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"Voices at the Crossroads: East Indian Women, Grass-Root Culture, and the Power of Becoming"

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Voices at the Crossroads
East Indian Women, Grass-Root Culture, and the Power of Becoming

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# Table of Contents

Introduction 5

I. Women and Culture

Indian as a Culture 8

Chaste – Sex in Bondage 9

Inferiorization of Women 12

Enduring Oppression: Gender and Tradition 14

The Politicizing of Sexuality 16

Arranged Marriages 17

The Overcast(e) Woman 18

The Principles of the Caste System 21

Assimilation – East India in the West Indies 22

Carnival – My Land, My Heritage 24

II. Literature and Diaspora: Telling New Stories

Modernism and the Indian Diaspora 26

Jamila- Disarranging the Marriage 27
Tradition versus Individuality 30
Women Empowering Women 34
The Art of Darkness 39
Malala Yousafzai: Putting the Blindfold in the Trash 40
The Depth and Color of Oppression 43
Ammu – A Woman Recast(e) 48
Sophie Mol: The Time Keeper 51

III. The Crossroads

Saving Faith for Last 53
The Unravelling of the Authentic Self 56
Voices at the Cross-roads 58

Works Cited 60
Every river delves and slowly defines its own bed:

each flood leaves its mark along the banks of its

own particular channel on the bottom: just so does

emotion constantly forge and alters its motives…

Light cannot penetrate the cracks through which water may leak;

but in a cave the flow of water may be recognized by its mysterious music.

—Jose Vasconcelos
Introduction

This thesis is designed to explore and to explain how culture is used instrumentally to confine, ostracize, and oppress women of East Indian culture and heritage, and the Indian woman’s struggle to liberate herself from cultural oppression. Women of East Indian descent, whether they are Hindus, Muslims, or have converted to Christianity, are conditioned, shaped, and designed by Indian culture and heritage from a very young age, and they are expected to behave in ways that are conducive to their tradition. For instance, remaining chaste until marriage, the caste system, arranged marriages, illiteracy, and the prevention of assimilation with other religions and cultures, are some of the important and essential doctrine in East Indian cultures to keep the lid on women.

I am of East Indian descent, and although I was born in Trinidad and Tobago, which is a beautiful Caribbean island in the West Indies, a country that has given me my own identity as a Caribbean woman. I was raised under the strict Vedic laws of Hinduism. Both my paternal and maternal grandparents came from Jaipur, India, as indentured laborers, and to preserve their heritage and culture was paramount. With them, the building blocks of Indian culture came across the waters of the Indian Ocean and spilled into the Caribbean Sea. In The God of Small Things Arundhati Roy brings to the surface the stink of the caste system, and how it strips women of their value, while Hanif Kureishi in The Buddha of Suburbia addresses the souring effect of arranged marriages on women who are forced into loveless relationships. Malala Yousafzai in her memoir I am Malala addresses the plight of the illiterate woman, and her own struggle for education for women, while in my own personal experience, where I dared to assimilate
with another culture by intermarriage, I made a bend in my traditional river, and created corners that I could not see. All of these works not only speak meaningfully about women who struggled by faith to bring dignity, hope, and spiritual sustenance to their lives, but also to the women who continue the struggle for the liberation of women.

In my thesis, *Voices at the Crossroads*, I will attempt to show that society may take away a woman’s chair but cannot take away her desire to sit. From my own experience with cultural oppression, and my fight for autonomy, I am inclined to believe that the winds of change have propelled the oppressed women of East Indian heritage to advance and to break away from the powerful coiled spring of the patriarchal society that they were born into, and to seek their own redemption by looking into other cultures and other women’s fight for their own liberation, value, and self-worth.

In Hanif Kureishi’s novel *The Buddha of Suburbia*, Jamila is British-born but with Indian ancestry. She rages against her arranged marriage, and by looking into American culture, and the African American women’s struggle for their own redemption, she is inspired by Angela Davis, a black African-American Human Rights activist, to redeem herself, and to take control of her own body. Davis’s central concern is the liberation of women worldwide, and she encourages women “to lift as we climb.” Malala Yousafzai in her memoir *I am Malala*, almost lost her life in her struggle for education for women in a society that fosters female illiteracy. She is from Pakistan, but takes her inspiration from books written by feminist author Jane Austin, and the German poet Martin Niemoller. Her struggle brought a change of attitude and consciousness to her society, and she maintains that education is not Eastern or Western, but that it is human.
Ammu, the oppressed woman in Arundhati Roy’s novel *The God of Small Things*, recasts the caste system by defying the voice of the oppressor with a voice of her own. She is born in India, but listens to the voice of British singers, such as the Rolling Stones, on her transistor radio. It is the words of the songs that sparked the language of physical and emotional needs within her, and moves her to commit to personal change and transformation, and to seek a new vision and a whole new pie. In my thesis, I make reference to Sojourner Truth because, although I was born in the Caribbean and raised within the realms of Indian culture, it was her voice that gave me renewed interest in my own value and self-worth. Her Akron, Ohio speech persuaded me to realize that, as women, we cannot stand freely unless we are liberated from within, and face the challenge and resistance that inhibits our human freedom, and to candidly ask ourselves, “Ain’t I a woman?”
I. Women and Culture

Indian as a Culture

East Indian culture is very complex. It is a culture that is divided up into many subcultures to create what is referred to as the “caste system.” The ultimate goal of each caste is to preserve the heritage, culture, and lineage of the family. To ensure the purity of ones caste, arranged marriages are vital to the East Indian culture. What I find disturbing about the caste system, Indian culture, and arranged marriages, is that it pushes women into loveless relationships just to uphold the ancient traditions of India, regardless of which country or what other social societies that these Indian women were born into.

As an Indian woman that was born in the Caribbean island of Trinidad and Tobago, and raised under the strict Vedic laws of Hinduism, I know, firsthand, that cultural oppression starts at the head and the heart of the family. It conditions the family to live, eat, worship, and behave in particular ways that are conducive to one’s heritage and tradition. Culture is taught powerfully and persuasively especially to the young female child of East Indian society. Women are raised to remain chaste until marriage because the burden of the caste purity lies squarely on their shoulders. Although I was born on the other side of the world, far away from where my ancestral culture is rooted, I was forced to wear my Indian culture like a halo over my head. Whenever I arrived home a little late from school, or from the movies, my mother’s soprano voice followed me from our front porch to my bedroom. “Chile, do’h mek me shame, ah beggin yo. Yo fadda gon kill yo.”
Chaste: Sex in Bondage

Lakshmi Persaud, author of *Butterfly in the Wind*, is also a Trinidadian of East Indian heritage. She grew up in the village of Tunapuna, and I was raised in the village of Barataria. Both of these provinces are predominantly Indian villages. In her novel, she criticizes the Trinidadian East Indian patriarchal society that seeks dominance over women’s sexuality. She also noted that since to be chaste until marriage was of utmost importance, girls were always under surveillance - especially by their fathers, so as to avoid pre-marital pregnancies that are considered taboo in East Indian society. If such pregnancy occurs, she says, “…never again would the father of such an uncaring and foolish daughter be able to walk the road with his head held high.” She says that in instances “when youthful passion overleapt cultural barriers” the wrath of the father falls on the mother since the mother is ultimately held responsible for the imperfections in her daughter’s upbringing and character. Persaud says that as a child she was introduced to stories that are written in the *Ramayna* and the *Mahabharat* both of which are ancient scriptures of Hinduism. These stories, about chaste women, and women like Sita, the wife of the Hindu deity Rama, who had to prove her fidelity to her husband by walking through fire, was told to her by her mother - trial by fire this was called, and if Sita was an infidel, so the story goes, she would have been burned to ashes (Persaud 102). Here again we see culture molding the mind of the child at a very young age.

In Trinidad, in the 1960’s, whenever I attended an Indian wedding I observed that an elderly woman, appointed as the *lukanee*, accompanied the bride to her husband’s house, after the marriage ceremony, to bring back proof of her chastity, especially to the parents of the groom. I did not fully understand the significance of the chaperon until I
was about fifteen years old, and my mother explained the importance of the *lukanee*. Of course I listened with unspoken distaste. It was a very nerve wrecking experience for the girl’s parents because, I know from personal observation in my own community, that if the girl is found to be unchaste, she is returned home to her parents. But the dowry is not returned; it is kept by the groom’s parents. Also, it was not unknown in my community that the return of the “*slut*” daughters caused fathers to commit suicide. This practice, of course, originated from East Indian culture. However, by the early 70s, I believe that Indian women in Trinidad emerged more liberal by looking to women outside of their own tradition, and by examining other cultures that have become part of the Caribbean melting pot. The Chinese, Afro-Trinidadians, Hispanics, or even the indigenous people of Trinidad and Tobago (the Caribs) who Columbus encountered when he landed on the Island, from my own observation, their women were not subjected to harsh cultural ideals, especially the idea of the *lukanee*. It is customary that the Indian wedding ceremony takes place at the bride’s home or her village temple, then the groom must bring his wife into his parents’ home to be welcome into her new family, before taking off on their honeymoon. The *lukanee* usually rides with the newly wed.

By the late 70’s, the illiterate woman, the educated class women, and the working class women, whether she was chaste or not, objected to be chaperoned to their bridal chamber. For the sake of tradition, these women accepted the chaperon, but en route to the groom’s house, after the ceremony, the *lukanee* was discharged. The groom, at his wife’s insistence, hailed a cab, and sent the *lukanee* back to her village. In the 1970’s Trinidad carried a weekly Newspaper called *The Bomb* and it is here where we learned the names and status of the Indian women who rebelled against the ancient spy. Often it
was heard that a *lukanee* was left stranded on the roadside, and these actions, eventually, brought an end to a very embarrassing tradition that presided over women’s sexuality. Although these chaperons were paid handsomely, women were skeptical, or even too embarrassed, to take on the task of the *lukanee*. This morbid act is nothing more than an invasion of one’s privacy.

