
**The Dark Side of the Nation: Essays on Multiculturalism,
Nationalism and Gender**

By Himani Bannerji

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With the help of anti-racist feminist marxism, Bannerji conducts a historical materialist review of multiculturalism in Canada. Bannerji tries to explain why this official ideology has been adopted by the Canadian state and with what consequences for non-white Canadians.

Bannerji argues that Canada is a capitalist state, a liberal democracy and a white settler colony. In the 1970s, the government of the time introduced multicultural policies to mediate the fissures and ruptures created by the presence of multi-racial and multi-ethnic communities living in Canada. The state utilized the idea of multiculturalism to create a notion of a nation made up of multiple racial and ethnic communities living in harmony, with the state acting as an arbiter between them. This ideology legitimizes the Canadian nation state formation at home and abroad. This book helps draw attention to the fact that discourses that might appear transformative in their conception and implementation might in the end be helping to consolidate the hegemonic hold of certain groups, resulting in the marginalization of others. Adult education, especially courses targeted at so-called "marginalized" groups, might be helping to erect the barriers of difference, with the consequent effects for those involved. This book helps to raise awareness of the fact that what might appear to be 'neutral' discourse supposedly helping others may, in the end, be a means of imperialization and segregation.

Bannerji points out that individuals are subjects of contradictory social relations and can therefore be appellated as a class, as religious or sexual agents, depending on the ideological or political ground of interpellation. In the liberal

pluralist construction of the Canadian state, the discourse of diversity takes into consideration few particularities of people, and consequently averts attention from other power relations in which individuals are implicated—as in the case of gender, class and race. This liberal pluralist discourse is based on a benign, desocialized and ahistorical concept of diversity. This power-neutral concept of diversity, however, hides the fact that difference is the basis of power differences within and in-between communities. Bannerji shows that state institutions such as the Department of Indian Affairs, together with racist and colonial discourses implicated within Canadian immigration and labour policies, do not treat the ‘invented ethnicities’ within the nation as equal entities. By utilizing ideological-political formulations—which are epitomized by categories such as ‘immigrant,’ ‘First Nations,’ ‘ESL’ and so on, the state is consequently conducting a colonial imperialist and racist ranking of the plethora of groups within the nation.

The Canadian state makes use of these concepts or categories to organize the state apparatus and hence enable the ideological organization of relations of ruling. Bannerji states that social subjects and agents within the Canadian national context are constructed categories, invented by national elites committed to a workable nation-state project. These categorical concepts grounded in the historically-produced social facts that constitute social location help to categorize people and consequently confer visibility on some of them. Visibility, as Bannerji points out, is conducive to special treatment by the state. Women and non-white individuals are visibly different and hence deemed inferior in relation to the white male that is adopted as the norm by state discourses. As inferior others, the state has the prerogative to decide what is good for them and hence divests them of political agency. Bannerji believes that visible minorities are assigned a lesser and inauthentic political subjectivity within the Canadian context and hence can only redress injustice limitedly. The author, however, concurs that different groups are continually resisting and contesting their assigned position within the Canadian nation. Political subjectivities therefore are not fixed entities as different communities struggle to achieve a better position within the nation.

The essay that got my attention in this collection was “A Question of Silence: Reflections on Violence Against Women in communities of Colour.” I was drawn to it by both its content and its format. This essay, written in the form of a reflective letter, explored the factors that prevent non-white women from speaking out against domestic violence within their communities and why it is that the Canadian state refrains from interfering when this violence occurs within ‘otherized’ communities.

For Bannerji, a community is both an identifiable ideological, cultural and political construct brought into being by lived relations, as well as by internal or external factors to the community. She insists that certain communities within

the Canadian nation are particularized by state discourses and practices when they are compared to the anglo-Eurocentric culture which the state has adopted as the cultural norm. In a nation-state that has established the anglo-European culture as the epitome of civilization, freedom and modernity, cultures that are different are particularized as lesser.

Bannerji believes that forms of consciousness emerge from particular social organizations and relationships. She believes that political subjectivities and agencies are often a response to particular national discourses adopted by particular states. Otherized communities often attempt to create a safe haven for themselves when living within an occluding culture, a socio-cultural space where they feel they belong. Within these boundaries, they sometimes revive a certain kind of nationalism deriving from the old country. By setting up these boundaries, these traditional communities are differentiating themselves from the rest and at the same time are bringing about their own recolonization within the Canadian setting.

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In these particularized communities, women are taken as symbols of the community. Religio-patriarchal norms and regulations are used to regulate the honour and purity of these women in an attempt to help protect the authenticity of the community. As symbols, women are disembodied and objectified. As objects/possessions of the community, the least signs of insubordination on their part can result in a violent retaliation on the part of males within that community which the Canadian state does not attempt to suppress. Bannerji argues that while the state’s racist and discriminatory immigration and labour policies compromises and reduces the masculinity of non-white men, the Canadian state legitimizes its non-action when violence is directed at non-white women by explicating these acts as being the product of a particular group’s traditions. By refusing to interfere, the state can be said to be offering non-white women as scapegoats to non-white males as a sop to their diminished masculinity.

Non-white women who are critical of the patriarchal and gendered social organization of their communities are caught in the dilemma of speaking and not speaking. By speaking out, they would be exposing the patriarchal constitution of their communities, but by uncovering the prevalent presence of domestic violence within the community, they may be running the risk of abetting and aiding in the colonial project of these men’s emasculation.

In the essay "On the Dark Side of the Nation," Bannerji examines racialized and ethnicized women's organizations in America and Britain and tries to find out what kind of approach they adopted in their struggle against sexism, class, racism and/or colonialism. The author believes that the naming of the group is important since this may act as a code for political subjectivities, while delineating ideological, political and pedagogical possibilities. Bannerji, for example, does not agree with the term 'women of colour' as utilized within the North American context since this term often occludes women of African and aboriginal descent. The term 'visible minority women, which promulgates visibility as the grounds of political eligibility, is also found wanting. Bannerji maintains that entities such as the National Coalition of Visible Minority Women often focus on the issue of diversity and lose sight of their social relations of power such as class, gender, sexuality, and so on.

Bannerji prefers the term 'non-white women' when referring to politically motivated groups of women deriving from marginalized communities within Canada. According to the author, the concept 'non-white women' gestures towards white privilege, while the use of the negative prefix helps to raise issues and questions relating to whiteness. Bannerji does not agree with the concept of diversity as a politically valid concept since, according to the author, state discourse has turned it into a power-neutral indicator of difference. The issue is that Bannerji here considers visible aspects of difference as rallying points for struggling for a more just world. At the same time, Bannerji does not lose sight of the fact that resistance and negotiation has to take place at multiple levels and in coalition with different groups within and outside the country if women in coalition with other oppressed groups want to achieve change.

