

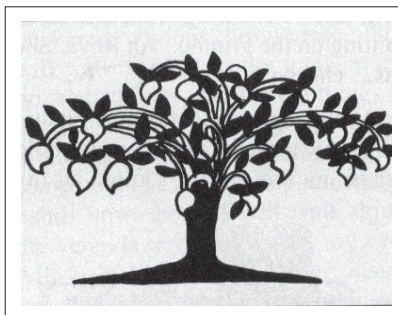
Responses to Manushi

Unfair Condemnation

I read with interest the interview with Shamita Das Dasgupta in **Manushi** in Issue 89. I waited till I finished the article to get really angry and sad at the manner in which Shamita has dismissed the importance and relevance of all of us who are part of mainstream women's organisations like the National Organisation for Women (NOW). As an Indian woman living in the US for almost 20 years, I have been very actively involved in NOW, especially in the past six years in the Illinois branch of NOW. My experiences have been very uplifting, educative and empowering.

Shamita talks about how she was told "to fit in here". I am amazed to hear that! NOW has frequently asked me to educate white women about Indian women's issues as well as those of immigrant women; I have frequently spoken on these subject at NOW chapter meetings and have also written relevant articles in NOW publications. Again and again, my suggestions and thoughts have been welcomed. I have never felt like Shamita that I was just a token Indian face or that I was not an equal partner in NOW activities. Though I am usually the only Indian at many of NOW's conventions, workshops, and meetings, I have never felt different or out of place.

I should also mention that I do not wear western clothes; I am always in a



salwar-kameez and wear a *bindi*. No NOW member has ever told me to "change my style of dressing" or has called it "backward and subservient". I believe that if that is the case in New Jersey, those NOW members are out of touch with the general philosophy of the vast majority of NOW members.

I would also like to touch on the topic of white women's perception of us as subservient or "under the thumb of our men". First of all, Shamita states that this was the reaction of white women in battered women's shelters! This is almost impossible for me to believe because such talk should not be coming from women working in shelters. It does not sound professional at all and has nothing to do with the cultural background of women who are being abused. One of the reactions that is felt when any woman is being abused is: "How can a woman allow any man to treat her like this?" The subordination of women is in a large part responsible for this abuse and it crosses all cultural boundaries. If white women in shelters talk like this,

it shows their particular insensitivity to all woman — not just women of color.

I have had an arranged marriage and my friends from NOW are amused by this because they find it hard to believe that an independent woman like me could have gone through such a system; yet they understand the significance of this. Native American and older generation white women from NOW talk about similar systems in their cultures. I know many activists in NOW who, like me, have been "married to the same man" for a long time.

Shamita also talks about Proposition 187 and explaining it to "one American woman." I wish she had specified if she meant a woman from NOW. Most American and many Indian women and men have had no idea what this proposition is all about, so I am hardly surprised by the woman's reaction. (Many people in America, and that includes a lot of the wealthy immigrant Indians, are either disinterested in or against any increase in the immigrant population.) I feel that Shamita is incorrect in her observation that the "mainstream feminist movement" did not speak out against Proposition 187. Perhaps Shamita has no idea that California NOW was vehemently opposed to it, and they were quoted extensively in mainstream newspapers decrying the proposition. Many NOW members have been

attending hearings and lobbying against similar bills that were proposed in other states, most notably in Illinois. Affirmative action has been attacked and NOW has been in the forefront fighting against its total elimination. Welfare reform which will affect poor women including many women of colour is an issue where NOW is fighting for fairness and justice for all. All of these issues affect large numbers of women and children, including immigrant women of color. I find Shamita's wholesale condemnation of the feminist movement pernicious and divisive.

I use the word 'divisive' deliberately. At a time when women of all races should be working together, at a time when NOW and other such organizations are being constantly attacked, trivialised and denounced by the media and are constantly fighting to be taken seriously, at a time when immigrant women need to get more involved in organizations like NOW, statements like the ones made by Shamita are going to be a step backward in forming alliances.

I do not disagree with the concept that white women need to be constantly educated; even white women in NOW, as I can see from Shamita's experiences. But to condemn and throw out all of NOW's work is hasty and indicates that Shamita did not do her homework; she concluded from her one experience in New Jersey that all feminist organisations are indifferent and hostile to immigrant women's issues. I respectfully differ and in the interests of the global women's movement and in the belief that sisterhood is universal, I feel she needs to examine the work of feminist organizations in the US, especially the commendable efforts of NOW in this direction.

