

# **TOO VISIBLE: RACE, GENDER AND RESISTANCE IN THE CONSTRUCTION OF A CANADIAN IDENTITY IN THE POETRY OF HIMANI BANNERJI**

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The South-Asian Canadian poet, writer and critic Himani Bannerji defines herself as an anti-racist Marxist feminist. Her Indian academic training and the impact that her migration to Canada caused on her made her analyze the condition of Canada as a postcolonial society. All her critical studies are a consequence of what she calls “how I was received in Canada” as a non-white woman. She studies and criticizes Canadian society from a Marxist, feminist and anti-racist perspective. Thus, both her academic and her poetic works have become a site of contestation and a weapon of social activism against racism, fascism and patriarchy. Being an analysis of Canada’s postcolonial reality, her critical work has become a social response to the hypocrisies of the Canadian national state. The intention of this paper is to analyze the poetry of Himani Bannerji as a space where she puts in practice all her theories about race, gender and nationalism. This analysis tries to show how the words in her poetry construct a suitable place for immigrant and non-white individuals to develop their identities. She makes her poetry a space where all kinds of barriers are destroyed and where contestation and resistance are voiced.

In her essay *Geography Lessons*, part of a collection of essays called *The Dark Side of the Nation*, she gives a description of her first approach to Canadian society:

‘Canada’ then cannot be taken as a given. It is obviously a construction, a set of representations, embodying certain types of political and cultural communities and their operations. These communities were themselves constructed in agreement with

certain ideas regarding skin color, history, language (English/French) and other cultural signifiers—all of which may be subsumed under the ideological category “white”. A ‘Canada’ constructed on this basis contains certain notions of nation, state, formation, and economy. Europeanness as “whiteness” thus translates into ‘Canada’ and provides it with its “imagined community”. (2000: 64)

This passage summarizes the different concepts that Bannerji uses to define Canada. Canada is a place where the ‘other’ occupies a big part of this space but does not have as a result an important social role. As a postcolonial society Canada looks for a discourse and an ideology that will build up the Canadian nation. According to Himani Bannerji, the discourse of colonialism is what relates the Canadians (English/French) defined under the category of “whites” on the one hand, and the ‘others’ or ‘non whites’, those Bannerji calls “visible minorities”, on the other.

Homi Bhabha develops a theory of colonial discourse in his book *The Location of Culture*. He defines it as an apparatus based on recognition and disavowal of racial/cultural/historical differences (1998: 70). This discourse creates through recognition and disavowal a space where individuals are subject to the production of different forms of knowledge in which surveillance is exercised. Originally the colonizer justifies his conquest and establishes systems of domination and power by a process of degeneration of the colonized population on the basis of racial origin. In the contemporary Canadian context, as in some of the contemporary postcolonial societies, the original practice of imperialistic nations has been transformed into a system of difference in relation to race, nation, religion, gender and culture. The Canadian Multiculturalism Act was passed on 21<sup>st</sup> July 1988. In it, the Canadian government recognized, among its most important points, multiculturalism as the fact that defines the culture and diversity of Canadian society. It concedes total freedom to all members of the Canadian community to preserve, enhance and share their cultural heritage. It posits multiculturalism as a fundamental characteristic of Canadian identity and ensures equal treatment to all members, including equality of employment opportunities for all. It also contemplates the assistance of ethno-cultural minority communities in the organisation of activities for overcoming any discrimination barrier related to race, national or ethnic origin ([http://www.pch.gc.ca/progs/multi/policy/act\\_e.cfm](http://www.pch.gc.ca/progs/multi/policy/act_e.cfm)). In his book *Encyclopaedia of Canadian Social Work*, Francis Joseph Turner states that nowadays in Canadian society race is considered just an arbitrary way of classifying groups of people, designed in Europe and taking account only of biological features. It is thus considered a category that lacks empirical support and justifies the domination of one group by another (2005: 313). At the centre of this idea, then, difference can be regarded as the strategy, the imperialistic weapon, used to keep the first colonizers, the “white Europeans”, in power. In the same line,

Bhabha concludes: “despite the ‘play’ in the colonial system which is crucial to its exercise of power, colonial discourse produces the colonized as a social reality which is at once an ‘other’ and yet entirely knowable and visible” (1998: 70-71).