Adulthood places women in the crossroads, and it is here, in this place, that we shed our childhood mentality, and begin to look deeper into ourselves and to our universe. Persaud says that as she grew older she could not help thinking that the stories from the *Ramayana*, the ones that she was told as a child, did not affect the Indian men the same way that it affected the women. She observed that the men had extramarital affairs, and their illiterate wives, who were economically challenged, were forced to stay in the relationship, especially for the sake of the children. She says, “That, I felt, was unfair and unjust. And I saw women’s acceptance of this not as a result of their having a greater capacity to absorb pain or to forgive...but because of their helpless dependence upon their husbands. I was overcome by sorrow for my sex in bondage, and for the real terrifying predicament biology and custom had placed in them. I was not aware of how strongly I carried this sense of injustice” (Persaud 103). Although Persaud’s understanding of morality was formed by her parents, her culture, the pundits, and by the interpretation of the *Ramayana*, it is at the cross-road, where the self and culture clashed, that she affirmed the ability to be self-defining. She evaluates what was fed to her culturally against her own findings within her society and tradition, and found that brainwash and hogwash are intertwined, somehow.
While Indian women are tethered on short ropes and given very little leeway, Persaud noted that the playing field for Indian men are vast and varied. At a time in history when women were expected to revere the patriarch in the family, Persaud showed outward contempt for the tradition that imprisons women and liberates men. She says, within ear-reach of her father, “Men who commit adultery should be shot” (103).

**Inferiorization of Women**

Persaud’s narrative shows the fixed ceiling that is crucially constructed by the cultural Pundits to control and manipulate women. From childhood we are taught to revere our male counterparts, and to accept our dependency on our fathers and husbands as our fate or *karma*. Personally, from my own experiences, I envision that the *inferiorization* of women is essential to the functioning of the Indian culture because it allows the men to net enough herrings as his heart desires, and then come home to scented roses. It happened to my friend Charlotte who has taught me much more than I could have obtained from books. Charlotte was a poor Hindu girl that stood at my gate every afternoon after school hoping that my friends and I would welcome her to play in my big doll-house. We were both about seven years old, she had no toys, she was low caste, and always shabbily dressed, and my father did not see her as a suitable playmate for his children. My mother did not harbor such views—to me she was the mother of all children.

One day, as she stood at our gate it started to rain and she tried to take shelter under our avocado tree that graced the front of our house. Downstairs was the playroom, and
we kept the door opened so that my parents can supervise. Upon my instructions, my
friend turn the dollhouse away from Charlotte’s view, and then we all turned our backs to
her. My mother baked brownies, and on her way downstairs to give us our treat, she
observed the little girl standing in the rain. She immediately ushered her in and gave her
one of my dresses to wear. My mother gave us each a brownie and mine fell in a bowl of
water color that was sitting on the floor. Immediately Charlotte stretched out her hands to
me. “Here, take mine,” she said. I started to cry; my mother thought that I was crying for
my lost cooking, but, instead, I was crying for the pain that I caused a little girl because
she was different. I observed that none of my Brahmin friends offered me their treat.

At the age of sixteen, her father married her off to a much older man who was
financially stabled but who had two grown children. She was young and beautiful, and
her husband wield control over her by rendering her inferior. She was not allowed to go
shopping, or to attend social functions alone, or even to seek employment. To control her
he had to render her house-bound by constantly reminding her that an Indian woman’s
place is in the house. At social functions he would accuse her of eying other men, and he
would dragged her away in full view of everyone looking. Embarrassment and abuse
rendered her inferior making it easier for him to dominate, oppress, and control her. She
confided in me that he told her, “Who go hire you? Yo don know fo spell rat, muchless
cheese. An’ what shoppin’ you want to do? Yo don know fo spen money. Yo fadder neva
had any, and de only money dat yo know is mine.” In 2013 when I visited her at her
home in Brooklyn she showed signs of early Alzheimer’s disease. I waited in her dining
room while she went upstairs to get her family album. After what seemed like an hour, I
went to find her. She was in pajamas, sound asleep in her bed.
Enduring Oppression: Gender and Tradition

East Indian culture is taught to the female sector of the Indian household long before they are adolescents, or have even started their menstrual cycle. I was about eight years old when my father’s youngest sister, Radha, eloped with her Venezuelan lover because she was pregnant. She was promised to a Brahmin’s son, a boy from the village of Udaipur, Rajasthan, where my grandmother came from. Two days after she eloped her father, which was my paternal grandfather, gathered all the young unwed women of the family into the family-room and he gave a stern lecture on how we were supposed to behave as Indian women: we must preserve and reserve our virginity for the arranged marriage that we are destined for, and that intercultural and interracial marriages are taboo to our culture, and we, the women, must preserve our heritage and caste by union with our own kind. I will never forget his last words before he walked away. “Radha is dead,” he said. “She will never be accepted into this house again.” Then he proceeded to remove all of her photographs from the walls of our living-room, and from family albums, and placing them on our old fireside, which was a clay hearth that we cooked on outdoors to save on kerosene (kerosene stoves were popular in Trinidad in the early sixties), and he burned them. My grandfather was a Hindu priest. He was well respected in the temple. When I was older I realized that the effect of my aunt’s behavior did not only affect our family but also our entire community. In the temple my grandfather taught the strict values and mores of Indian culture to the members of his congregation, now he was confronted with something that he was totally unprepared for: the repercussion of his daughter’s behavior: he had to endure the young women in his congregation whispering and laughing as if they no longer cared for his logic on dharma.
and *karma*. I was standing next to him one Sunday morning when a teenage girl told him, 

“You couldn’t see yo own data. She belly swell right unda yo nose. Ah glad she run away. If I was she, I woulda run away too before somebody kill me because a dey culcha.” I remembered that my grandfather had once reprimanded this same young lady for getting too close to a black boy in the neighborhood. It was her moment to get even, and she seized it.

It was ten years later that I saw my aunt Radha again. She arrived from Venezuela for her mother’s funeral, but she was not allowed at the viewing, and neither at the ceremony nor the burial. She stood across the street, alone, as we were strictly advised to disown her, and from there she mourned her mother. “Look who come,” said my cousin Gopica in her Trinidadian sing-song lingo. “She modda will neva rest in peace. Na mek she cast she eyes on de coffin.”

“Kuta,” said my grandfather (Radha’s father) in his gibberish sounding Indian accent, as he spat on the ground in the direction in which Radha was standing. Kuta translates to dog in the English language. My grandfather was kindhearted and generous, but winter moved into his eyes and presided there whenever he was confronted with disquieting situations, especially if these situations interfered with his heritage and culture, and if the character of the women in the family became questionable. Both my parents and my grand-parents and all of their siblings who migrated from India, had one common view: the only people that are worse than those who amputate their culture are atheists and communists. Their theory prompted me to think that some people are wise while some are otherwise.
The Politicalizing of Sexuality

The politics and policies of Indian society are strictly ordained by the male patriarchs, and it is the foundation on which the Indian culture is erected, taught, and accepted by specific groups of people. The principles of these policies are geared to confine and restrain women’s sexuality, and push women to live in a state of psychological stress. After all, it is not difficult to envision the stress that an Indian woman endures from girlhood to adolescence as she contemplates her unavoidable fate with an arranged marriage, where she is thrown together with a perfect stranger to whom she must submit and be loyal to. Also, the caste system confines women to men and sexual partners of her own caste and heritage only. Since she is ordained to produce the seeds for tomorrow’s crop, the burden to continue, and to preserve the caste which she was born into, lays heavily on the woman.

The politics of Indian culture forces women to accept their subordination and economical challenges as part of their biological makeup: women are baby-makers and men are head of households, so obviously education is wasted on the female. Assimilation is also disallowed in the policy laws as it restricts women from interacting with people of other race and class, thus preventing them from gaining knowledge outside of their own culture and heritage. I have met girls of my own Brahmin culture who were interested in soulmates of French, Spanish, and mulatto heritage. These men were both good-looking and gainfully employed, but because of the “cultural glue” some of these girls were doomed to live in poverty because they were given in marriage to poor Brahmin men. My friend Neelam proclaimed, “Of all de men I get to marry a man with...
Rembrandt face an Gandhi physique. I stay a virgin fo’ dis? I go kick his ass daily, mark my words.”

I marked her words and I realized, for the first time, that a chasm was created between my mother’s era of cultural acceptance and the modern woman’s outlook and acceptance of that same culture that oppresses women, and I felt that a change was about to happen in the form of a cultural revolution.

**Arranged Marriages**

Arranged marriages are deemed to oppress women, stripping away their privilege to secure a husband of their own choice, and to whom they will want to commit to. A marriage is considered arranged when the matchmaking originates with someone other than the future spouses. In *Marriage, Family, and Relationship: A Cross-Cultural Encyclopedia*, Gwen Broude, in her research, finds that in many Asian cultures the women have no say in the choice of a spouse. In China, the heads of the families sign the marriage contract and the signatures of the couple are not required. In Javanese, the bride sees her future husband on the day of the wedding. In India, especially in the Garo society, parents arrange marriages between children, sometimes before the children are born, so as to preserve and strengthen the lineage of their heritage. In some cultures if a woman resist entering into an arranged marriage brutal force is applied to persuade her to give in (Broude 192-193).

