

## Teaching Caste and Race: Feminist Readings in Writers of the South Asian Diaspora

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I generally teach courses in the English department that are cross-listed with African-American Studies, Women's Studies and Global Studies at Hamline University. Although I have taught South Asian writers in my world literature courses many times before, I taught ENG 3450: *Writers of the South Asian Diaspora* for the first time in the Fall of 2002. Since an area studies curriculum on South Asia is not available on campus, most students enrolled in this course were either English or Women's Studies majors/minors whose exposure to South Asian histories, writing, and cultural issues was extremely limited. While students with junior or senior standing were adept at critically reading western literary texts, they were less adept at interpreting the perspectives of other cultures. Whenever texts signal cultural difference, students revert to reading texts primarily as realistic or descriptive accounts of that difference and "experience," rather than as aspects of cultural production in a global context. This course, therefore, needed to accomplish several different things:

1. to introduce students to theoretical constructs such as diaspora, transnationalism, hybridity, globalism, cosmopolitanism, and cultural flows in the context of postcolonial conditions;
2. to introduce students to the dominant histories and cultures of the sub-continent while clearly problematizing the notion of South Asian identities formed through the diverse migration patterns within the diaspora;
3. to help students see the relationships between textual and narrative production on the sub-continent and the metropolitan centers of the world outside; and
4. to continue to read and write critically about literary texts through the familiar categories of class, race, and gender analyses, and wherever possible, to approach the readings comparatively with American or British texts that students recognized and understood

Such an isolated course within an English department curriculum offers many challenges, beginning with the planning process. The questions I faced initially included theorizing the course and choosing appropriate materials. In answering these questions I realized that although texts by the well-known Salman Rushdie, V. S. Naipaul, Michael Ondaatje, Rohinton Mistry, Bapsi Sidhwa, Jhumpa Lahiri and others can be easily selected, they created clear lines of engagement with the histories and cultures of the homelands that need to be addressed.

I chose to focus on postcolonial contexts by taking Rabindranath Tagore's *Home and the World* as a point of departure. This offers, even in its title, an excellent

articulation of themes important to the topic at hand—questions of cultural conflict, emergent nationalisms, negotiations of tradition with modernity, and women's roles; in short, constructions of both the home and the world. Clearly, I could not include all sub-continental voices that faithfully reflected the diversity of regions. Hence, I had to accommodate and make explicit to students my own particular national/regional/intellectual history and bias that privileged Indian texts over other national texts. The point of making this explicit was to help students recognize the diversity and complexity of the histories we were considering. I invited students to undertake further independent investigation into regions of their own interest. As the course progressed, much of the information students gathered about various histories, regional issues, social structures, and cultural values that dispersed communities bring with them showed clearly the nature of the cultural flows between the diaspora and the homeland.

As a group, we initially examined theoretical readings on the histories and cultures of the sub-continent to make the underpinnings of the course explicit to the students as well as to explain the selection of texts. Ideally I would have liked to spend at least four weeks on these discussions, but students were eager to get to the business of the course (reading the literary texts), and I wanted them to reinforce theoretical discussions in the context of close readings of the texts. A fifteen-week semester does not allow much time to set up the course, but the challenge is worth taking, even at the undergraduate level.

Sandhya Shukla's essay in particular, "Locations of South Asian Diasporas," is an excellent primary reading. A brief summary of its major points can help underscore its value as a central essay for this course. It provides an overview of the various historical factors of South Asian dispersion separating it from the more familiar Jewish and black diasporas. The essay also raises critical questions about the relationship between diasporic communities and the sub-continental "homeland" in terms of the discourses of continuity/integration and hybridity. Shukla identifies three structuring narratives for South Asian diasporas—those of globalization, racial and ethnic formation, and postcolonialism. She shows the ways in which homeland-derived identities take multiple forms of nationalism—Hindutva, pan-Islamism, Khalistan—as well as language-based regionalism. She also identifies various fissures in the constructed grouping "South Asian" that have been created by feminist movements in the United States and Britain through their discussions on gender, sexuality, and youth from within nationalist discourses.

