxon women and women of colour in this period. My exploration of the "Hindu Woman's Question" suggests that women's groups, especially the National Council of Women and the IODE, played an important role in racializing gender for South Asian women in Canada. Both groups constructed South Asian women as barriers against South Asian male sexuality, and both promoted patriarchal relations among South Asian migrants. This raises the question of whether middle-class Anglo-Saxon women shared a commitment to a racialized nation, and to what extent they shared a commitment to a gendered nation. How did this rhetoric reinforce notions of the superiority of white femininity in Canada? To what extent did this rhetoric allow Anglo-Saxon women to become gendered representatives of the white nation?

Finally, the "Hindu Woman's Question" begs the question of how Canadian nation-building racialized gender for Chinese- and Japanese-Canadian women. While Chinese and Japanese migrants were also defined as outsiders to the nation-state, and immigration policies also restricted the entry of Chinese and Japanese females, we know little of how gender was socially constructed for these groups of women.

This paper begins to explore the importance of the Canadian nation-state and its concomitant discourses of race and gender for understanding the institutional forms of systemic racism against South Asian women in Canada. The most significant aspect of the racialized project of nation-building is that the potential of South-Asian Canadian women to contribute to the public space of either production or social reproduction has been defined as dangerous. The exclusion of South Asians from the Canadian imaginary community has meant that rather than desiring South Asian women as workers or as "reproducers of the nation," these women have been imagined as

desirable only as spouses for South Asian men. Importantly, the legacy of this discourse has continued to shape the structural relationship South Asian women have with Canadian society. The policies of the Canadian state—especially on matters of immigration and multiculturalism—reconstruct South Asian women as spouses to male migrants and thus continue to marginalize South Asian women in their relationship to the Canadian economy and society.

*A version of this article was originally published in Anti-Racist Feminism: Critical Race and Gender Studies. Eds. Agnes Calliste and George J. Sefa Dei. Halifax: Fernwood, 2000. It is reprinted with permission.*

*Enakshi Dua teaches in the Department of Sociology at Queen's University, Kingston. Her areas of interest include Race and Gender; and Third World Studies.*

<sup>1</sup>Following Miles distinction between race and racialization, I will use the concept of racialization to refer to “those instances where social relations between people have been structured by the significance of human biological characteristics in such a way as to define and construct differentiated collectivities” (Miles 75).

<sup>2</sup>While the public discourse labelled South Asian women as Hindu, it is important to note that the majority of South Asian women who entered Canada were Sikh. For the purposes of this paper, I will use the term South-Asian Canadian women to refer to the Sikh and Hindu women who migrated to Canada.

<sup>3</sup>The kinds of restrictions on Asian migration varied in different periods. While in periods of acute labour shortage, Asian indentured male workers were actively recruited by middlemen, in periods of labour surplus or unrest, restrictions were placed on Asian migration. Asian migrants also faced a series of discriminatory regulations that defined their status as temporary workers. For example, Asian workers were required to carry identification, were unable to vote or to own certain kinds of property, and were prohibited from entering into certain occupations; in addition, Asian workers and their children were unable to apply for naturalization. See Bolaria and Li; Sharma; Ramcharan; Law Union of Ontario for more detailed discussion of immigration policies in this period.

<sup>4</sup>Notably, First Nations were among the few groups in Canada that appear to have remained silent on the issue. This reflects the degree to which the First Nations had been marginalized from mainstream Canadian society in this period.

<sup>5</sup>The issue of movement of labour from India across the Commonwealth had been contested by Indian nationalists. Colonial and Commonwealth policies had restricted the free movement of Indians, despite India's status within the Empire and the rhetoric of equality for all residents of the Empire. See Huttenback; Gangulee;

Kondapi; and Tinker for an more elaborate discussion of Asian migration within the Empire.

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## SHEILA PETERS

### birthday decorations

there are still few enough  
 that i am enchanted by my own grey hair  
 each seems as exotic  
 as my childhood mother's  
     high heels  
     or lipstick  
 i twitch them out as if they were  
     birthday decorations  
     bright steamers from yesterday's party

the first i remember  
     a vagrant on my shoulder  
         "whose could this be?" i asked out loud  
             lifting it  
             looking around for the culprit

my hair is long  
 there was ample time to form this question  
 before i felt the sharp tug on my scalp

*Sheila Peters's poetry appears earlier in this volume.*