Notably, Broude’s concept of an arranged marriage contrasts vastly with the views of Bansi Pandit, who is of East Indian descent and the author of *The Hindu Mind*: 
Fundamentals of Hindu Religion and Philosophy for all Ages. While Broude seems to disavow the practice by revealing its negativities, Pandit clearly praises this practice as one that is necessary to the sacrament of marriage. Pandit says that arranged marriages are viewed as a life-long commitment, and Grhastha ashrama (beginning a household) is the stage of the marriage where heritage is preserved by affirming to one’s culture. To retain the bloodline is to pay homage to the ancestors. He says that man and woman become soul mates through the institution of marriage and not through falling in love and courtship, therefore, marriage is not a concession to human weakness, but a means for spiritual growth. The spiritual ideal of arrange marriages requires the couple to recognize marriage as a permanent lifetime relationship and therefore an indissoluble one.

Marriage, he says, is not an experiment to investigate whether or not one loves the other but it is an irrevocable commitment for life. However, the woman’s consent is not necessary, but the man’s approval of the woman is vital; he has to be satisfied with her appearance, and the size of the dowry (Pandit 292-293).

This type of arrangement shows a lack of consideration for the welfare of women. Itsubjects women to exploitation and emotional oppression, and, in addition to her oppression, she has to go through the motions of portraying a good wife.

The Overcast(e) Woman

The caste system refers to different but related groups of people that originated from the social organization of East Indian cultures. Caste is defined by one’s birth, status, and bloodline. Peoples and communities are restricted to their caste for life. The
survival of the caste system rests on practices that will neither dilute nor pollute the caste, whereby preserving the tradition and heritage of each caste. In *Ethic Relation: A cross-cultural Encyclopedia* Levinson says that the term “caste” originated from the Portuguese word “casta” and was first used by Portuguese explorers to refer to the many social organizations of the Indian population in the fifteenth century, and it is difficult for outsiders to fully comprehend the nature, dynamics, and pervasiveness of the caste system or *Varna* in East Indian society (33).

Both my maternal and paternal grand-parents were high caste Brahmins, for this reason my paternal grandfather was ordained the village priest. Only Brahmins are allowed to become Pundits as they are taught to read Sanskrit which is the oldest Indian language. *Ajah*, which is the respectable title for the Indian paternal grandfather, was very proud of his caste, and to ensure that his bloodline remains uncontaminated, he imported husbands, and sometimes wives, for members of our family, and noticeable, the scent of curry potatoes, curry chick peas, and *dhal* (boiled split peas with cumin seed) perfumed our village. My mother was an imported bride from my grandfather’s childhood village in India; it was important that she was of his caste. She seemed to be contented with her arrangement, but for my sister Seema, the caste system was an abomination. From the day that my oldest sister was married off to a high caste Brahmin, a man that was hand-picked for her, my second sister, Seema, became withdrawn and irritable as if, mentally, she was assessing her own fate.

Two years later Seema was married to an Indian man from Gujrath, India. On her wedding day it was obvious to all who were present that she was just going through the motions of what was expected of a dutiful daughter. One month later she left Trinidad for
her new home in India. While waiting for her flight, she sat alone, avoiding conversation with her family. Her plane arrived, and she set her face resolutely toward the tarmac as she following her husband to board the aircraft. “Air India,” I said aloud, and drew the attention of both my grand-parents and my parents. I must have said it with disgust because I was angry at the distance that had come between my sister and our family; it was not the distance between India and Trinidad, but the distance that formulated on the day that she was “sold” to a stranger. She did not say goodbye to anyone, she only touched my mother’s feet as per our custom.

Arriving home, the atmosphere was bleak. A darkness loomed over our house, as if someone had spilled dark ink through our windows and defiled our beautiful home. While everyone was avoiding everyone, looking for distractions along bookshelves and in pantries (it was the early 60s and we had no television). I had something important to do. The night before my sister’s wedding she came into my room. “Rafi,” she said, “behind my chest of drawer is a red accordion. After my wedding, I want you to wrap it carefully and give it to Richard Joseph. He gave it to me for valentine when I was thirteen years old. There is a note in the case, don’t let it fall out, please.”

She is still married and has four children who are well versed in the Indian culture, and her two sons are learning Sanskrit as all Brahmins do. She has since moved to Florida, and occasionally calls on the phone. She visits only at Christmas time, and I always wondered why she allowed her husband to give her children names that their cousins cannot pronounce. Because of the caste system, one has to be identified by certain names that are relevant to their caste.
The Principles of the Caste System

Dube in *Men’s and Women’s Role in India* gives a good and insightful explanation of the caste system. She says that it is the father who arranges the marriage with someone who meets his own approval, and who is worthy to preserve his (the father’s) own caste and tradition. Indian society is caste structured. The structure of the family and the nature of their interpersonal relations within the intra-family settings are governed by the caste system. In East Indian society, these caste (*jati*) are characterized by an ascribed system of status evaluation. The ritual status of a person determines the caste that he or she is born into, and must be committed to for life. Each caste is obligated to preserve its purity by avoiding polluting contacts with other caste. Marriage is confined within the castes. A member of a high caste (clean) is said to acquire “pap” (sin) if he or she has relations with someone from a lower class (unclean). The highest caste is the Brahmin. They are the traditional priests and often serve in that role in their communities. Brahmins are proud of their status, and hold themselves aloft to other lower castes such as the Kshatriya, Vaisya, Sudra, and the Untouchables. Each caste, from highest to lowest, has its own hierarchy and its own prohibitive norms (Dube, cited in Ward 176).

However, on a visit to India in 2002, I found it hard to believe that the caste system still exists. I noticed that people mixed freely in offices, schools, and public transportations. They even ate in the same restaurants. This was a change from my visit in 1979 when shops displayed signs that read “Brahmins only.” But just like in our America society where racism is still alive, although we do not go about hanging, and rounding up and lynching (on social media we witness the big stink at the 2016 Oscar
awards ceremony when no black artist was nominated for an Oscar), similarly, outward display of the class and cast system is not necessary to prove its existence. Blank, in *Arrow of the Blue-Skinned God* gives a good insight of how the caste system works and is preserved in modern day India. He says that earlier in the Twentieth century Brahmins would shun any physical contact with the lower castes, especially the Untouchables. Today, they wrestle on the same university teams, grappling each other into arm–locks, and mingling their sweats with no thoughts of corruption. But after the bout is over, after the showers and the friendly slaps on the backs, each wrestler goes back to his own home. It is there that the caste mingling ends. He says that a Brahmins may have people of low caste over for dinner, but never let them consort with his family. “After all, bhai, we’re as liberal as anybody, you know, but would you really want your pretty little daughter marrying one of them?” (Blank 129).

**Assimilation: East Indies in the West Indies**

Growing up in the Caribbean it was obvious to me (but probably not to people outside of our society) that Indians, especially the high caste Brahmins, resist assimilation, and again their resisting was to prevent their women to be contaminated and “spoil” by the local Trinidadian men. Unlike the Indian women in India, literacy was one of the basic foundations for Trinidadian women. Colonized by the British, I grew up under the British system that required every child to register for free education. There was a school in every village and the Headmaster (principal) would investigate the parents of any child that was reported to be kept at home. School was one way of escaping the watchful eyes of family members, and of course, it created a pathway for
assimilation since boys and girls of every nationality and creed were huddled together in one classroom. It is the classroom and assimilation—knowledge from books and listening to other people from other diverse background—that gave the West Indian woman her voice and perception of the world around her, and sets her apart from her sisters in India.

Looking in from the outside, one sees a sanitized version of the real Indian persona. At social functions in Trinidad where Indians, especially the older sect, mingle with people of other races and cultures, all seems to be well. At these gatherings Indians appear to let go of some of their cultural dogmas and blend right in with their country folks. They even extend dinner invitations to neighbors. My parents held frequent house parties since my father enjoyed celebrating with the local boys and their families, but his own daughters were never invited to these functions. My parents would give beautiful gifts to their guests, and pack food for them to carry home, and promise to have an even better party the next time. Our neighbors would never believe, if anyone should tell them, that my father would personally hang me if I should get too close to one of their sons.

My grandparents arrived in Trinidad, West Indies, as indentured laborers in 1899, on a ship called the Shiela. They crossed the Kala pani (black waters) of the Indian Ocean and emptied their culture and their heritage on the banks of the Caribbean Sea. The first fear that gripped my grandfather, he said, as he embarked onto Caribbean soil, was that unknowingly, he may be given beef to eat (eating the flesh of the cow is taboo to Brahmins because they worship cows as part of their religious ceremonies), and secondly, it was the fear of assimilation. He did not want his family to assimilate into the Trinidadian culture. Blending may cause his descendants to convert to and absorb other religious values outside of his own. In Ethnic Relations: A Cross-Cultural Encyclopedia,
Levinson sheds some light on the impact of assimilation on indigenous culture. He defines cultural assimilation as a practice that can dilute or hinder the strict practice of indigenous cultures. He says that cultural assimilation is the process whereby one ethnic group loses its distinct culture and ethnic identity. In cultural assimilation, one ethnic group changes its values and mores to confirm to the values and norms of a different culture. This involves altering the tradition beliefs, and changing religious practices to confirm to the adapted culture. A fitting example of cultural assimilation is intermarriages (Levinson 15-16).

For this reason my sister Seema was taken away from the man she loved and given to a stranger, then sent away to a strange land. Today, when we look at her wedding pictures, there are numerous photos of smiling grandparents and parents, but not one of a smiling bride. Her intermarriage with Richard Joseph, who was the son of a Baptist minister, would have raised eyebrows within the Indian community. “Don’t leh me ketch you wearin dem grass skirt and dancing wid dem putty face low life boys down de street fo carnival. Yo know it go raise eyebrows,” my mother’s sister told me.

“I don’t care about their eyebrows,” I replied.

