

Navigating the Third Space with Double Consciousness

South Asian Indian Women in the American Workplace

SUCHITRA SHENOY

DePaul University

Having recently moved to Chicago, I decided to be proactive in my search for friends. So I went to the first place most people my generation and younger go to these days, the Internet. More specifically, I joined the group "Indians in Chicago" on Facebook and soon befriended another Indian woman, around my age, and with whom I shared common interests. At our first meeting, one of the first questions she asked me was, "So, what are you?" I smiled. In an alternate universe, this question might be constructed as being offensive. However, when Indians converse, there is an implicit understanding of what this question means that comes equipped with the knowledge required to answer it. I told her my mother-tongue, *Konkani*, and the part of the country I come from (born in Mangalore, Karnataka; raised in Pune, Maharashtra). My answer satisfied her curiosity. With a geographically dispersed ancestry that bears little resemblance to where I was born, raised, and my native language, few Indians can figure out *what* I am from just my last name Shenoy (last names, in the Indian context, can typically be very revealing of a person's caste, religion, occupation, state of origin, etc.), and this was certainly not the first time I was being asked that question by an Indian. Of course I could go into a detailed explanation about

the origin of my last name, its history, and famous Shenoy's in India and elsewhere, but here in Chicago and the United States, I am Indian and that is all that matters.

I narrate the incident with my new friend because this essay is about identities—the multiplicity of our selves. I might have left India far behind, but the Indian in me constantly negotiates as she searches for a modicum of situated selfhood. In this essay, I focus primarily on my ambivalent navigation through my many professional selves. As I narrate my work experiences, I embed them within related academic constructs. I also draw on the workplace images of Asian Indian women as depicted in popular media.

Double-Consciousness of an Outsider Within

Since I first arrived in the United States in 2001, I have held a number of organizational roles. As a graduate student pursuing her master's degree, I worked as a graduate assistant, a university newspaper and year-book reporter, a receptionist at university publications, a bookstore worker, and a janitorial assistant. A semester before I graduated, I got a full-time job at

a community college that required me to direct the college's public relations, coordinate alumni activities and membership, and teach public speaking; this was my first "real" job (see Clair, 1996). A year and a half later, I started a PhD program that continued for 4 years, during which I worked as a teaching assistant, a graduate lecturer, a research assistant, and an organizational change management intern. I valued every one of my jobs and fulfilled my responsibilities with dignity and integrity. Today I am an assistant professor at a university that could not have been a better fit for me. In this essay I reflect on some of my workplace experiences that, as a result of my heightened self-consciousness, got embedded into my journey along the way.

I distinctly remember the day one of my colleagues at the community college, a white woman only a couple of years older than I was then, told me that I might have been an affirmative action hire. Even though I was not quite clear about the legal requirements state-funded educational institutions needed to observe, somewhat with uncertainty, I explained that because I was not a U.S. citizen, I might not really qualify for that category. She dismissed my reasoning matter-of-factly by saying, "You're a woman, and a woman of color," as if that was enough to get me a job on the college president's staff. As things turned out, when it was time to renew my contract, the college found a "qualified American citizen" for my job and therefore decided to let me go. With no community college teaching experience, no knowledge of computer software skills essential for the job, and no master's degree in communication (the job advertisement specifically asked for all three criteria), the woman who was hired to take my position was not "qualified," even though I was. Having always believed that things happen for a reason, I took my job loss in stride. Meanwhile, intuitively knowing which way the wind was blowing, I had applied to doctoral programs across the country. My position at the college officially ended on December 31 and by August of the following year, I had started my PhD program. A year later, I came to know from a former colleague and friend, a black woman, that she had heard through the grapevine that one of the biggest reasons for letting me go was the reaction among certain folks in the community

regarding the college hiring "foreigners." Given that the college depended on the community's goodwill and donations, the decision neither surprised nor embittered me.