If Bhabha describes the ‘other’ as “entirely knowable and visible”, Bannerji uses the term “visible minorities” to define the social imagining. She states that in the space of Canada, colonial discourse relates the ‘whites’ and the ‘non whites’ in a multicultural discourse. It is the consequence of the presence of ‘others’ who are recognized, visible and finally impossible to ignore. This multicultural discourse is the ideological construction of the Canadian nation based on difference and dependent on the concept of community. Community, affected by difference, becomes a structure in which it becomes very difficult to bring into the private and the personal. Bhabha describes the concept of community in these terms:

In the metropolitan space it is the territory of the minority, threatening the claims of civility; in the transnational world it becomes the border-problem of the diasporic, the migrant, the refugee. (1998: 231)

In view of this obstacle, Bannerji explains in her essay that to imagine a community implies making a project in which difference could be valued. She also assumes that the source of this difference is just cultural difference. However, this obstacle is the consequence of a difference that has its roots in race.

It is at this point that multicultural discourse is born. As Bannerji mentions in her essay *The Paradox of Diversity* (1998) this multicultural discourse is based on difference, a difference that is created by the comparison and contrast of the possible ‘Canadian’ subjects:

But colour was translated into the language of visibility. The New Canadian social and political subject was appellated “visible minority”, stressing both the features of being non-white and therefore visible in a way whites are not, and being politically minor players. (2000: 30)

She coincides with Bhabha in this definition of the ‘other’ as a subject marked by his visibility in racial terms. Bhabha states that “the visibility of the racial/colonial Other is at once a *point* of identity” (1998: 81). As a mark of identity, Bannerji understands that skin colour is also a mark of tradition and culture and, in terms of nation construction, a tool of the political discourse of liberalism. The combination of these elements makes possible the cultural integration of colour divested of racism. Bannerji uses and interprets the concept of “visible minority” as a celebration of colour and difference, a brightness that makes possible the discourse of diversity as an alternative to the multicultural discourse. However, it seems that although the category of “visible minority” opens a new hope for

integration, these “visible minorities” are the immigrants, newcomers, refugees, aliens, illegals, people of colour, multicultural communities who emigrated due to poverty. In spite of the Canadian Multicultural Act, these categories seem and feel to be excluded from society, in the light of Bannerji’s texts. From this point of view, they may become important weapons in the hands of the state apparatus to modify the conditions of freedom and restrict the access to integration. Francis Joseph Turner talks about this in his book and states:

Race-related concepts remain important for social work because historical perceptions about racial differences have been used to justify inequities and oppression of some persons and communities, from false notions about the inherent superiority of others. Systemic racism persists throughout Canadian society, often affecting the circumstances and life experiences of social clients, despite Canadian multicultural laws. (2005: 313)

Thus, it could be stated, visibility is transformed from brightness into darkness in the hands of the state. Visibility is what makes the minorities be seen and recognized and what makes them the support of cultural imperialism and white power. Nonetheless, invisibility is a consequence of visibility. This invisibility is a metaphor for the excluded categories that represents the fact of being politically and socially minor players in a society that sometimes considers them necessary but which, at the same time, can consider them a threat of destruction for the domination of only one group over the rest. How do these excluded categories fit in the definition of Canada and Canadianess? Bannerji answers this question:

The identity of the Canadian ‘we’ does not reside in language, religion or other aspects of culture, but rather in the European/North American physical origin—in the body and the colour of skin. Colour of skin is elevated here beyond its contingent status and becomes an essential quality called whiteness, and this becomes the ideological signifier of a unified non-diversity. The others outside of this moral and cultural whiteness are targets for either assimilation or toleration. These diverse or multicultural elements, who are also called newcomers, introducing notions of territoriality and politicized time, create accommodational difficulties for white Canadians, both at the level of the civil society, of culture and economy, and also for the ruling practices of the state. (2000: 42-43)