**Carnival: My Land—My Heritage**

As a teenager living in Trinidad in the 70s, I, like most Indian girls, was not allowed to take part in one of our greatest cultural festivals which is the Trinidad carnival. Our brothers were allowed to go down town, and join masquerade bands, and “jump up” to steel band and calypso music in the streets, while we, the sisters, who are
condemned to be chaste until marriage, viewed the parade on television. It made me angry and sad at the same time when I saw white women from American and European, and other people of color from different Caribbean Islands and South American countries having a great time at carnival, and I was strictly prohibited to be part of my own heritage.

At home we listened mostly to Tabla or Indian classic music, and Saturday afternoons the whole family gathered to watch the Indian talent show called Mastana Bahar on television. Sometimes I would presumptuously turn the set on to view the calypso competition, and all will be well until the calypsonians start gyrating. “Bandar,” my grandfather would say, as he reached for the “off” button. Bandar, in Hindi, means monkey.

In school we were taught that Carnival was introduced to Trinidad by the French planters and was celebrated by both the slaves and their slave-masters. The festival originated in Europe from a festival called the Roman Feast of Saturnalia where the Romans celebrate the rebirth of their members. In the middle Ages, it was renamed The Feast of Fools as a mockery to the Catholic Church. The church tried to suppress the festival, but was unsuccessful, so they changed the name to carnival (carne vale translates to “farewell to flesh”). That is why carnival is celebrated before the fasting lent season. “Farewell to flesh,” the Pundits bellowed one carnival Sunday night at the temple. “There is too mush flesh exposed in the street for this degrading festival. Look at what this culture is doing to our women. They dance naked in the street. Too many unwanted pregnancies, and single mothers. I am glad that you young women choose to come to the Ashram (temple) tonight.”
Why do the Indian pundits and society always have to keep women on a short leash by constantly reminding them of their place in society? Why do we have to immerse ourselves into a foreign tradition when we have one of our own? We must call a spade a spade, and not to confuse it with a shovel or a hoe even though they are all garden tools. We are all Indians, but there is a difference—we are West Indian Indians. These are the questions that plagued the Trinidadian women of East Indian descent. Influenced by the Nottinghill carnival in London where British born West Indians revel in the streets celebrating carnival West Indian style, more and more Indian women rebelled against their oppressive culture and took to the streets for carnival in Trinidad. Every year, since 1976, I returned to Trinidad for carnival and Jourvet morning jump-up, and I have met Indian girls and women from Holland, Rome and Germany who have come back home to celebrate, and to relish and unite with their own heritage and culture. In the 1980’s Drupatie emerged as the first Indian female calypsonian, and in 2015 I observed that East Indian girls make up the majority of the carnival revelers in Trinidad.

II. Literature and Diaspora: Telling New Stories

Modernism and the Indian Diaspora

It is fascinating how deep and permanent ancient cultures are ingrained into our modern society. Indians- whether they are Hindus, Muslims, or Christians, and regardless of where they live or have migrated to, they uphold the values of their Indian culture. People of other races and cultures, right here in America, show outward disbelief when we tell them about the oppression that still exist for women of East Indian heritage. The
caste system, arranged marriages, illiteracy, and control of their sexuality are still the defining principles that confines women to patriarchal control. In *God of Small Things* by winner of the Booker Prize Arundhati Roy, and Hanif Kureishi’s *Buddha of Suburbia*, and Malala Yousafzai’s *I am Malala*, we are introduced to women who have endured and challenged the tenets of Indian cultural oppression, and by looking into the struggle of women from other cultures, have risen above the complexities of their own society’s projections and misunderstanding of women.

**Jamila: Disarranging the Marriage**

Kureishi’s novel *The Buddha of Suburbia* not only shows the influence of heritage, class, and culture, but it also brings to the forefront how these values affect modern societies that inhibits modern concepts and beliefs. In India’s culture and traditions one of the values is arranged marriages. Anwar pushes his daughter Jamila into an arranged marriage. She accepts to save her father’s life, but she does not consummate the marriage. Her feminist stance in the novel shows that although family ties constitute obligations on an individual, there is a higher nobility that is justified in one’s own self-worth. Although Jamila feels the blood-ties to her family and culture, she also has a moral obligation to herself. At the heart of the novel is the struggle between loyalty to family and culture, and loyalty to the self.

Anwar, an Indian immigrant living in London, imports a husband for his British born daughter Jamila. Anwar will starve himself to death if she does not accept the man that he chose to be her husband. She pleads to be released from this kind of arrangement,
but her father is adamant. He will disown her if she disobeys him. “Get lost,” he tells her. “You’re not my daughter. I don’t know who you are” (Kureishi 59). Anwar uses his Indian history to evoke the power of the India patriarch in his household and in his community. He declares, “I won’t eat. I will die. If Gandhi could shove out the English from India by not eating, I can get my family to obey me by exactly the same…Our way is firm. She must do as I say, or I will die. She will kill me” (Kureishi 60). The narrator, Karim, says that a “smell” emits from Anwar’s room where he locks himself away. Yes, it is the stink of oppression and subordination, the stench from an old and rancid culture that curtails women’s freedom of choice.

Jamila’s parents, Anwar and Jeeta, were raise in the ancient Indian traditions and mores, whereas, Jamila was born and raised in modern England. She has adopted the values and tradition of her own British community. It is her community that molded her to be unlike the typical Indian woman. From observing the marital relationship of her parents she learns that arranged marriages are deemed loveless with no emotional bonds. Jamila wants to run away, but knows that her action would have serious consequences for her mother. Karim says that Jeeta (Jamila’s mother) would be blamed for everything Jamila does outside of her culture. If Jamila runs away, Jeeta’s live would be a living death, and there is nowhere that she could escape to because Indian wives never leave their marital home (Kureishi 72). Jamila confides to Karim that her mother is a battered spouse. “He takes it out on Jeeta. He abuses her.”

“He hits her? Really?”
“He used to, yes, until I told him I’d cut off his hair with a carving knife if he did it again. But he knows how to make her life terrible without physical violence. He had many years of practice.” (Kureishi 58)

The family seems to have a history of domestic violence in which the abused woman accepts her condition as fate. In *India-Labyrinths in the Lotus Land*, Shasthi Brata says that even as the Women Liberation Movement reached India in the mid-twentieth century, the majority of Indian women neither resented their subservient role nor felt any need or desire to change the status quo. Virginity is still prized in a prospective bride, and the concept of “damaged goods” determines a man’s choice of a wife, and the size of the dowry (Brata 47). A chaste daughter is a pride to her family. To ensure that Jamila stayed chaste until marriage, Anwar, in disguise, spies on her, and listens in on her phone conversations because he thought that her karate classes and her long runs through the city were ways that she concocted for her to meet boys (Kureishi 57).

I travelled to India in 1997, and in provinces like Gujarat, Jaipur, and Tamil Nadu arranged marriages were still organized by the patriarch of the family. I attended a wedding between a fifteen year old girl and a thirty-seven year old widower in Jaipur where caste, which is another name for ‘class’ is highly revered. There was a small protest, mainly women, in front of the temple where the ceremony was held, but the police quickly disperse the group with their batons. In *The Hindu Mind—Fundamentals of Religion and Philosophy for All Ages*, Pundit says that physical attraction alone is not a true basis for a lifetime relationship since divorce is frowned upon in Indian culture. There must be common interest and similar spiritual goals…. This makes selecting marriage partners in Indian culture very crucial. To minimize the chance of inter-cultural
marriages it is necessary for marriages to be arranged because it is from this tradition
culture is maintained and manifested (Pandit 293-294).

**Tradition versus Individuality**

Jamila’s interaction with Miss Cutmore at the library resonates an inner struggle
where she (Jamila) must decide where her loyalty lies. Should she be loyal to the values
of India’s culture and heritage, or does she owe loyalty to her own values and self-worth?
Her father Anwar’s character in the novel is symbolic of an old Indian culture and
community that suppresses women, and to keep them illiterate, whereas Miss Cutmore’s
character symbolizes modernism that fosters literacy and liberation in Jamila’s British
community. Jamila goes to the Library where Miss Cutmore is the librarian. A library is
an institution for education. Both Miss Cutmore and the library are symbols of literacy,
and together they mold the character of Jamila. Karim, the narrator, says that it is at the
library that Jamila received the highest-class education at the hands of Miss Cutmore,
and that education had changed her (Jamila) for good. Miss Cutmore, he says, seemed to
“colonize” her, and eradicate everything that was foreign (Indian) in her. Miss Cutmore
taught Jamila about equality, and fraternity and made her read books by feminist authors
such as Baudelaire, Collette, and Radgeut (Kureishi 52).

Jamila is a product of her own modern community; India’s ancient culture is
foreign to her. India’s culture has class division and is set up according to masculine
models of thought and structure where Indian Love Laws are out of touch when it comes
to the feelings of women. It is from the modern influence of her community, and
education, that we see a woman who sheds the cloak of subordination, and who demonstrates strength in her femininity. Although she sea-saws between loyalty to family and culture and loyalty to the self, she consciously choose not to be imprisoned by her father’s ancient regalia; she will marry the man that her father chooses, but she reserves the rights to her body. Listening to the voices of feminist writers allow Jamila the privilege to redefine her place in society, asserting her rights to be respected, not as the second sex, but as an autonomous human being. She assumes the working class woman’s independence and asserts her own economic independence.