My 9 years in the United States have carefully and cautiously alerted me to my *outsider-within* status in my environment (Collins, 1986, 1999), interpersonal or professional, no matter what space I occupy. Instinctively, I grasped an awareness of a distinct double consciousness that had developed almost mechanistically, almost as if my very survival in the American workforce depended on my performing that duality of consciousness. DuBois (2006) considers the term *double consciousness* a "peculiar sensation" that involves "looking at one's self through the eyes of others" (p. 204). In performing my consciousness, I was thus twice-aware of my outsider-within status as an Indian, a foreigner, a woman, a woman of color, an "other," a "minority" in the United States. My nationality, of course, came with my passport, but I was not prepared for the salience of other identities fighting for significance simultaneously as I tried to adapt to my new home and work worlds in America. Having lived a privileged life in India as a middle-class, well-educated Hindu, I had to suddenly accept membership into forced identity groups such as "woman of color" and "minority." Hegde (1998) observes that, "the experience of seeing oneself represented as 'the other' makes immigrants highly speculative and anxious to develop oppositional narratives that explain and connect their relationship to otherness" (p. 42).

To me this relationship to otherness was what defined my outsider-within status. I wanted to adapt and as much as I find the connotations associated with the word *assimilation* problematic, I wanted to devise a middle way wherein I could seamlessly assimilate into my adopted country without drawing any attention to my obvious foreignness while simultaneously and proudly embracing my cultural identity. To straddle an ambivalent space created between the familiar, more natural culturally flavored behaviors (Indian) and the learned, expected, and accepted normative behaviors in my new home (America), is to always enact the double consciousness DuBois (2006) talked about. It often means suppressing or ignoring my Indian sensibilities and accepting and

even embracing the newness that surrounds me with critical reflection and reservation. It is also to feel a certain sense of dislocation and disorientation from the pulling and pushing between homelands. Bhabha (1994) observes that "to be unhomed is not to be homeless, nor can the 'unhomely' be easily accommodated in that familiar division of social life into private and public spheres. The unhomely moment creeps up on you stealthily as your own shadow" (p. 13), causing an unconscious reality of oppositions.

Despite the often juxtaposed Eastern and Western perspectives that color my decisions and values, however, I feel fortunate that living in hybrid locations allows me to draw on the best of both cultures and develop a dually sensitive personality characteristic, thereby strengthening my outsider-within status. I am now better able to critically evaluate my own positions as well as those of others and consider them in full light of what I know to be appropriate in either culture and act accordingly. In doing so, a transnational nomad or the "unhomed" as Bhabha (1994) calls us, can make an honest attempt at putting one foot in each world and making a successful journey, albeit an adventurous and ambivalent one. To do so, the translocated immigrant can use *mimicry* as a constructive method of adaptation. Bhabha (1994) explains that "mimicry is a desire for a reformed, recognizable Other, as a subject of difference that is almost the same, but not quite" (p. 122). For example, my mimicking involved faking an accent in a feeble attempt to neutralize my original Indian one, an accent that ended up being neither completely Indian, nor American, but the compliments I got (e.g., "You are so easy to understand") somehow made it worth the pretend speech. In vying for colonial approval, I was willingly playing into the power structures that prevail, but secretly pleased that in my own concocted world, I was gaining acceptance. Hybrid performances such as attempts to neutralize my accent or conforming to normative work attire (consciously choosing not to wear Indian clothes even on informal occasions when I could) usually emerged after some internal struggle. The solace throughout this identity negotiation process is the fact that I *choose* to make those decisions. I am my own agent to my performing professional self. The truth of the matter is, having lived most of my adult

life in the United States, my original Indian self has almost "gone native," which according to Lincoln and Guba (1981) occurs when individuals consciously adopt the values and beliefs of another culture.