Shobha Sharma, Illinois, USA

No Cakewalk

Three letters have appeared in issues 89 and 90 of **Manushi** — Smeeta Mishra's *Stereotyped Emancipation* (in **Reader's Forum**) Susan Dhavle's *Mothers or Nothing* (also in **Reader's Forum**) and K. Shobha Devi's *The Mother Trap* in **Responses**. These letters are, content-wise, quite contradictory and read together make for interesting reading.

K. Shobha Devi presents a very limited view of motherhood. She seems to think that motherhood means being the mother of sons only. She has totally ignored the mother-daughter relationship. Furthermore, she has only a certain type of mother-son relationship in mind — a relationship in which the mother is extremely possessive about her son. While this kind of extremely possessive relationship is an aberration, it is not the only possible scenario.

While I agree that motherhood carries with it a lot of responsibilities and sometimes drudgery too, I think it is all a matter of attitude. For me, the very process of carrying out one's responsibilities properly brings joy. Having no responsibilities at all would be terribly boring. Is there any worthwhile job or position which does not carry responsibilities?

Like Susan Dhavle, I also love being my children's mother. I am happy and proud that I have been able to pass on

this trait to my children as well. My daughter is a law graduate from Delhi University, who quit her job as a law officer in a well known Delhi company in order to bring up her infant son. She is enjoying this interlude of being a full-time housewife as much as she did her job. Once her son starts going to school, she will be back to work so she's trying to make the most of her time at home. In one of her recent letters she told me that if anyone asks: "You are not working? You are just a housewife?" — she wants to be able to reply that "I am not just a housewife. I am a *just* housewife and I do more work in my house than a lot of working men and women do in their offices."

Running a house and taking care of one's family is hardly a cakewalk. Being a housewife is not an eight-hour, but a 24-hour job and requires dedication, perseverance, skills, effort and resourcefulness. Regarding Susan Dhavle's apprehension that "Mothering and housekeeping is being scorned more and more, even by women," I feel that housewives and mothers will start commanding respect if educated and qualified women opt to become wives and mothers by choice and not by compulsion of any kind.

I feel that many girls, by opting to become housewives, take the path of least resistance. Smeeta Mishra is mistaken if she thinks a good job will be waiting for any young woman who completes a master's degree. Even intelligent and articulate young women are having difficulty facing today's job market. The tragedy of this situation for many modern girls is that their college education does not train them sufficiently for a career. Many young women 'choose' to become housewives because they are not capable of doing anything else and



thus, in fact, have no choice. Some may, of course, deceive themselves into believing that they have decided to become housewives out of their own free will.

Smeeta Mishra mentions that a woman need not be “single, career-oriented and independent” to be emancipated. But any woman of this description must necessarily depend for her emancipation upon her husband’s sweet will. What sort of emancipation does a woman have when she is solely dependent upon her husband? How many husbands allow their wives to take an independent stand on an issue? To be emancipated, one needs to think for oneself, and be able to take a stand and assert oneself. A woman must be financially independent or at least should have the potential and capability to be financially independent. Only then can she talk about her emancipation.

Lakshmi Bhargava, Bhopal

Flip Sides of a Coin

Madhu Kishwar’s article *When India “Missed” the Universe* made for interesting reading. I cannot remember any past event that has been catapulted so completely out of proportion as the crowning of Sushmita Sen and Aishwarya Rai was. The subsequent mushrooming of local beauty contests in every nook and corner of the country, leading to the establishment of these two women as ultimate role models for our little girls, is a certain cause for concern.

Ms Kishwar’s analysis with reference to her tumultuous ‘Miranda days’ judges the events as some elitist activity, but as she correctly recognises, these days, both the ‘*behenjis*’ and their ‘hep’ counterparts have completely sold out to the

glamour of these events. I agree with Ms Kishwar about the snobbery of the Miranda House elite and their contempt for the ‘*behenjis*’ but I am not too sure about viewing the ‘*behenjis*’ as helpless victims of this elite onslaught! If the ‘hep’ types propagated the lifestyle of parties, boyfriends, beauty contests, and Mills and Boon, the ‘*behenji*’ types giggled about *mangalvaar ka vrat* (fasting on a particular day of the week), read silly Hindi romances, observed *karva chauth ka vrat* for future husbands, discussed their own versions of beauty tips (*mehendi* and *multani mitti*) and wrapped their *dupattas* tightly around themselves, condemning women in western clothing as loose and immoral while priding themselves in being ‘*achhi ghar ki ladkiyan*’. How many of them ever read Mahadevi Varma or Premchand?

To me, both these types are two sides of the same coin — representing products of a society that completely devalues the merit of a woman as an individual in her own right and glorifies her as a vulnerable, decorative object. If the ‘copycat elite’ are to be condemned for blindly aping the West, the ‘*behenjis*’ are equally to be blamed for their closed-mindedness and blind adherence to a culture which does not credit women with much respect either.