Karim says that Jamila wants to be Simone de Beauvoir who is a feminist, so she assumes the women that Beauvoir represent. In *The second Sex*, Beauvoir says that a woman should not make herself a carnal object to the prey of someone else. She says that women who are coerced into relationships as instruments to be used feel violated—a blight to their own body and soul. She says that when a woman goes into a relationship with a man whom she feels no affection for, through children he might get some attachment from her, but he cannot liberate her. She reserves her “whole” to preserve her ego and her integrity because of the injustice imposed upon her in a loveless relationship (Beauvoir 648-649). Jamila is not a carnal object to be preyed upon; she sleeps with whoever she feels attracted to, whether it be male or female, but not with her imported husband. This behavior of Jamila’s does not connote that she is “slutty,” instead, it highlights the free spirit of the liberated woman who has removed herself from the prevailing social expectations of the Indian woman.

Jamila marries Changez, but keeps her “whole” reserved. She will not open up fully to Changez. He begs her to go to bed with him, to stop her “pervasive” relationship
with Joanna, but she is unmoved. She instinctively reminds him of the reason that they were thrown together. “There are plenty of people who will kiss you. But not me. You were imposed on me by my father” (Kureishi 277). Here we see Jamila consciously choose not to accept her marriage as Fate or destiny. She has removed herself from the calcifying confinement of patriarchal narrow-mindedness that seeks to wield control over the female. Karim says that Jamila has married Changez “out of perversity” and that in her mind “it was a rebellion against rebellion” (Kureishi 216). Yes, her father rebelled against her civil liberties and she in turn rebels against his strict cultural principles that governs women. From the onset of the marriage she shows her feminist stance in the relationship. The layout of the bedroom resonates who holds the reins in the relationship. The narrator says that the bed is covered with an Indian bedspread, and at the end of the bed is a small card table with a liberty-patterned table cloth over it. On the table are her post-Miss Cutmore books which she calls the classics: Angela Davis, Baldwin, Malcolm X, and Millet (Kureishi 95).

Jamila’s choice of a liberty-patterned table cloth and her literary texts seem like a prelude to the woman that she hopes to evolve into. Like the authors of her classics, she is also a freedom fighter. With her display of her choice of books and authors, and the liberty-patterned table cloth, she is flaunting the liberal female boldly in the face of the oppressor. She expresses her feminist beliefs and values with a voice of her own when Changez begins to flex his husbandly muscles. Changez is outraged because he sees Jamila in bed with Karim. She explains to him “just who her damn body belongs to” and that it is none of his business since her body belongs to her (Kureishi 134). In India, where women are thwarted physically, emotionally, and emotionally by men, she would
have been stoned to death or burned on a pyre for adultery, and beaten for raising her voice above her husband’s.

Changez seeks to have some control over his wife and their marital problems. He tries to instill some of his own religious values into Jamila. He recites verses from the Koran, and what it says about the duties of a wife to her husband, but when words were not sufficient to convince her, he tried to give her a whack. But Jamila was not whackable. “She gave Changez a considerable backhand … which shut his mouth for a fortnight” (Kureishi 134-135). Here we see the female fighting back. She is lashing out at the patriarchal society that has held her hostage for too long. Whacking back Changez is symbolic of a monumental shift from the male dominance back to a balanced relationship between the masculine and the feminine. She has spent enough time in the heart of darkness, now she is heading for the heart of light.

Jamila moves away from the house that her father rented for her and Changez to live in, and chooses a place of her own. Moving away from the house that her father set up for her clearly shows she is departing from the patriarchal dominant society and the oppressive culture that she was born into, and has assume the role of a socially independent woman. She says to Changez, “I’ve been tired for a while of the way things have been. I’ve been conservative in a way that doesn’t suit me. I’m leaving the flat… I want to live somewhere else” (Kureishi 214). Karim is impressed with the transformed woman. He says, “I couldn’t help seeing that there was in her great depth of will…and much energy to love. Her feminism, the sense of self and fight it engendered…the things she made herself know… seemed to illuminate her tonight as she went forward, an Indian woman, to live a useful life in white England” (Kureishi 216).
As an Indian woman, I know that if we want to make a difference in our lives we cannot look to our own society for answers to questions that plague us because, from childhood to adulthood, we have been fed the same cultural jargon. Cultural oppression has made us fearful of our own thoughts. Whenever I remember my aunt Radha, and how she must have suffered emotionally, I tried to block out the vision of her face that I remembered as a child. To understand and to gather the tools necessary to confront our oppression, and to gain momentum in our struggle to preserve our civil liberties, we are persuaded to look to other cultures and races, and to other women’s struggle for redemption. It is no wonder that among Jamila’s books, on her liberty printed tablecloth, are books that feature American freedom fighters. She must have been particularly inspired by Angela Davis, because in her purse, Kureishi says, she carried a photograph of Davis (53).

**Women Empowering Women**

Angela Davis is a black American human rights activist whose central concern is the struggle for racial, sexual, and economical equality for women worldwide. She is the author of *Women, Culture, and Politics*. Davis says that her fight for women’s civil liberties and justice is patterned from the national organization of Black Women’s Clubs that was organized by women of color in 1895. The White sister’s organization, she says, was tainted with racism, and only included white women, but the Black Women’s Club was open to all women. The manifesto of the Black Women’s Club stated:
Our woman’s movement is a woman’s movement in that it is led and directed by women for the good of women and men, for the benefit of all humanity…we are not drawing the color line; we are women, American women, as intensely interested in all that pertains to us as such as all other American women: we are not alienating or withdrawing; we are only coming to the front…and welcoming any others to join us. (Davis 4)

The motto of the Black Women’s Club was “Lifting as We Climb.” Today, Davis says, as we reflect on the process of empowering Afro-American women, our most efficacious strategies remain those that were guided by the principle used by the Black women in the Club movement. We must “lift while we climb” and climb in such a way as to guarantee that all of our sisters, regardless of social class, climb with us. This must be our dynamic quest for power, a principle must not only apply to the struggle of the Afro American, but for all the authentic struggles of dispossessed people… The overall battle for equality can be profoundly enhanced by embracing this principle (Davis 5).

Davis encourages women to stop living as domestic servants and baby makers, but to get out into the workforce, and secure financial independence for themselves. It might be a struggle in some cultures, she warns, but it is worth the fight. Since woman suffrage emerged as a significant demand for working class women, Davis makes the primary distinction between the independent working class woman and the oppressed class who is economically challenged. She argues that as increasing numbers of women entered the rank of labor and becoming integral members of the working class, the fight for woman suffrage would increasingly become a struggle for the capture of the political power by the proletariat (Davis 162).
The influence of Davis is illuminated by Jamila’s resolution to take control of her own financial affairs, and asserts herself as head of household. As a working woman, she is no longer manipulated by her father or her husband. Karim says that Jamila went to work, and it was she who paid for everything. She even supported Changez, her imported husband, and carried on with her life “as if he weren’t there” (Kureishi 98). Davis agrees with Lenin that the working class woman takes the reins of her struggle into her own hands by achieving economic independence. In *The Emancipation of Women* Lenin says:

The chief task of the working women’s movement is to fight for economy and social equality, and not only formal equality, for women. The chief thing is to get women to take part in socially productive labor, to liberate them from “domestic slavery,” to free them from their stupefying and humiliating subjugation to the eternal drudgery of the kitchen and nursery. (81)

To keep the legacy of the Black Women’s Club, Davis proclaims that women should organize, lobby, march and demonstrate against racism and oppression, and must be willing to appeal for multiracial unity in the spirit of our sister ancestors. She says, “Like them we must proclaim: We do not draw the color line The only line we draw is one based on our political principles…empowerment for the masses of women in our country will never be achieved as long as we do not succeed in pushing back the tide of racism” (Davis 11).

Davis’s concern for women’s sexuality was not limited to her American society, but she spoke out internationally against political, sexual, and cultural oppression of women. In 1973 she visited Cairo and was surprised to find that, to preserve virginity, genital mutilation was a practice still imposed on Arab women, especially the impoverish
class. Because of tradition, Arab women are rarely disturbed by the lengths that they have
to go in order to alter their bodies surgically for the purpose of confirming to male
supremacist standards (Davis 119). She was asked to address a group of social Arab
women on the issue of equality, but was warned by a few elite Arab women to stay away
from the subject of sexual equality. She was told by the women organizers of the social
meeting, “We want to be emancipated, we want to be equal, but from an economical
point of view, not from a sexual point of view” (Davis 125).

Undoubtedly, female circumcision is another political arm of the patriarchal
society to control woman’s sexuality. In Cairo, Davis found that a majority of Arab
women opposed genital mutilation but was afraid to speak up. Dr. Nadja Atef, Davis
writes, spoke about Egyptian women’s responsibility to confront and publically represent
their own positions and questions regarding sexuality. In her address to a congregation of
Arab women, Dr. Atef, accompanied by Davis, addressed the sexual oppression of the
mutilated woman, and the woman’s responsibility to defend herself:

The fact is we must be sensitive to the question of sexuality…and I think
we have to look at ourselves in order to find out what our responsibility is
to ourselves. It may be our duty to actually write about it. It may be our
duty to start putting forth our positions at forums and to publishers abroad.
If this topic upsets us, let us speak about it openly. (Davis 127)

The practice of female circumcision is gradually becoming obsolete because women are
coming forward and denouncing the practice relegating it to historical obsolescence.
Davis address to the women of Cairo and Dr. Atif’s appeal for Arab women to “speak
up” and to “publish” drew attention from other women concerned with the emancipation
of women. In her pioneering work on Arab women, Dr. Nawal el Saadawdi, author of *The Hidden Face of Eve*, was the first to describe and made audible to women, worldwide, through her book, the brutality of genital mutilation. She says that she was six years old when she was taken from her bed at night by family members and taken to the bathroom where the operation was performed. She recalls:

> I realized that my thighs had been pulled wide apart… I felt the knife or blade… dropped between my thighs, and there cut off a piece of flesh from my body. I screamed with pain despite the tight hand held over my mouth.