Bhabha's (1994) articulation of the *third space* perspective explains this quandary better. The notion of a third space refers to an "in-between temporality" (p. 19). It is the space between colonial powers and colonized subjectivities. It is an inclusive space that is neither Indian, nor American. Explaining Bhabha's conceptualization further, Khan (1998) states that the third space, "becomes a space of contradiction, repetition, ambiguity, and disavowal of colonial authority that does not allow for original signifiers and symbols in oppositional polarities" (p. 464). Hybridized individuals who are caught in a "discontinuous time of translation and negotiation, erasing any claims for inherent cultural purity, inhabit the rim of an 'in-between reality' marked by shifting psychic, cultural, and territorial boundaries" (p. 464). More positively, third space is "celebrated and privileged as a kind of superior cultural intelligence owing to the advantage of in-betweenness, the straddling of two cultures and the consequent ability to negotiate the difference" (Hoogvelt, 1997, p. 158). So far, I have discussed my own dialectical, behavioral, and discursive polarities. As a South Asian Indian immigrant in the United States, perhaps my dilemmas are not far removed from those of other immigrants who, in the process of navigating shifting homelands, constantly negotiate this third space. What, however, of those first-generation individuals who represent a culture of origin but were born and raised in the United States? More specifically, how do American-born South Asian Indian women negotiate their own work and nonwork spaces?

South Asian Indian Women on Television

Given this essay's interest in identities and organizational experiences, I draw from popular media to analyze creative characters' depiction of their cultural backgrounds. Currently four popular television shows have South Asian Indian women as prominent, if not lead characters: Amita Ramanujam (Navi Rawat) from *NUMB3RS*, Divya Katdare (Reshma

Shetty) from *Royal Pains*, Kalinda Sharma (Archie Panjabi) from *The Good Wife*, and Kelly Kapoor (Mindy Kaling) from *The Office*. The characters of Amita and Divya embody struggles that most first-generation (foreign-born, here U.S.- and U.K.-born children of immigrant Indian-born parents) South Asian Indians face. Both Amita and Divya are highly educated and hold professional degrees; the former, a mathematician; the latter, a physician's assistant. Both characters had episodes that addressed their parents' involvement in their marital lives. When Amita's parents meet Charlie Eppes (David Krumholtz), Amita's boyfriend, they disapprove of him and their relationship and in fact set her up with an Indian physician. In *Royal Pains*, Divya's parents insist that she marry an Indian man—a childhood friend—and return to London with them. They also disapprove of her profession as a physician's assistant and instead want her to get an MBA from Wharton. Both cases represent diasporic Indians' (and Indians in general) desire for professional degrees and cultural homogeneity (in Amita's case, it was more of the latter). Amita and Divya both struggle to make their personal and professional decisions while pulled in two different directions; one requiring them to fulfill their traditional obligations to their parents by seeking and winning their approval for everything they do and a second one that promises independence and many personal freedoms, perhaps at the cost of severing familial ties.

In *The Good Wife*, Kalinda Sharma, played by England-born actress Archie Panjabi, is a secretary and research assistant of Indian origin who assists the lead character and the partners in her law firm in investigating key evidence pertinent to the cases they take on. Kalinda's character is depicted as a strong, articulate, and no-nonsense straight-shooter whose innovative practices have more than once helped attorneys win their cases. Even though this show has not yet focused on Kalinda's Indian origin, in a recent episode, the fact that nuances surrounding one's background almost always influence and shape a person were obviated when a young, white male attorney, in an attempt to flirt with Kalinda, challenges her to demystify her personality. In reply, without hesitation, she says, "You and I have nothing in common ... you and I are from different worlds

and it's not just Mars and Venus, it's Spaghetti and Hydrogen. They're different categories." Perhaps Kalinda was referring to her nonwhite minority status or perhaps she was referring to her gender. The point is that as children of immigrant parents, these young women are constantly reminded of their ceremonial membership in the third space.

Next I move to Kelly Kapoor (Mindy Kaling), a character that is most unusual as far as stereotypical representations go. *The Office*, the U.S. version of the British hit show by the same name, created by Ricky Gervais, according to its official Web site is a "fly-on-the-wall 'docu-reality' parody about modern American office life ... and delves into the lives of the workers at Dunder Mifflin, a paper supply company in Scranton, Pennsylvania." Kelly Kapoor is one such worker, a customer service representative.

Kelly Kapoor is an antithesis to typical stereotypes that might be associated with South Asian Indians, considered the "latest and greatest 'model'" minority (Richwine, 2009) in the United States. First, Kelly is not employed in professions such as engineering, information technology, medicine, or surgery, fields that are overrepresented by people of Indian origin (Richwine, 2009). Second, the way her character is depicted as an annoying, sassy, inarticulate attention-seeker might make more traditional Indian Americans cringe as they realize that in representing a character of Indian origin, she might be undoing the carefully crafted positive characteristics about the Indian as a soft-spoken, hard-working model employee, more typically connected to the larger Indian diaspora in the United States.