Indian women still have a long way to go before they can reach anywhere near the autonomy of their western counterparts. Despite their obsession with youth and good looks, the western woman still has more independence and control over her sexuality. For Indian women, looks are important mainly until they find a ‘suitable’ husband, after which marriage and motherhood shut all doors on her as an individual. Because of this, she is

not really in a situation where she can be directly compared with her western counterpart, in so far as wanting to remain beautiful into old age is concerned.

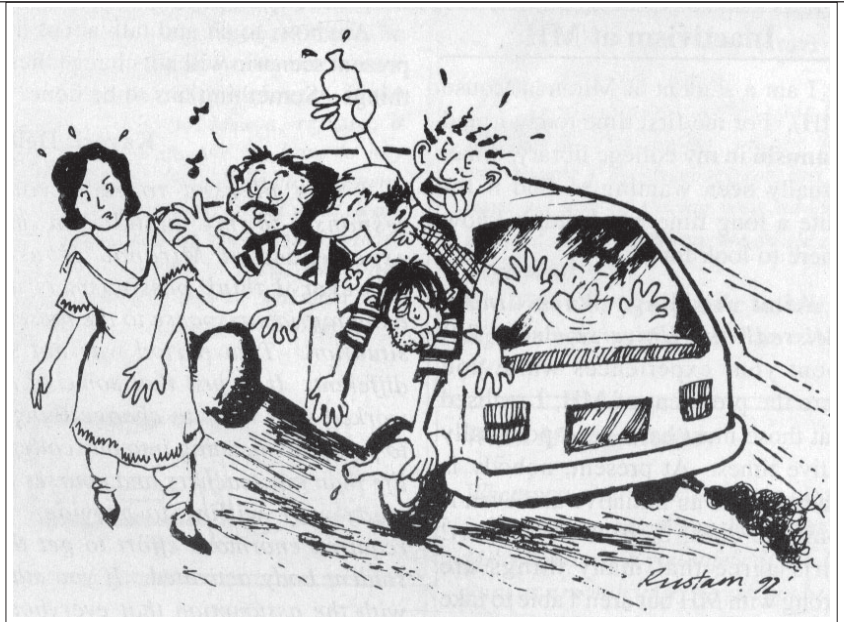
Aesthetics, in terms of good looks in men and women, cannot always be divorced from sexuality. Good looking men and women are almost always defined from the point of view of being attractive to the opposite sex. This is true in the West as well as in India. I don’t see any cause for concern here. What is disturbing is when a society gives a woman’s looks the prominence that it does not deserve. That is when the Aishwaryas and Sushmitas of the world become more important — and indeed are made to feel more important than they are, simply because of their beauty. The West, too, has innumerable beauty contests but none of these events make it to the headlines of their national newspapers! I can’t imagine an American beauty queen being invited to the White House to be honoured for her ‘achievements’. It’s little wonder that nineteen-year-old Sushmita Sen felt like a demi-goddess and started making ‘profound’ statements on issues she knew nothing about — knowing well that star-struck India would lap up anything she said!

Coming to Ms Kishwar’s comments on the “Barbie Doll Aesthetic”, yes, women in the West *are* obsessed with the way they look. Women in the West *are* obsessed with youth. A woman has everything to gain as long as she looks young, beautiful, and provocative to men given the consumerist, sexist culture of the West. But we would be fooling ourselves if, in the garb of tradition, we choose to absolve ourselves of similar attitudes in India.

Such attitudes transcend all classes and cultures — they manifest

themselves differently in different cultures and seem more obvious to us in others than in ourselves. If the super-model Barbie doll look is sought after because it is attractive from the point of view of the western male, the plump Indian look is attractive from the point of view of the Indian male! There has always been a large gap in the western and Indian/Oriental concepts of good looks in women. I have often heard traditional Indian men ridicule the pencil-thin western look. They will always find Meena Kumari far more attractive than Meryl Streep! Look at our temple carvings at Konarak and Khajuraho and the descriptions of *shringar* in our ancient texts and you will realize that the traditional Indian male's concept of an attractive woman is the complete antithesis of Barbie. I know for sure that no pencil-thin beauty will ever be a success on the silver screen in South India! So if Indian women need not worry about suffering from anorexia nervosa in trying to meet the beauty standards of their men — since it takes a lot less effort and pain to stay plump — it is still nothing to feel very proud or superior about — it is simply the flip side of the same coin.