(Davis 129)

Dr. Saadawi explained that genital mutilation goes hand in hand with brainwashing, for down the age a system had been built up to destroy the ability of the Arab women to see the exploitation to which they are subjected to, and to understand its causes (Davis 130). However, most Arab women, especially those from impoverish villages, favor the mutilation procedure because pregnancy among young girls will drive the family deeper into poverty. Because of The Woman Liberation Movement that is popping up worldwide, the Pill and condoms, through Family Planning, were introduced to Egyptians as a measure of birth-control and also to discourage genital mutilation (Davis 137).

Returning to America, Davis came away with the understanding that the sexist discrimination in Cairo is being challenged by Arab women who benefitted from the experiences of women in capitalist countries. She says, “I realized that the Egyptian women faced sexist discrimination…and that they were conducting struggles that might benefit from the experiences of women in the socialist countries. I felt profoundly moved
by the invincible determination of so many women to keep the fires of their struggle burning” (Davis 153-154).

The Art of Darkness

Illiteracy is a form of blindness, and to keep the woman illiterate is a dominant discourse in East Indian society. An illiterate woman makes a good wife, my uncle Reggie (Ragindranauth) said, because unlike you (indicating me), she cannot argue or talkback. Since she does not know how to differ, or to find answers to profound questions, she is best sedated with ignorance. My uncle Reggie is a doctor. He had two wives: my aunt Priah who was chosen for him, and with whom he lived at the end of our block, and Miss Pearl who was my second grade teacher. Priah had no formal education, but she was a good wife and mother to their four children. She spoke softly, but one day her voice echoed through her house and ours. Her daughter, Ashali, was my age, fifteen, and my uncle declared “no more schooling; time to learn sewing.”

“Ashali will go on to college,” my aunt shouted, “and will never become a floor-mat like her mother.”

“But I give you a beautiful big house,” my uncle said.

“All I want is a small home that just belong to me,” my aunt replied.

Later she told me that through her oppressive years Tolstoy’s Anna Karenina, the movie, was very inspirational to her. She watched it on television, she said, and it made
her realize that if a woman wants to make a difference in her life the first person that she has to stand up to is herself.

**Malala Yousafzai: Putting the Blindfold in the Trash**

Malala Yousafzai made a difference in her life by standing up to herself and her society, and not allowing herself to be sucked into a culture and tradition that puts the blindfold on women. It baffles the mind that even into the twenty first century a tradition, thousands of years old, is still deep-rooted in our modern society. Her memoir *I Am Malala* shows that one person’s voice can inspire change as she champions for the rights to educate girls in a country that promotes illiteracy for women. On October, 2012, Malala was shot in the head by members of the Taliban who is a secular Muslim group in her homeland Pakistan, as she was returning home from school. Two men boarded the school bus. “Who is Malala?” they asked, then shot her before she answered (Malala 241). Of course they recognized her from her appearances on television and other social media as the girl active in the struggle for education for Muslim women in Pakistan. She says that she had done lots of television interviews “but was scared that if the Taliban caught me going to school they would throw acid in my face as they had done to girls in Afghanistan” (Yousafzai 160).

Malala is the winner of Pakistan’s National Youth Peace Prize, and at age fifteen she began campaigning for education for women. She appeared on international radio and television with one proclamation, “They can stop us going to school but they can’t stop us from learning” (Yousafzai 161). “They” not only referred to the Taliban, but to the
entire Muslim regime— their culture, tradition, politics, leaders, and religious beliefs—that was formulated and designed to render Muslim women illiterate. Malala says that the Taliban was against education because reading and learning English will make Muslim women “westernized. But she sees education as the only way out of traditional bondage for all women, Pakistan or elsewhere. She says that we should learn everything and then choose which path to follow because “education is neither Eastern nor Western. It is human” (Yousafzai 162). The clerics and the Taliban shut down all the girls’ schools in Pakistan, but they could not shut down the determination of one woman—Malala Yousafzai. She says, “The Taliban could take away our pens and books, but they cannot stop our minds from thinking (Yousafzai 146).

She reads novels by feminist author Jane Austen (Yousafzai 67). Clearly she is someone who does not want to be hemmed in to Pakistan’s fabric of illiteracy. She is reading what women are saying about other women in different societies and culture. She wants to compare her own world with the universe around her, and she is resolved in her struggle for the literacy of women. She says that women are misunderstood when they say that they want independence. People in Pakistan thinks that this means that women no longer want to obey their fathers, brothers, and husbands. Liberation and education for Muslim women, she says, have a different connotation. “It means we want to make decisions for ourselves. We want to be free to go to school, or work. Nowhere it is written in the Quran that a woman should be dependent on a man, or that every woman should listen to a man” (Yousafzai 219).

Malala also is empowered and encouraged by the voices of other oppressed people in other cultures. She reads a poem written by Martin Niemoller, who suffered
oppression in Nazi Germany, and whose poem inspired her to continue her struggle for literacy for women, and for women’s rights:

First they came for the communists,
And I didn’t speak out because I wasn’t a communist.

Then they came for the socialists,
And I didn’t speak out because I wasn’t a socialist.

Then they came for the trade unionists,
And I didn’t speak out because I wasn’t a trade unionist.

Then they came for the Jews,
And I didn’t speak out because I wasn’t a Jew

Then they came for the Catholics,
And I didn’t speak out because I wasn’t a catholic.

Then they came for me,
And there was no one left to speak for me.

I know that he was right, she says. If people were silent, nothing would change (Yousafzai 140).

Schools are re-opened in Pakistan, and girls are attending. Malala has left Pakistan and now resides in England. She says that the Taliban promise to forgive her if she returns to Pakistan and wears a *burkah* to school, but she stood up in the face of
adversary for what she believes is morally right. She writes, “It’s my life; how I want to live it is my choice…Today we all know that education is our basic rights (Yousafzai 311). Every, woman, regardless of age or status, can make a difference, but the fight has to come from within.

The Depth and Color of Oppression

Sometimes we are faced with situations that are way beyond our control. I have also moved away from my homeland to live a useful and contented life. Like Jamila, I also was forced into an arranged marriage with a man that I never saw before. He was selected by my father because his family was upper caste Brahmin just as ours. Like Jamila I was born into a very different environment from my forefathers who had their roots planted firmly in the soil of India. Both my maternal and paternal grand-parents came from India to Trinidad as indentured laborers. My father was an engineer and my mother never attended school. Their marriage was arranged by their fathers.

I was about sixteen years old when I was brought into the family room and introduced to a young man almost twice my age. He was the son of a Brahmin and, according to my father, he was the ideal husband for me. I remember the house swarming with relatives and devotees from our temple. My father and uncle covered my face with a thin veil and placed me to sit opposite this stranger, and they left the room. He looked me up and down as if I was commodity instead of a human being. I felt like a heifer on the auction block awaiting the highest bidder. As he talked I simply stared at the clouds
traversing the skies through the open window, and I imagined my life, like the clouds, drifting aimlessly without love—just commitment to a heritage and culture.

Within a month I was betrothed to him in a religious ceremony. It was a promise to him by my father that I will be given to him in marriage, and to no one else. Since I was still very young, he will return to Mumbai and finish his studies then return the following year for the official marriage and celebration. Since being chaste until marriage is governed by the strict Vedic Laws of Hindu society, I was a prisoner in my own home. Unknown to my parents, I was dating someone else from my own West Indian community. He was a half-caste; his mother was French creole and his father was Muslim. Whenever my parents were out of town I will meet Sajjad on the beach at the Gulf of Paria, which is a beautiful stretch of sand, trees, and sailing boats along the Chagaramas coast line in Trinidad; but I never mention my betrothal. While Sajjad talked enthusiastically about us getting married, my young heart was pulsating with fear. Words such as elope, runaway, and escape crossed my mind, while other words such as family, karma, Brahmin, and outcast flashed before me like a neon sign. Every day, heavy-heartedly, I watched the calendar bring me closer to the day that I dreaded—the day that the stranger would return.

Then it happened. The stranger arrived to collect his bride. The day before the wedding, when everyone was busy getting their saris ready, and the sadhus and pundits were chanting “Hari Om, Hari Om, Hari Om,” I ran away with Sajjad. The next ten years of my life have left an indelible mark on my mind. I learned, from my own life experience, that free will is thrown off the saddle when fate takes the reins. Sajjad and I had great plans. He held a government job as a contractor in the Ministry of Works and
Hydraulics, but that was not good enough for my family and my community. His greatest taboo was his class and heritage. Like Sophie Mol, in *God of Small Things*, he belonged to no caste.

Sajjad wanted to meet and talk with my parents but they were not open to dialogue. The last time that I saw my father was when I was allowed to meet with him on our front lawn. I wanted to tell him how happy I was, and that I was getting married, and that I want him to attend. I started “Papa,” but he cut me off. “Papa is no more,” he said. I could hear the tears in his voice, and, naturally, I felt my own. They welled up without warning, blurring the vision of the father that I loved. Just as Anwar says of Jamila, “She is not my daughter,” just so my father disowned me because I refused to accept an arranged marriage. The enormity of what was happening suddenly overwhelmed me, and I felt the physical sensation of cold flowing through my body like one’s blood turning to ice. I realized that I have lost my father long before he died. My feminist stand to do what is morally right for me was met with harsh repercussions. My family and my community turned their backs on me.

