

"I Am So Sari"

The Construction of South Asians in Cyprus

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The reception of South Asians in other cultures, even in the context of the postcolonial state, has been largely that of the subaltern-voided of an effective subject position. South Asian countries with their differing structural, economic and political problems, labelled as the "third world," have in some ways contributed to such a reception.

In this piece I am stating that the construction of South Asians in Cyprus, is primarily and essentially done through their women, with the observation that all such constructions are based on the presence of a visible percentage of South Asian women, particularly from Sri Lanka, who are employed as domestic maids. According to the latest statistics, out of the approximately 32,000 legally employed foreign workers in various capacities in Cyprus, 8000 are domestic maids from Sri Lanka. They constitute 60% in this category. The next 30% are maids from the Philippines, and, the remaining 10%, from Nepal, India, Vietnam and other countries (Department of Immigration, Nicosia, Cyprus Oct. 2002). My aim here is not to devalue this group by over-determining it along class lines, but, to alert the public to the fact that such narrow, ethnic, gendered, class constructions of cultural others feed into larger forms of discrimination in social formations and cultural differentiations.

It is a compromised space-the "always already"-into which the South Asian enters Cyprus. A gee-social prescriptive space, which reduces the subject from a person to a sign, that definitionally erases differences, ignores the heterogeneity of South Asians as a group, and, annuls subjectivities. The South Asian woman in particular becomes the site for the production of cultural meanings that perpetuate stereotypes in wide ranging social subordination. She has constantly to negotiate and renegotiate herself as bodily presence and social signifier.

Cyprus, which is strategically located at the crossroads of three continents- Africa, Asia and Europe-has always lauded itself at being best suited for a democratic multiculturalism. The island's history stamped by various empires (Assyrians, Egyptian, Persian, Ptolemies, Romans and Byzantines, Crusaders, Lousignans, Genoese and Venetians, the Ottomans, and the British), further

strengthens this claim. Politically too, Cyprus has been the meeting place of several high-powered officials to sort out serious global issues. The meeting of the foreign ministers of the Non-Aligned movement, held in Nicosia in 1988, and, the meeting of the International Commission for Security and Cooperation in West Asia, held at Limassol in 2000, are examples in point. Today, Cyprus is at the threshold of joining the European Union. When it joins this Union—which is very northern and central European as an entity—it will be one of the few wholly Mediterranean countries in it. This makes Cyprus not only an important link to the southern Mediterranean countries, to the Middle East and to the East, but it also makes it an important conduit for global dialogue.

Cyprus is facing a crucial historical moment, in its preparation for accession to the European Union, when notions of self-identity, the idea of the nation, and, the, nature of cultural hegemony are going to be radically questioned, invented and reinvented. There has to be an alertness to and a surveillance of these processes—both in terms of their ideology and materiality. If a rigorous questioning of the narrow, ethnic, gendered and class construction of cultural others does not take place at the present historical conjuncture, then, there could be a re-enactment and a congealing of prejudiced imaging of cultural others in more damaging ways, and on a more expanded scale, later. The complexities involved in the process of the unification of the two parts of Cyprus (Greek and Turkish, divided since 1974) raises these very insistent questions that inflect a great deal of anxiety among Cypriots of different ethnic origins. There has to be a reconciliatory cultural atmosphere, rather than a mere geographically enforced necessity, within which the *Attila* (green line), dividing Cyprus can be removed.

Given the not so distant subaltern history of Cyprus under the British rule (1878-1960), during which Cyprus was primarily constructed as a country of hybrids—slave races—and, the partition of Cyprus into Greek and Turkish parts (1974), with its varying degrees of dislocation and violence (over 160,000 Greek Cypriots were forced out of their homes, and 55,000 Turkish Cypriots escaped theirs), such subaltern constructions of the South Asians seem puzzling.

An understanding of the historical links between India and Cyprus, maybe useful in forging new ways of viewing these constructions. Pandit Jawaharlal Nehru and Archbishop Makarios were both instrumental in creating the bonds of post-independence friendship between the two countries. There are several reminders of this in the capital city of Nicosia, the largest of the six districts in the island. For example, the Indian High Commission is located on Indira Gandhi street and the national Parliament on Jawaharlal Nehru Avenue. Adjacent to the Parliament is the statue of Mahatma Gandhi. Similarly, in India too, there are several such reminders. One of the plush streets in New Delhi is called Archbishop Makarios

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Apart from these historical links, today, in Cyprus, there are hundreds of highly qualified Indian software professionals and computer scientists building up the cyber base of the nation in what is called "E-commerce" deals. In fact, I am writing this piece at a time when the Indian Prime Minister Atal Bihari Vajpayee has recently completed his three day visit to Cyprus, during which, both he, and the President of Cyprus, Glavkos Clerides, agreed that the bonds of friendship between the two countries extend to all sectors based on mutual feelings of trust, respect and support (*Cyprus Weekly*; 11-17 October, 2002, p.9).