Finally, regarding Ms Kishwar's comments on our country's *didi/amma* obsession, I was a little disappointed to hear her elevate this part of our culture as a positive plus point over the rest of the world, since I find nothing more hypocritical about our society than this. Does a man need to be '*bhaiyya*' or '*pitaji*' to half the world in order to get the respect that is due to him? Can't a woman be respected for who she is without posing as anybody's *didi* or grey-haired *amma*? It is considered 'safe' to play the role of *didi* or *amma* because then 'they' will not regard you in 'that' way. In spite



of the fixation with sex, sex itself is a bad word (*ashli*) and women's bodies are some sort of embarrassment. Any woman who is remotely attractive (read 'provocative') is not respectable, so thinking of her as *didi* or *amma* makes life simpler — respect comes easily then. This is the way some of our men choose to deal with conflicts within themselves. Why doesn't respecting a woman come naturally to them without resorting to this hypocritical drama? Simply because most of them cannot see a woman as anything beyond a sex object — and the only other beyond is *didi* or *amma*. I suppose posing as *ammas* and *didis* is a good practical strategy but isn't it high time someone pointed out what really went into this wonderful 'plus' that we have over our western counterparts? Why can't a woman be respected as an individual with personality and sexuality?

I am reminded of my days at the University of Roorkee where I was doing my masters. Every weekend I would push off to Dehradun where my family lived. Any woman who has

travelled alone by a UP Roadways bus knows what it is like. My concerned friends at the University would tell me that I should get myself a black-beaded '*mangalsutra*' to put around my neck and stain my forehead with a pinch of *sindoor* each time I undertook that trip home so I could count on the trip being smooth sailing! "They'll leave you alone," my friends assured me. Of course, a rebellious and defiant me would do nothing of the sort and had to bear the consequences. In retrospect, if I was today faced with a similar situation, I might use that as a practical strategy for my safety but touting it as an advantage of our culture would be that last thing that would ever enter my mind. I think we should be very ashamed of such a culture. Nothing else brings out the classic double standards of the Indian male so clearly — mothers and sisters (and wives, to a certain extent) are to be respected and every other woman is scum! So, if you want a little respect, you had better choose between one of the three.

Anu Venugopalan, Bombay

Inactivism at MH

I am a student at Miranda House (MH). For the first time today I read **Manushi** in my college library. I had actually been wanting to find it for quite a long time but I didn't know where to look for it.

After reading *When India "Missed" the Universe* (Issue 88) about your experiences while you were the president of MH, I realised that those must have been politically active times. At present, nobody is ready to take an initiative and even if someone does, there is no support! Girls agree that many things are wrong with MH but aren't able to take the time out of three busy years. Everybody is too busy to think about rising canteen prices, deteriorating quality of food, the condition of library books, and other such matters. Yours must have been a time when people could at least say *wrong is wrong*.

Now, the only duty our MH union performs is to conduct *The Tempest*, our annual cultural festival. Regarding the situation of the elite and the *bhenjis* of MH that you spoke of, the situation has worsened to the extent that the principal and the union advisors of MH had to call a general body meeting to ask for the resignation of the unopposed elected president of the 1995-96 session. Reason? Because she was supposedly a *bhenji* from Hindi Honours who didn't know English and because she was a student who felt strongly about the worsening situation of MH. The matter was settled after the election commission of Delhi University intervened. The president's activities are still being hampered by her not being able to conduct union meetings since she is expected to do all the union work in English, and so on.

Anyhow, to sit and talk about the present scenario will not change these things. Something has to be done.

Kaveri, Delhi

I was pleased to read your response to my article on my experiences at Miranda House. However, I think pessimism is an inappropriate response to the present situation. That period was not so different. It is just that some of us worked very hard to change things, to put more meaning into our college life than our teachers and courses of study were willing to provide. It required enormous effort to get the student body activated. If you start with the assumption that everybody else is indifferent or disinterested, you won't be able to evoke a positive response. You have to have faith in people's good sense and desire to make things better. Usually, all it requires is a catalyst. Even one or two people can successfully play that role if they carry conviction and work with enthusiasm. If you are demoralised

yourself, you will evoke a similar response in others.

However, in one sense we were indeed luckier. Political parties had not until then begun paying attention to women's colleges. We had a space all our own for a few years to think for ourselves. However, as soon as we succeeded in activating the student body, various political parties descended on women's colleges and began to build their own areas of influence, sponsoring candidates in elections. These outside political parties precipitated fragmentation of the politically active student body and imposed their own agendas on student politics. Today, anyone who decides to activate students will need to be vigilant so that she does not become a tool in the hands of unscrupulous politicians. Not that staying away from party politics is in itself a guarantee that you will not make any mistakes, but at least they will be your own mistakes.

-Editor

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