There is one more identity aspect which defines and conditions the “visible minority”: raced women. Woman, as Himani Bannerji says, is “the sign of the nation” (2001: 54), a space where she is doubly subjected both to the patriarchal colonial state and the patriarchal nation. According to her, “women are thus advised or presumed to be contented with their status of ‘non-autonomous, non-bourgeois, non-secular personhood’” (2001: 56). All her critical and fictional work explores the relationship between race and sex as biological markers that cause and

justify subordination and marginalization. Accordingly, Himani Bannerji uses again the term “visible minority” to define woman as a raced individual manipulated and silenced by the patriarchal community and nation. In her poetry Bannerji gives voice to these “visible minorities” especially to women in an act of struggle that finally “becomes so many people” (1986: 11).

Ashcroft, Griffiths and Tiffin tackled the question of “why the empire needs to write back to a “centre” where “language becomes the medium through which a hierarchical structure of power is perpetuated, and the medium through which conceptions of ‘truth’, ‘order’, and ‘reality’ become established” (2005: 6-7). Bannerji subverts language and uses its power to create the language of the minorities, to give a new perspective of truth, order and reality, and, particularly, to create the space that this new language can describe. The poetic voice of Bannerji’s poetry is the voice of the diasporic individual, the immigrant who lives in the fissure between two worlds: the past and the present. Bhabha states that the immigrant subject “requires the experience of anxiety” understanding anxiety as “the affective address of a ‘world [that] reveals itself as caught up in the space between frames” (1998: 214). This is what he calls the “in between spaces”, the space where Bannerji’s speaking subject lives. Deconstructing the imperial language results in a new language, a language that can be attributed to the “visible minorities” and is able to build up a new space and with it a new identity, a new reality and a new truth. Roshan G. Shahani says in reference to Bannerji’s poetry that the poetic space is supposed to be a space of “existential angst” or “exited psyche” (1996: 180). I agree with the conclusion that Bannerji’s poetry lacks this sense of “exited psyche” or direct immigrant experience to be replaced with a broken voice that is transforming all the pain into struggle and resistance. Bannerji’s poetry goes one step further turning her poetry into a weapon with which the obstacles of multiculturalism can be overcome.

In her book of poems entitled *Doing Time*, Himani Bannerji puts into practice all her critical theory about racism, gender, patriarchy and nationalism. Each poem seems to be a voice that describes and an eye that sees the same place but from different perspectives. Each poem is a different window opened in the same house and the act of speaking through it reveals a new world and, with it, a new identity. In this collection of poems Bannerji creates an imaginary space that is described as a fracture. A middle space where culture, races and gendered races create. There, they find a voice that destroys the barriers imposed by postcolonial Canadian society. With these poems she gives voice to the margins of society and, in a way, she rewrites history. The poem that introduces these different voices is the one that gives its name to the whole book, “Doing Time”, a poem that summarizes the poetic content and presents the main metaphors:

If we who are not white, and also women, have not yet seen that here we live in a prison, that we are doing time, then we are fools, playing unenjoyable games with ourselves. (1986: 9)

The central voice that she describes is the voice of a woman who considers the place where she lives to be a prison. As Susan Jacob explains in her analysis of the ‘prison’ image in Bannerji’s poetry, this reflects both the lack of personal and private life but particularly the rejection of the concept of freedom as something false and an unreal product of imperialism (1996: 191-192). This “we” that she refers to in this fragment will become in the end “so many people” because principally they are “doing time”. Bannerji, giving voice in her poem to these minorities, is rewriting history, is uncovering the corrupted and violent methods through which colonialism took root. As a colonized and postcolonial country, Canada’s history has been told by the same dominant group which in this case is the voice of the white European individual. Once the Multicultural State is accepted, history as it is known should be modified by those voices which now have a recognized place in Canadian society. The unique historical perspective has to leave a way open for these voices to reconstruct and create their histories in Canadian society. This is what Bannerji does with her poetry: she is opening an alternative and creating a new perspective necessary to create a space not constructed under Eurocentric principles.