Caste is the one aspect of sub-continental culture, particularly Indian, which is seldom theorized in South Asian diaspora literature. Neither does Shukla's essay raise caste and its implications in identity formation. This silence is somewhat problematic given the rapid growth in Dalit writing in various vernaculars throughout India and its visibility through translations abroad. At the very least, scholars who are working with issues of social justice and human rights in

the international arena are aware of Dalit struggles in India. Although caste may not be part of the public discourse in the South Asian diasporic communities, nevertheless, it is coded in all sorts of ways in everyday interactions among people from diverse backgrounds. It is certainly part of the sub-continental social structure in India, even if it has changed institutionally or has been denied vehemently in public discourse. I found it important, then, to note the internal dynamics of caste in comparison to the discourse of “race” and “ethnicity” familiar to students in American social contexts. To emphasize these discourses as emerging from very different historical processes was a useful comparative tool. It also helped to further complicate the notion of ethnic and racial formations within the discourse of South Asian diasporas. To ignore caste is to ignore a significant aspect of the sub-continental historical fabric.

As is clear from *Caste Today* edited by C.J. Fuller, caste in India is often disguised as class inequality or cultural difference. Bringing it to the forefront in the earliest texts read in class enabled us to articulate the fissures of various community formations. Using translations from Dalit writing in Marathi was a way to address this silence in the class. My own Maharashtrian, albeit brahmanical, background enabled this process. One student, concurrently taking a course in African American Literature of Rebellion, found similar echoes of “protest literature” in Dalit. Using Mahasweta Devi’s “Breast-Giver” was another way to link the intersections of caste and gender.

Representation of women in texts was of considerable interest to students since some had already taken several courses in women’s studies and had familiarity with third world feminisms. It is perhaps important to mention that all fifteen students in this class were women, making the discussions around gender open and extensive. In many discussions we focused on new and contradictory roles generated for women by nationalist movements. Women had both symbolic as well as subordinate roles as mothers, daughters, and martyrs. Students were conscious of the powerful political roles women have played and continue to play in the sub-continent while they were being narrativized in roles of subordination by many writers. Diasporic women writers also emphasized class, caste, and privilege as well as inequalities exacerbated by migration. The intersections of caste, class, and gender that allowed writers to represent woman as a separate cultural group also allowed them to show differences and inequalities among individual women. Selections from *Our Feet Walk the Sky* as well as Lahiri’s *Interpreter of Maladies* emphasized fissures in diasporic communities related to age, sexuality, class, gender, region, and religion. The complexity of these representations helped students attain a more nuanced understanding of sub-continental and diasporic cultures.

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## Relating to the Voices of India’s Untouchables

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Since the 1970s, a wave of literature from India’s ex-untouchables (“ex” because the practice of discrimination against untouchables is illegal in India just as the practice of discrimination is illegal here) has been sweeping through India. Ex-untouchables generally prefer to call themselves “Dalit,” i.e., oppressed, which signifies that they are not polluted, just exploited by higher castes. Dalit literature emerged in the language of Marathi in Western India, developing from a movement affirming self respect and human rights, led by Dr. B.R. Ambedkar, an untouchable educated in the U.S. and England. I have used some of the poetry from this literary movement in various classes and lectures, finding it can create a bond between students and the poets.

In the poem below, Jyoti Lanjewar, a university professor, visualizes “mother” in every hard-working mistreated woman. I ask each student to read one stanza, in turn, while thinking about any possible American parallels. Reading, in turn, emphasizes the fact that the poem incorporates the “voices” of different women, all seen as “mother.” Some allusions need to be understood in their own cultural contexts. For example, the reference to a woman “carrying barrels of tar” reflects women’s prominent role in heavy construction. Cooking done in the homes