Mindy Kaling, the real person behind the character, who was born Vera Mindy Chokalingam, perhaps started using her middle name as her first, and shortened her last name, to gain easier recognition in her professional life as an actor, producer, and writer. Indeed as Tahmincioglu (2009) observes, one's name can lead to prejudice and workplace discrimination especially when that name sounds ethnic, unfamiliar, or foreign. In changing her name to sound more "mainstream," Mindy has voluntarily identified with the dominant white culture and allowed for her name to be a nonissue as far as the workplace is concerned. Perhaps this was Mindy's way of managing her ambivalence of being between worlds. Bhabha (1994)

argues that his concept of stereotype-as-suture "is a recognition of the ambivalence of that authority and those orders of identification" (p. 115). The character Kelly has her own frustrations with her name when in one of the episodes, failing to win favor with Charles Miner, the vice president of the Northeast region for Dunder Mifflin, who compliments the receptionist Erin's middle name, Kelly cries out in frustration before running out of the room, "Well, you know what my [middle] name is? Rajanigandha, and I hate it. I hate it!"

Although I have gotten my share of questions about my name, Kelly's work world bears no resemblance to any of my workplace experiences. Kelly is a loud, obnoxious, smack-talking (by her own admission), somewhat immature and extremely verbose character, and although I could not find myself relating to her, I did *understand* where she was often coming from.

In an episode leading to the first celebration of a Hindu Indian festival, Diwali, on national television, Michael Scott, the regional manager for Dunder Mifflin's Scranton branch, asks Kelly to explain the significance of the festival. Kelly comes across as ignorant of her cultural heritage as she rambles incoherently until Dwight, the assistant to the regional manager, steps up to explain the history behind the celebration. Kelly's reluctance, or perhaps genuine ignorance of Diwali, could be deliberate and meant as an act of resistance against being the token member that is singled out to talk about *her* cultural festival. In reality however, reportedly, the Diwali episode of *The Office* was Mindy's idea. Although she admitted in an interview that she had to look up information about the festival online, she appreciated the opportunity to learn about her own culture. Even as Mindy, who is a Hindu, wrote and acted in an episode showcasing and celebrating an important Hindu festival, she expresses the double consciousness (DuBois, 2006) discussed earlier. Says Mindy, "I could tell [executive producer Greg Daniels] and people I work with were a little antsy about assigning the Hindu writer the Indian episode. I didn't want to feel like they pigeonholed me, but I felt like I'd done enough episodes that it was okay. I was actually a little excited" (Porter, 2006, ¶ 4). Embodying an outsider-within status herself, she was uniquely

positioned to understand the discomfort her coworkers might have experienced in assigning her a predictable assignment. At the same time, she asserts her competence and reasons that because she had proven herself by writing other episodes, writing a Diwali episode would be like any other another writing project.

Likewise, when I take on my professorial role in front of my students, I am careful to include only as much information about India and Indians as is essential to the context under discussion, in case I get accused of pushing India on disinterested students. Although I have never been singled out to represent "India," my opinions in and outside of class, and in other professional settings have been particularly attentively listened to for hints of speaking for all Indians, something I am always mindful of. I, of course, realize that even in mundane everyday professional communication, I might be shouldering the responsibility of representing my country of origin, and although this can be a fulfilling experience, there are times when I just want to be an inconsequential employee who comes in and does her work to the best of her abilities with no cultural expectations and no stereotypes.

In avidly following *The Office*, it has been interesting to see the transitions Kelly's character has undergone over the seasons of the show. In season one, Kelly wore a serious appearance and had her hair pulled in a bun. In subsequent seasons, Kelly was not only given more lines in the script, but her character evolved into a more self-confident and glamorous young woman with better clothes, and better hair and makeup. Her first and perhaps most aggressive form of resistance thus far was in one of the first-season episodes titled "Diversity Day." At the end of the day when Michael mimics what appears to be a South Asian convenience store owner's accent with an in-your-face tease, Kelly slaps Michael and walks out of the conference room. For all practical purposes and despite their individual differences with her, it appears that Kelly has been accepted by her coworkers as one of their own, as an American, who only happens to be of Indian origin.