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In her poem “between sound and meaning” she describes clearly that ‘in between space’ into which the immigrant and the non-white individual fall in a postcolonial society. This voice is “standing at the crossroads”, between two cultures where she is nameless, without an identity. The past connected to suffering and slavery is dragged by this voice from room to room like prison chains on her ankles while she is trying to free herself through the act of writing poetry. This is impossible because her original language has been left behind in the process of immigration and consequent integration into a new society. This condition of double consciousness (in W.E.B. Dubois’s terms) and race are connected with the central image of the poem: the space between sound and meaning:

You have fallen into a fissure,  
Between sound and meaning.  
You run your hands over your body  
Feeling out the length, the breadth, the depth. (1986: 14)

Between sound and meaning there is a fissure where she can feel and touch her body. With these two images she makes a combination of language and body. The word is a combination of sound and meaning in its material manifestation: the signifier. Hence, we can interpret that in the middle of sound and meaning is the signifier. The signifier is what makes the word visible as her raced and gendered

body makes her visible and condemns her to live in a fissure of recognition that at the same time takes her into a position of inferiority. Indeed, in her essay *The Paradox of Diversity*, she describes race as an ideological signifier:

Colour of skin is elevated here beyond its contingent status and becomes an essential quality called whiteness, and this becomes the ideological signifier of a non-diversity. (2000: 42)

There is an attempt to integrate “inventing a name”, an identity. However, the threat of racism and violence is always present in this case in the figure of Mara as the Hindu Goddess who brings death. It can be interpreted that past fear and death are always present in that dark fissure which at the same time, as a hope, can also be a return to the darkness of the mother’s womb that is only possible in sleep. Once they are awake they are out in the patriarchal world where they are only what they want them to be. This point takes us back to her reflection about how the brightness of visibility has been turned into darkness that, in this situation, has become a refuge.

If “between sound and meaning” is a poem that deals with the image of space in relation with the gendered and raced individual, “Canada in Winter” is a poem that directly identifies this space with Canada and connects it with patriarchy. Again the voice of a woman describes, with grotesque and terrifying corporal images, the result of that cruel, violent and racist part of postcolonial Canada. The first reading of this poem creates an image that brings out at the same time feelings and metaphors as those evoked by Sylvia Plath’s poem “Lady Lazarus”. Actually, this reading has a referent in the book. Bannerji writes a poem tribute on the occasion of Plath’s death called “To Sylvia Plath” (1986: 38). “Canada in Winter” is a poem that in its images seems to echo “Lady Lazarus” to express the patriarchal oppression that, in a way, is expressed by the poets as a torture; but in the case of Bannerji’s poem, she adds the postcolonial condition with which the male oppressor is able to use not only gender but also race to exert his power and domination. In addition to this, exiled women suffer, on the one hand, the patriarchal actions and situations of the society they are trying to integrate into and, on the other, the patriarchal domination imposed by their own culture. In this case the patriarchal oppression is double especially in the case of South Asian men whose culture is based on the control of men above the rest of the individuals. In the poem, Canada is described as a distant cold landscape of snow and whiteness, snow representing cold in a place where she cannot integrate. The cold is outside and outside is the world of the fathers and inside is the house, a warm place associated with the mother’s womb. To complete the image of Canada as a cold white landscape, the poet adds the image of the wind. The wind stands for the sound of the landscape, as the voice of Canada that constantly talks to these non-white

women that appear in Bannerji's poems. The wind drags with it the painful past and therefore the real history that the official one is trying to hide: "the snow cannot hide the blood anymore" (1986: 43) like "sadness is rubbed against your ankles" (2000: 14) in "between sound and meaning".

