

"How Do You Identify?"

by *Fawzia Ahmad*

L'auteure, d'origine indienne et possède un héritage antillais, nous partage ses vues sur les questions d'identité et elle nous fait part de sa colère vis-à-vis du mouvement féministe qui tente constamment de la classer par catégories.

Identity for me is not simple. I always have to make a choice about my identity and it is not complete without the inclusion of all of me.

My identity has always been a conflict for me. I am a heterosexual, middle-class woman of Caribbean heritage and Indian descent. This identification is not sufficient depending on who I am talking to. With other Caribbean women my identity needs to be broken down even further. There are so many fragments to my identity that it is frustrating when I am asked the "simple" question "how do you identify?" It is a question that I have extreme difficulties with. I cannot answer in one sentence. If you have about an hour or so I may be able to fill you in. Living in Trinidad, I was clear who I was and who the other people around me were. In Canada's white feminist movement, where identity justifies your existence and experiences, I feel great resentment. I "thank" colonialism for my dilemma. I "thank" white supremacy for the identity crisis women of my heritage face.

Racism perpetuates division and resentment within woman of colour communities. Some women of colour are treated with more respect by the white woman's movement than others, they are given more space, and are given paid positions in *your* organizations. This creates divisions within the collective woman of colour community. We are constantly put in the position of fighting for our space and fighting for our voices to be heard. Conquer and divide is a venomous strategy used by white women to weaken the woman of colour community.

Identity for me is not simple. It is not simple because of the displacement that my people have experienced through colonialization. Somehow, women of colour are supposed to fit into the slots provided by white women to make their concepts of ethnicity easier. I always have to make a choice about my identity—do I identify with Indian women from East Africa or Black women who are of Caribbean heritage? My identity is not complete without the inclusion of all of me. I often wonder why it has to be so difficult

for me and why I have to constantly make choices about which part of me needs support.

South Asian is an identity I have never embraced. I could not identify as a South Asian because I am not from South Asia. I am a third generation Trinidadian Indian Muslim woman. Colonialism and imperialism have defined, redefined, and confused the issue of identity for me and other women of my heritage. The white woman's movement perpetuates this alienation by providing labels for women to fit into. Women of colour are not permitted to define themselves and their own political identity.

I go to Toronto about twice per year. Each time I return to Vancouver I ask myself "what am I doing here?" The Caribbean presence is much greater in Toronto than in Vancouver. Living in Vancouver has been difficult since the South Asian community does not fully accept me. I speak English. I do not speak any other language that the South Asian communities speak. When I am asked how I identify, the first thing that comes out of my mouth is that I am of Caribbean heritage. No, I do not forget that I am Indian. I am proud of my Indian ancestry. Women in the South Asian community tell me that I have lost my heritage because I do not speak Indian languages, because my curries are different, because I do not dress the way other Indian women dress and so on. I have not lost my heritage. Yet, I am always made to feel that I am a lost soul. White society believes that Caribbean heritage is a Black heritage. People always look at me with shock and amazement when I state that I am a Caribbean woman. The common response is "you are not Black!" I am left to justify my identity by relaying the oppressive history that Indian people in the Caribbean have faced and how it is that I am really of Caribbean heritage. Caribbean culture has always been lumped into a neat little package by white Canadian society: Bob Marley music, sweet coconut water, and sun-filled beaches. Give us more credit than that. We are a people of strength and resistance. It is time that this is recognized.

My experiences as an Indo-Caribbean woman never fit into the socially constructed categories. It is assumed that I can relate to and understand all other South Asian women's experience. I cannot do that. Unfortunately, I have in the past directed my anger at other South Asian women, blaming them for alienating me from their meetings and caucuses. I have realized that this is misdirected anger. It is anger at the hundreds of years of white oppression, of colonialism and imperialism. It is anger at a white woman's movement for defining for me what my experience is. It is difficult to make requests or to ask white feminists to provide space for me and women like me. It is difficult to ask for funding from a granting body

to network with other women from the Caribbean when I am not sure who these women are because we have all been fragmented in the woman's community.

I have always felt that I was alone in my identity crisis. Talking to other Caribbean women, I have found that I am not alone. Dialogue with other women who are of my heritage makes me feel whole. Our distinctiveness needs to be recognized. My community is with all Caribbean women which includes all possible racial combinations. Within this large grouping of "Caribbean women" I can further identify with other fragments of my identity. I am of Indian descent, I am a Suni Muslim, and I am from Trinidad & Tobago.

Living in a white society, I hunger for Caribbean presence. For now focusing on Caribbean heritage is a place to begin a support network and to feel a sense of "oneness." It is the only way I can survive in a society in which white supremacy pervades.

Diversity is a synonym for the Caribbean. It is a great assumption to think that a woman from Martinique and a woman from St. Lucia automatically have a connection. In a Caribbean woman's caucus we could break up into many different fragments and we will most probably need to do that.

It is extremely frustrating when I attend feminist meetings or conferences and caucuses have already been defined for women of colour. I may be able to fit into more than one caucus in relation to cultural identity. If a South Asian woman's caucus is formed, I can relate at some level with these women. But how do I explain to them about soca, reggae, the sweet taste of salt fish, pelau, and doubles? Lumping women of colour together—and sometimes women of colour and First Nations women—into one room to talk about the movement and to support each other around the issue of racism is problematic. It is the responsibility of white women to ask women of colour in your organizations or women of colour attending your conferences and meetings what their needs are. Providing an allotted space and label is not good enough. Take direction from us and you will have a stronger movement, a movement that I, as a political woman of colour, may want to associate with.

Fawzia Ahmad is a political Indo-Caribbean (Trini) woman and proud of it. She is a rape crisis worker in Vancouver, a full-time student, thirty-something and constantly has thoughts of Trinidad & Tobago on her mind.

NATHALIE STEPHENS

de passage

•
ma langue s'est
émiettée un jour
dans la paume d'une femme
qui demandait de quoi
manger

elle titubait dans l'entrebâillement
entre le devenir et l'être
sa main tendue au gré
des rafales de
vent
qu'elle avalait
en silences
de ses lèvres écartées

• •
j'habite les nids précaires
des oiseaux migrateurs
disait-elle
à l'aube de leur envol

elle n'a trouvé comme
réponses
que des regards glacés
prenant chacun leur
place sur les trottoirs
passagers

• • •
elle a dessiné
de ses doigts
dans l'air qui l'entourait
une fenêtre ouverte
ainsi qu'une porte
pour nous inviter

et les regards glacés
en réponse muette
ont construit à
leur tour des murs
pour l'en empêcher

Nathalie Stephens est étudiante en humanités et en études du «tiers monde». Ses poèmes sont publiés dans LittéRéalité et The Authors.