In Closing: How I Know

Writing this essay has been an incredible experience. I was forced to delve deeper into the nuances of my

everyday discursive practices. I feel a certain inexplicable comfort knowing that even though I might be oscillating between spaces, the existence of a third space provides a serene sense of stability even amidst fluid identities. Even though I might not consciously think about it, it can be a personally exhilarating experience to go from being a semineutral accented English-speaking Indian in the American workplace to a code-switching, English-Hindi speaking Indian among other Indians.

I came to the United States as a 21-year-old student to attend graduate school. Today I teach graduate classes in organizational and multicultural communication, courses I wish I could have taken as a newcomer to this country. However, I learned and continue to learn the old-fashioned way, by not being afraid to approach people and solicit answers to cultural questions I do not know or understand, by being culturally sensitive in sharing and acquiring knowledge, by keeping an open mind and not getting offended by questions others ask of me about my culture and why we do what we do as Indians. I have also believed that asking is the first step to learning, so I appreciate and respect those who genuinely want to learn about my culture. However, as a dually conscious outsider-within South Asian Indian woman immigrant in the United States, I can see right through you if you patronize me and pretend to know me just because you saw *Slumdog Millionaire*, watched *Gandhi*, or do yoga. It is important to realize that there is more to individuals than just their national origin or accents or the color of their skin, and embrace cross-cultural experiences as opportunities for personal growth and learning.

Meanwhile, as my new friend and I walked out of the café making plans to attend the musical *Jersey Boys* on Broadway, I knew we would continue to have a good time as friends given our shared knowledges and implicit cultural understandings emerging from our country of origin and our mutual love, admiration, and respect for our adopted home. Our in-between professional identities however, would be a discussion for another day.

REFERENCES

Bhabha, H. K. (1994). *The location of culture*. New York: Routledge.

- Clair, R. P. (1996). The political nature of the colloquialism, "a real job": Implications for organizational socialization. *Communication Monographs*, 63, 249-267.
- Collins, P. H. (1986). Learning from the outsider within: The sociological significance of black feminist thought. *Social Problems*, 33, 14-32.
- Collins, P. H. (1999). Reflections on the outsider within. *Journal of Career Development*, 26, 85-88.
- DuBois, W. E. B. (2006). Double-consciousness and the veil. In R. F. Levine (Ed.), *Social class and stratification: Classical statements and theoretical debates* (pp. 203-210). Oxford, UK: Rowman & Littlefield.
- Hegde, R. S. (1998). Swinging the trapeze: The negotiation of identity among Asian Indian immigrant women in the United States. In *International and intercultural communication annual* (Vol. 21, pp. 34-55). Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage.
- Hoogvelt, A. (1997). *Globalization and the postcolonial world: The new political economy of development*. Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press.
- Khan, S. (1998). Muslim women: Negotiations in the third space. *Signs*, 23, 463-494.
- Lincoln, Y. S., & Guba, E. (1981, September-October). *Do evaluators wear grass skirts? "Going native" and ethnocentrism as problems in utilization*. Paper presented at the Joint Annual Meeting of the Evaluation Network and the Evaluation Research Society, Austin, TX. Retrieved December 17, 2009, from <http://eric.ed.gov/ERICWebPortal/contentdelivery/servlet/ERICServlet?accno=ED213750>
- Porter, R. (2006, November 2). Happy Diwali from "The Office." Retrieved November 17, 2009, from <http://www.zap2it.com/tv/zap-mindykalingtheofficediwali,0,6410256.story>
- Richwine, J. (2009, February 24). Indian Americans: The new model minority. Retrieved December 21, 2009, from http://www.forbes.com/2009/02/24/bobby-jindal-indian-americans-opinions-contributors_immigrants_minority.html#
- Tahmincioglu, E. (2009, November 23). Like it or not, name can impact your career. Retrieved November 14, 2009, from <http://www.msnbc.msn.com/id/34063244/ns/business-careers/>