The voice of the woman is constructed, as I mentioned before, through grotesque and terrifying images, reflecting the poem "Lady Lazarus". Some of Bannerji's verses can be read as echoes of Plath's. Both poetic voices are describing a woman who is slowly dying. Bannerji describes a wounded bleeding woman who leaves a trace of blood in the snow, on the white skin of Canada, painting it with her colour. This image can be connected with Plath's description of her poetic voice as a "sort of walking miracle". Both images can be linked by the idea of gas, lamps and light that can be interpreted as metaphors related to the Nazi regime concerning genocide, death and dehumanization. Concretely, light represents the outside and the patriarchal world; darkness represents the inside and the mother's womb. At the end of the poem we see Bannerji's woman transformed into the mythical bird 'The Phoenix':

Torn wings  
Leaves  
Feathers  
In the bush. (1986: 430)

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The woman who at the beginning of the poem was dying now has torn wings, that is, has lost her freedom, waiting for her only possible salvation at the hands of her executioner. However, in the comparative terms used to analyze this poem, we can assume that, like Lady Lazarus and 'The Phoenix', this woman will rise out of her ashes, will reinvent herself and resist. In fact the poem ends with a tone of resistance and struggle because she extends the suffering of one woman to women in general and to those who are victims of oppression: "everywhere/millions are dying" (1986: 43).

"Apart-hate" connects space with race. Concretely, it describes Canada as a cultural imperialistic society where non white people are subjected to a postcolonial power. In other words, it deals with the situation of the immigrant in a society dominated by the same ruling group (the white European colonizers who established their power once they arrived in the country) who fights to maintain that domination that seems to weaken in the postcolonial and multicultural Canada. Here Bannerji clearly makes reference to all the "visible minorities" that live in Canadian society. She plays with the concept 'Apartheid' to change it into 'Apart-hate', describing, on the one hand, the racial segregation that this term defines and, on the other, highlighting the violence and rage that gave origin to this action. Bannerji writes in her essay *On the Dark Side of the Nation*:



***Too visible: Race, gender and resistance in the construction...***

An unofficial apartheid, of culture and identity, organizes the social space of 'Canada', first between whites and non-whites, and then within the non-whites themselves. (1998: 108)

Canada is again represented as a white landscape and as a land governed by white individuals. As she states in the previous paragraph, Canada practises a hidden cultural apartheid that reveals itself through violence (1986: 46-47):

In this whiteland  
Chinese coolies, black slaves, Indian indentures  
Immigration, head tax, virginity tests

Apart-hate

Sudden attacks in the dark  
In the dawn with cops and dogs  
White Cop plays with her mouth —resuscitates  
London Pretoria Toronto

Apart-hate

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The word 'Apart-hate' divides the poem into different sections as apartheid does. It is a refrain that with each repetition seems to condemn its victims more heavily. In the poem it sounds like a confirmatory chorus that manifests its strong desire to make effective what this voice says as in a mantra. Each raced individual is described in terms of slavery that in its essence implies violence and each has his particular adjective. It is striking that she does not use any adjective to refer to the word 'immigration', suggesting that that condition regroups the minorities mentioned in the verse before. More striking is how she describes women with the words "virginity tests". While in the poem "Canada in Winter" the voice of the woman suggested her inferior and oppressed condition as a victim of a patriarchal society and culture, here she is described in terms of sexual property. Himani Bannerji writes on this matter:

Women of the nation are thus permitted to be sexed beings only as property, as owned beings to serve their husbands and patriarchal lineage by being mothers of the nation and national heroes. (2001: 67)

She is a property for a patriarchal society and for her culture as a South Asian woman. The poem finishes with the image of this raced skin considered as 'pelt'. This is a denigration of the raced minorities who are again offended and marginalized because of their body visibility:

In this white land  
Skin is fingered like pelt  
Skin is sold and the ivory of her eyes

The category human has no meaning  
When spoken in white  
Apart-hate.

This white society treats the non-whites as non-human and grotesque individuals, disgusting and terrifying beings whose strangeness manifests itself in decayed physical features as blood, or pelt that at the same time transforms them into shadows, semi-dead people. The image of a non-human grotesque is a metaphor that represents the treatment of the non-whites by the white society. Ignorance regarding women and other cultures or races makes the white humans behave as non humans to maintain their power and their particular essence of humanity.