Three years later my son was born, and Sajjad and I moved to a larger cottage in the city. However, from the time that I stepped out of my heritage and culture, I had this strange sensation that something was waiting to happen. One Monday morning, my husband returned home from work, earlier than usual, with a defeated look on his face. My uncle, who was a rising politician, caused my husband to lose his job. That day, in some vague and unspecified way, the wind of destiny shifted. Sajjad knew that it was my family that had wronged him, and as weeks and months passed by without him being able to provide adequately for his family, he turned to alcohol for solace.
It is very difficult to understand how families can become estranged from each other because of cultural differences. I always believe that with time my family would heal, and we will put aside our differences and become “us” again. But it was not to be. My Grandfather who was the community Pundit could not accept a grand-daughter who went against his doctrine. Forgiving me would open doors for others in his society to follow in my footsteps, thus diluting the Hindu culture and tradition. To preserve heritage and culture is paramount in Indian society.

Mammachi in *God of Small Things*, written by Arundhati Roy, winner of the Booker Prize, constructs a “pickle house” to preserve her culture and heritage. The narrator says that Mammachi’s mind wandered back over the years to her first batch of pickles. Her first batch of pickles symbolizes her children when they were young (Ammu and Chako,). “How beautiful they looked! Bottled and sealed, standing on a stable near the head of her bed…She had gone to bed early that night, but woke a little after midnight. She groped for them and her anxious fingers came away with a film of oil. The pickle bottles stood in a pool of oil. There was oil everywhere …Under her Bible. All over her bed. The pickled mangoes had absorbed oil and expanded, making the bottles leak” (Roy 159).

Her “first batch of pickled mangoes” symbolizes her children—they are her first family. When they were young, she firmly instilled in them (bottled and sealed) their culture and heritage. But over the years she observes that they have changed. This is symbolic of her going to bed and waking up after midnight ‘groping’ for them and found her hand soiled with oil. After midnight is the breaking of a brand new day- a brand new beginning. The oil surrounds the “pickles” in the bottle; they are immersed into it. The oil
is symbolic of our community and our environment that we are immersed into and influenced by. The pickled mangoes “absorbed the oil and expanded, making the bottles leak” symbolizes that her children, influenced by their modern society and concepts (the expanding of the pickles) have spilled from their culture and heritage (the pickle bottles leak). They have “absorbed” the new and modern, and discard the old traditions. The pickles are no longer “bottled and sealed.” The narrator says that they all (Mammachi’s children) broke the cultural and traditional rules that were instilled into them. They all cross over into forbidden territory. They all tamper with the laws that lay down who should be loved, and how, and how much (Roy 31).

Mammachi is a high caste Syrian Christian of Indian heritage. Her heritage is diluted, and her caste becomes impure because both of her children, Chako and Ammu, produce off-springs with people outside of their caste and culture. Chako marries a white British woman and has a daughter named Sophie Mol; Ammu’s twins were fathered by a lower caste Hindu and they were never fully accepted as “family” by their maternal side of the family.

Roy’s novel is set in Ayemenem, a remote village in Kerala, India. At the very beginning of her novel she makes the distinction between the laws of nature and the laws of man that are constructed to interrupt nature—by comparing the activities outside of Ayemenem House to that which is taking place inside. Outside, everything is going as nature has planned—mangoes and red bananas ripened, jackfruit bursting, allowing its seeds to spill and grow into new plants, the rains came and the countryside turns an immodest green while the tapioca fences take root and bloom (Roy 3). But the old pickle house on the hill wore its steep gabled roof pulled over its ears (Roy 4). This house, this
pickle house, is deaf to ideals outside of its walls. Inside, the laws of culture takes precedence over the laws of nature, and these cultural laws curtail the freedom to function independently. Although the occupants of Ayemenem House appears to be in harmony with each other and people of lower caste (Mammachi employs both Valutha and his father who are Untouchables), it is Sophie Mol, the half caste daughter of Mammachi’s son Chacko, that gives clarity to the fact that the caste system is preserved, and is mobilized in Indian culture, and in Ayemenem House.

**Ammu: A Woman Re-cast(e)**

The caste system murders Velutha, the Untouchable man-servant in Ayemenem House, because he has a relationship with Ammu, who is the daughter of the house. Velutha takes his Touchable lover to the History House that lies across the river from Ayemenem House. After several failed relationships Ammu finally finds happiness with someone who loves her children and who, in spite of the consequence he knows that he must face if they are found out, loves her unconditionally. The narrator says that Ammu listens to English language songs on her transistor radio. And it is “the words of a song that exploded in her head” that motivated her to break away from her cultural bondage and to seek her own fulfillment:

*There’s no time to lose*

*I heard her say*

*Catch your dreams before*
They slip away

Dying all the time

Lose your dreams and you

Will lose your mind.

At the end of the song, Roy says, Ammu rises from her chair, and walks out of her world to a better place... She moves quickly through the darkness, towards the river….as though she was late for something. As though her life depends on getting there in time…As though she knows he would be there. Waiting. As though he knows that she would come (Roy 314).

Every night Velutha and Ammu meet at the History House. Velutha’s Father saw them, and “others have seen them too. The whole village knew…They had made the unthinkable thinkable, and the impossible really happen” (Roy 242). Ammu’s happiness is secondary to her society and family ethics. Her aunt, Baby Kochamma reports to the police that Velutha raped Ammu. Before she went to the police, Baby Kochamma locks Ammu away in the house for fear that she (Ammu) would come forward with the truth. Ammu is incoherent with rage at being locked away like the family lunatic (Roy 239). Here we see, undoubtedly, how culture imprisons the woman.

Sophie Mol and Ammu’s twins take the paddle boat across the Aymenem River to see Velutha, and to show Sophie Mol the History House. It is dark, the boat capsizes, and Sophie Mol drowns. She is buried in the church yard, close to Aymenem house, in her yellow pants and plastic watch that she arrived with from London. After Sophie Mol’s funeral, Ammu goes to the police to set the records straight, but she realizes that
Velutha is already dead. He has been killed on the back veranda of the History House (Roy 293). They (the police) wake Valutha with their boots. The narrator says that “the muted sound of skull on cement…was inspired by contempt born of unacknowledged fear—civilization fear of nature, men’s fear of women, and power’s fear of the powerless…Man’s subliminal urge to destroy what he could neither subdue or defy (Roy 292). What comes from the realms of the heart cannot be subdued or defy. Roy says that “the only reason the police did not behead Velutha or cut off his genitals is because the posse of Touchable policemen acted with economy. After all, they were not battling an epidemic. They were merely inoculating a community against an outbreak” (Roy 293).

Just as my grandfather inoculated his community by discarding Radha, his daughter, for fear of other women following in her footprint, the Aymenem community had to set an example to other women who are tempted to sway from their own heritage and caste. They were afraid that other women would follow in Ammu’s footprint if drastic actions were not taken to prevent an occurrence which can lead to polluting the caste of entire communities.

After Velutha’s death and Sophie Mols funeral Ammu’s twins departs from Aymenem, but Ammu stays behind in the pickle house. She never sees her children again; she falls sick, and dies at age thirty-one. But she fights and dies for what she believes are her moral rights—to take control of her own sexuality, to give her body to whom she pleased and not to be sexually exploited. She is proof that one woman can disquiet a whole community if she chooses to do so.
**Sophie Mol: The Time Keeper**

Twenty years later Rahel, Ammu’s daughter, returns to Aymenem, and finds a modern city where once, surrounded by forest, was a pickle-house, a History House, and a wide running river. Modernism has changed the landscape, and brought life into the otherwise dismal community. The modern hotels and restaurants brought tourists flocking to Aymenem, and with modernism came assimilation. The History House is converted to the modern Heritage Hotel, and the veranda at the History House where Velutha was murdered is renovated into the modern hotel’s kitchen. A wall is constructed to keep out the view of the now dilapidated Pickle house (Roy 119-120). However, although the house is dilapidated, it is not yet demolished. Inside the house, among the old pickle jars, is Baby Kochamma, a surviving preserved pickle of Aymenem House (Roy 21). Here we see that even in modern countries and societies, culture is preserved even if it is not visible to the naked eye, or displayed openly.

People may die, and governments may change but the class separation of the caste system will always prevail in Indian society. Like the scars on the slaves, and the brands on the Holocaust survivors, just so the caste system that oppresses women is deep and permanent. To show the depth of the cast system Roy re-introduces us to the character of Sophie Mol. Twenty-three years after Sophie Mol’s death, Rahel returns to Aymenem and finds that modernism has changed her old community, but, the narrator says, something lies buried in the ground. Under grass. Under twenty-three years of June rain:

A small forgotten thing.
Nothing that the world would miss.

A child’s plastic wristwatch with the time painted on it.

Ten to two, it said. (Roy 121)

Some things change with time; but for some things, time never change. Sophie Mol came to India twenty-three years past, with her plastic watch displaying painted time. Twenty-three years later, her watch still says “ten to two,” which symbolizes that change is not an option in Indian caste system, because the hands of time is restricted when it comes to Indian oppressive laws that uphold the caste and class system. The death of Sophie Mol, and the hands on her plastic watch is significant; it resonates that imperialism (Sophie Mol’s character) died in India, but the oppression continues because the oppressive Indian laws such as the Love laws, the caste system, the dowry for the bridegroom, arranged marriages, and the virginity laws, like history, is timeless.

These oppressive laws are binding within the culture, and sometimes it destroys families. Brata says that because their parents could not come up with the dowry, many Indian girls committed suicide, and this prompted the government to outlaw the dowry demand. However, he says, ads are still appearing in Indian and British press with all of the oppressive laws hidden in just a few lines:

WANTED—For handsome, England-returned, fair-complexioned boy, 26, with brilliant prospects, A really beautiful virgin from respectable South Indian Brahmin family with well-to-do background and economic capacity.