What is of immediate relevance to us about such high-powered governmental exchanges is their transformative potential-or lack thereof-into the minutiae of the daily lives and the lived experiences of South Asians in Cyprus. I am stating that the construction of the South Asians in Cyprus offers incisive insights into the nature of Cypriot society and its relation to femininity as a metaphor for the other. It is a relation that carelessly interweaves and rehearses the discourses of patriarchy and colonialism by re-articulating their foundational binaries of conquest and defeat, superior and inferior, strong and weak in its representation of the other.

Cyprus, known as both the Island of Panayia, the Virgin Lady, and, the Island of AphroditesNenus, the goddess of love, has in the mythic imagination of its people posited women as two distinct modes of subjectivity-woman as mother, and, as lover (wife). This makes the woman's body into a disordered, contested site, an embattled terrain for definitions of masculinity and femininity, notions of self and other, and, community and nation, in the context of post-coloniality. Within the scheme of this embattlement-fought inside the material conditions of Cypriot society with its specific set of social relations-resolutions are sort through doublings and splittings that spill into the social arena creating their own peculiar tensions. One such doubling and splitting is manifested in the employment of South Asians-via Sri Lankan women-as domestic help to fulfil the duties expected of the Cypriot women whether she is an employee, or, a housewife. In this they parallel the American super-moms of the sixties, where too, war time prosperity had created a similar situation. The figure of the super-mom was expected to fulfil a range of duties from household chores, to looking after children, the sick and the aged. Interestingly, although the Department of Social Welfare Services of the Ministry of Labour and Social Insurance provide for these services, especially among the more needy, there is a resistance in Cypriots to avail of these facilities due to cultural traditions and strong family bonds.

The trend of employing Sri Lankan maids in Cyprus began approximately eight years ago (1993/1994) with Cypriot women entering the work force in larger

numbers (there are over 40% in it). This was a result of the near full employment conditions created by the country's high rate of economic growth. There were several factors responsible for this economic boom. These included dynamic entrepreneurship, an expanding tourist industry, the ratio of the sterling pound vis-à-vis the Cyprus pound, among others. This trend of employing maids in Cyprus, also coincided with the feminisation of wage labour in the market economy globalisation. That is the migrant women's entry into domestic work constitutes a sexual/racial division of labour within the macro-processes of globalisation .

Most of the maids are recruited through private agencies working with the family that employs them. The entry of the maids into Cyprus from the "sending nation" to the "receiving nation" is based upon demand. They are usually twenty-five years age or younger. The employer pays for the air ticket and arranges for the visa that can extend up to six years. The employer/family is also obliged to pay for the health insurance. Despite these measures, 90% of the complaints in the Ministry of Labour, Department of Complaints, are from Sri Lankan maids for a wide range of abuses: verbal, sexual, physical (in the form of long working hours), and no payment. The salary of these maids is 150 Cypriot pounds per month exclusive of food and housing. These are taken care of by the employer/family.

The doubling of roles, the Cypriot woman as housewife, and the South Asia domestic maid, as a symbolic representative of her, when transferred on to the social register, violently splits itself into the self and the other within the twin discourses of patriarchy and colonialism. This is illustrated best in the representation of South Asians as the disorderly other, to be contained, controlled and marginalized. The notion of the "clean mistress" and the "dirty servant" is played upon. There are several Cypriots who state that they prefer Sri Lanka maids to maids from other countries because they are easier to control. They also argue – like the colonisers – that these domestics are happier to work as maids in Cyprus, than, live with their families and children in their own country.

Such attitudes in Cypriot men and women point to a racial collusion – with colonial, gendered notations – in maintaining uneven distributions of power. I am suggesting that a more felt feminist movement in the country could provide an alternative way of understanding history and the position of the subalterns in it. This would help in a reworking of femininity as a metaphor, for the other, in Cypriot culture. *The National Machinery for Women's Rights*, set up by the Government of Cyprus in 1988 and reformed in 1994, and, which functions under the auspices of the Ministry of Justice and Public Order, has to engage in a larger canvassing in terms of ideological orientations and re-orientations. Of course there are several women's groups that have sprung up particularly in the 1990s in Cyprus. But these groups have to be far more vigilant and proactive at this particular juncture in the

history of Cyprus. Through their consciousness raising programmes, they could sensitise people to the fact that gender discrimination feeds into other forms of discriminations which disallows the recovery of individuals as subjects. In this context, I am grateful to the Department of Foreign Languages and Literatures, at the University of Cyprus, for inviting me to teach cross cultural courses on gender and women's writings.