All the main elements analyzed in the three previous poems are condensed in the poem “Paki Go Home” with a new element which defines both her critical and poetic work: resistance. If in the other poems resistance, struggle and hope were insinuated, in this poem resistance becomes the central and final image of the poem. The poem is divided into three parts. The first part of the poem situates the poetic voice in a place in winter trapped in an atmosphere of “fear anger contempt” that wires the bodies. She describes a hostile situation of repression that in this part of the poem is generalized to all the non whites. In the last stanza of this section the situation blows up:

And a grenade explodes  
In the sunless afternoon  
And words run down  
Like frothy white spit  
Down her bent head  
Down the serene parting of her dark skin  
As she stands too visible  
From home to bus stop to home  
Raucous, hyena laughter,  
“Paki, go home”

She makes this tense atmosphere explode by going from the general to the particular and showing how this South-Asian woman is attacked in an ordinary and harmless situation. The cruel words “frothy white spit” try to stain her coloured body with fear, contamination and despair. White land and white spit are images related to Canada and the white community. This connection makes them a symbol of corruption and cruelty. The second part of the poem describes the woman going

back home and establishes a brilliant, but at the same time sad, relationship between the Canadian winter landscape and her body:

The light of her sadness runs like tears  
Down the concrete hills, tarmac rivers  
And the gullies of the cities  
The wind still carries the secret chuckle  
The rustle of canes  
As black brown bodies flee into the night  
Blanched by the salt waters of the moon.  
Strange dark fruit on tropical trees  
Swing in the breeze gently. (1986: 16)

The union between her body and the landscape is established with images like “blanched by the salt waters”, connected to the image “frothy white spit”, in an attempt not to integrate these “black brown bodies” but to swallow them and make them disappear. The brightness of her visibility is now transformed into tears that take her down to the “gullies of the city”, take her to that fissure “between sound and meaning”. Wind covers the crushing city and it pulls with it the painful past and racism. The last two verses open the third and most revealing part of the poem comparing the raced minorities with “strange dark fruit” that still lives. This hope is transformed into a resistance weapon, into a form of contestation that will speak “like a song, like a roar, like a prophecy that changes the world”:

To organize, to fight the slaver’s dogs,  
To find the hand, the foot, the tongue,  
The body dismembered  
Organ by organ rejoined  
Organized.  
Soul breathed in until she, he  
The young, the old is whole.  
Until the hand acts moved by the mind  
And the walls, the prisons, the chains of lead or gold  
Tear, crumble, wither into dust  
And the dead bury the dead  
Until yesterdays never return. (1986: 17)

This part goes from the particular experience of the South Asian woman to the general again, in order to organize themselves in an attempt to keep their own identity and finally get together in one community. Together they will destroy the prison they live in and by this means they will create their own freedom. This destruction is a regeneration of the past: they have to use the painful past, the

history seen by their eyes to destroy the present and restore everything into a future that will allow them to create and express their real identity.

The four poems analyzed summarize the four main images developed throughout the book of poems *Doing Time* in an accumulative and simultaneous process of elements that build a space and a multicultural identity. Space, as an abstract ‘in between space’ of confusion, and the voice of the immigrant woman who speaks from a double patriarchal oppression, culminate in the representation of space in relation to imperialism, gender and race in the poem “Apart-hate”. These three images that constitute the space of “between sound and meaning”, “Canada in Winter” and “Apart-hate” show their ultimate intention in the poem “Paki Go Home” which is to grow from that new space into weapons of resistance able to make a space for them in society.

Himani Bannerji makes of her poetry her most valued weapon. She discovers the language of the margins of society to include new voices in history and revise the national identity with the experience of the exiled individuals. Her personal experience as a South Asian Canadian woman helped her to work out a theory that confronts the official history of Canadian society and was necessary to build the pillars of a new space for the new comers who are treated as aliens. In conclusion, racism, gender, patriarchy and resistance, which live in Canadian society, are the foundations of this space that is a result of the deconstruction of these concepts. Bannerji constructs her poetry to struggle against cultural imperialism and to build up a place where the “visible minorities” will be able to be themselves without any kind of oppression or marginalization. Racism and patriarchy become weapons to fight against the postcolonial oppressive structures and to regenerate their lives. Bannerji depicts and gives voice in her poems to a social multiculturalism, an activist multiculturalism that resists and fights with the poems and leaves a door open for hope, freedom and equality.

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