Economic capacity is a coded signal indicating a sizable dowry (Brata 135-135).
III. The Crossroads

Saving Faith for Last

From my parents and grandparents I knew that change was not an option. But I needed to change, because I was the one with the dreams to be fulfilled, and the more I evaluated my situation, and the daily threats that noosed over my head if I should “step out of line” the need to take charge of my life and all that pertains to it became stronger. While my parents worship the sacred cow, I ate hamburgers at the burger joint down the block from my house. Like Ammu and Jamila, I am from a new generation of Indians. I have adapted to Caribbean mores and traditions. I was immersed into a culture that permits girls to achieve college education, to wear grass skirts, and bikinis made with glittering beads and dance in the streets to the sounds of steel drums for carnival. My friends and I wore fake tattoos and attended “impromptu” beach parties. It was the seventies, and we were all acting like left over hippies. Then came the offer of marriage to a wealthy Brahmin, and Indian culture took precedence over my own Caribbean culture. I did not allow myself to be “pickled.” By marrying out of my heritage and culture I made a bend in my traditional river, and created corners that I could not see. Since I chose my own destination, I took responsibility for all the cracks that I encounter in my path.

Life was getting harder for us to manage our finances, and after much contemplating, Sajjad sold my car, then his was repossessed; after, we moved into a one bedroom apartment. Sajjad finally secured a job building walls along a ravine, and when the foreman wanted someone to prepare sandwiches for the laborers, I took the job. When the ravine project closed, my husband and I secured a small stall in the market and we
sold vegetables that we grew in our backyard. My husband wanted me to remain at home; he did not want my town folks to see me as a market vendor. But my pantry was bare, and I wanted formula and medicine for my child, so I came out into the bright sunshine, in full view of the community that despise me, standing next to and supporting the man that I love. I saw my mother and sister in the supermarket—they both looked at me and turned away. How I longed for them to ask for my son who is their nephew and grandson. It was wishful thinking—and I wondered if they had forgotten that I was once a daughter of the big grey-stone house in the Croisee, which is a very affluent district in the northern section of Trinidad.

My father passed one year later. I was blamed for his death. Just as Anwar says that he will starve to death if Jamila does not do his bidding, just so, my father neglected his health when I left home. He refused his blood-pressure pills, and scarcely left the house. He was afraid that people might ask about me, my wedding and my disappearance. I was not allowed to attend his funeral. My father’s assets were divided up among my sisters and my two brothers. I did not share in the proceeds because I was disinherited in my father’s will.

Sajjad sunk deeper into depression, and consumed so much alcohol that we did not have money to cover our rent. Some nights when he is sober he is gentle and kind, and I see the old Sajjad that I gave up my whole life for. We would sit at our kitchen table, thinking each other’s thoughts, as we sipped tea that we brewed from the leaves of the peppermint plant that sprouted along our fence.

Sajjad’s health deteriorated and he became withdrawn. I could not read the expression on his face anymore because he avoided looking at me. We hardly
communicated, and right before my eyes I saw the galloping rapture of love come to a mere sober trot. “Go home to you mother,” he implored, “I have failed you.” I half-heartedly went to my mother’s house one day when my husband was asleep, and knocked on the door. My mother inquired who it was, and my brother replied “low-life.” With sculptured lips and scattered thoughts I walked away from my childhood home.

Sajjad died of a heart attack ten years after we eloped. He was thirty years old and our son was eight. I disperse his ashes into the Gulf of Paria where I used to run away and frolic with him on the beach. We had our favorite spot on the beach among the rushes—it was our History House. I received money from an insurance policy that he secured from his government job at the Ministry of Works, and I moved with my son to America.

The Buddha of Suburbia, Haroon, says it well when he proclaims that people should not confine themselves to culture that stems from religious believes, but one must be loyal to their own beliefs. He says, “We live in an age of doubts and uncertainty. The old religions under which people lived for ninety-nine point nine percent of human history have decayed or are irrelevant…I believe happiness is only possible if you follow your own intuition, your real desires. Only unhappiness is gained by acting according with duty, or obligation, or guilt, or the desire to please others…Should people pursue their own happiness at the expense of others? Or should they be unhappy so others can be happy? There’s no one who hasn’t had to confront these problems” (Kureishi 76). I have confronted these problems, and I made the decision, like Ammu, to pursue my own happiness, with no cultural boundaries in place. If the past is erased, the slate wiped clean, and I live my life all over again I will live it the same way-my way.
The Unravelling of the Authentic Self

My childhood fled the day that I witness my grandfather spit in the direction of his daughter Radha. Kuta, he said. For years I tried to block out that vision but it was very difficult; it was imprinted into my head, and my heart; and at eight years old, I did not have the capacity to fully understand the ramifications of his actions but I knew, somehow, that it was a despicable act. When I was thirteen I learned from my mother the impact of his action, and I knew that he was quite surprised when I told him one day, “Ajah, I would have loved you more if you had stayed in India.”

I wanted to be a good Brahmin daughter, out of fear mostly; because of my environment, I knew what was expected of me. But underneath all the layers that I constructed to be perceived as someone or something else, under all the layers, was the authentic self, crying out for recognition. I wore the sari, I attended temple frequently, I refrain from burgers, and I stopped socializing with friends. Everyone was happy, but me. It is when they brought the strange suitor to “see” me that I unraveled. It is here that I left the tour, and began my life. I undo the layers, and the West Indian girl emerged. I ditched the sari, and just as Jamila, I went back to jeans and t-shirts, I traded the temple for calypso and mardi gras, and spend most of my time in the library since rejecting the suitor caused my parents to pull me from school; too much assimilating was a good enough reason.

I believe that our lives are shaped not only by the extent or nature of our experiences, but also what we learn from them. It is our experiences that transcends personal memory, and allows us to formulate our own perceptions and ideals by examining our own lives, and the lives of those that are around us. Robert Nozick, in The
*Examined Life,* shows the importance of self-evaluation. He says, “I want to think about living and what is important in life to clarify my thinking—and also my life” (Nozick 11). Nozick disagrees with Freud that our childhood deficiencies such as restricted opportunities, restricted emotional environment, and childhood passionate desires, can affect us in adulthood. He argues that humans are too intelligent a species “to be so continually shaped by its childhood” (Nozick 11). He alluded to the fact that as we go from childhood to adulthood, our character can be altered and interpreted differently when distinctive component such as reflection is added; reflection generates new thoughts and ideas about lives and about ourselves. He says, “Therefore, examination and reflection are not just about the other components of life, they are added within a life” (Nozick 15).

I agree with Nozick. By reflecting on my own situation, it is evident that life is an accumulation of all of our experiences. It is a potpourri of events shaped by the understanding gained by examining our own lives, and reflecting on those experiences that are important and significant. Had our childhood and our upbringing affect us and restrict us to certain values, women like myself, and girls like Jamila, Ammu, and Malala could not have the capacity to re-understand and re-classify ourselves. Disagreeing with Freud, Nozick states, “It would be sad if nothing important about life were learned along the way” (12). I have learned that authoritarian ideologies are deeply embedded in the psyche of Indian tradition, and I also learned the importance not to lend myself to be in bondage to such a system.
**Voices at the Crossroads**

Undoubtedly, everyone has substantially different values, but the most important moral value is to preserve the integrity of the self. Indian women have suffered for centuries under the patriarchal values that were religiously constructed to place restrictions on them. They no longer want to be like the *kalikatha* dancers who, dress in ancient Indian regalia, performs the mythical stories from the *Ramayna*. Indian women are breaking away from the grip of an oppression culture, and are finding their own voice in the crossroads where they can converse and where they can also listen. Since the road we chose will confirm us to our destiny, women listen to the voices of other women, in other cultures and countries, who were pushed into the crossroads, and how these women struggled for their civil liberties and won. These voices of their liberated sisters put wind beneath the sails of the oppressed woman. They no longer want to be interrupted, ignored, or challenged. Davis listened to the voice of the Black Women’s Club, Jamila is British and she listens to Davis who is American, Ammu is Indian and she listens to the Rolling Stones and British pop music, Malala is Pakistani and she reads novels by Jane Austen, my aunt Pryia watched Tolstoy’s *Anna Karenina*, and I admired Sojourner Truth’s courage in the face of her oppressors. Truth’s struggle with oppression propelled her to be a strong advocate for women. In her Akron, Ohio speech, in the midst of the mostly white and male hecklers, she knew that it was time to speak up for all the hidden voices of oppressed women, worldwide. She says, “I am woman’s rights…I have as much muscle as any man...if a woman have a pint and a man a quart, why can’t she have her pint full? You need not be afraid to give us our rights for fear we will take too much...for we can’t take more than our pint can hold” (Painter 125).
It is the voices at the crossroads that energize the oppressed woman to demand her pint, and to rise up in the glory of the freed woman. To foster cultural resistance, and to fight for autonomy, international feminist groups are popping up worldwide, and women are joining the struggle to liberate themselves, and to see the world from their own point of view. In 1965, The General Union of Palestinian Women was founded. In 1976, women in Brussels held an International Tribunal on Crimes against Women. Out of this conference grew the International Feminist Network which women, globally, can utilize for information and support. The Manushi, a strong radical movement that emerged in India in 1979, serves to link women of all casts together to severe discrimination and oppression. North American and European women helped to reform the Argentinian Civil Code to grant suffrage to oppressed Argentinian women. Women’s Institute of Ceylon, and literacy programs in Ghana were formed by women’s organizations to educate women, and to raise their standard of living. In 1979, women throughout the world demonstrated to support the resistance by Iranian women against patriarchal and cultural oppression and dominance (Leghorn and Parker 309-311).

Second to life, itself, is freedom. It elevates existence, and allows us to take command of our lives intellectually, socially, and morally. Oppression pushes women towards the crossroads. It is at this junction that we have that uninterrupted conversation with our inner self, and where we make significant decisions governing our lives. By formulating and adhering to our own decisions, and by elevating our moral values and self-worth, we can show that society may take away a woman’s chair but cannot take away her desire to sit.
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