

Expanding Conversations of Race and the Nation: A Closer Look at *The Fish Eyes Trilogy* by Anita Majumdar

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Article abstract

“Coming of age” narratives in multicultural Canada often construct an ideal that is not attainable for many Black, Indigenous, and young people of colour growing up in the country. Often times, experiences of racialized young people are dismissed and cast aside. This article explores how Anita Majumdar’s *The Fish Eyes Trilogy* acts as a tactic of resistance to this reality. Tactics of resistance as argued by feminist media scholar Yasmin Jiwani help us to imagine different ways of seeing the world that is often presented to us. As a tactic of resistance, *The Fish Eyes Trilogy* uses parody, disrupts homogeneity of South Asian experiences in Canada, and reverses the dominant white gaze. This three-part play offers a curious site for reimagining *how* we can expand and critique discussions of race with young people in Canadian theatre.

Expanding Conversations of Race and the Nation: A Closer Look at *The Fish Eyes Trilogy* by Anita Majumdar

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Dans le contexte multiculturel du Canada, les récits sur le passage à l'âge adulte servent souvent à construire un idéal qui, pour bien des jeunes personnes autochtones, noires et de couleur qui y grandissent, reste inatteignable. Or, il arrive souvent que les expériences des jeunes personnes racisées soient écartées. Dans cet article, Alysha Bains explore comment les trois récits formant *The Fish Eyes Trilogy* d'Anita Majumdar servent de stratégie de résistance à cette réalité. Comme le fait valoir Yasmin Jiwani, spécialiste féministe des médias, les stratégies de résistance nous aident à imaginer de nouvelles façons de voir le monde tel qu'il nous est souvent présenté. Pour y résister, *The Fish Eyes Trilogy* emploie la parodie, brouille l'homogénéité des expériences sud-asiatiques au Canada, retourne le regard blanc qui domine. La pièce en trois parties est un lieu curieux à partir duquel on peut réimaginer *comment* élargir et critiquer les discussions avec les jeunes au sujet de la race dans le contexte du théâtre canadien.

Mots clés : Asie du Sud, diaspora, stratégie de résistance, race, Canada

“Coming of age” narratives in multicultural Canada often construct an ideal that is not attainable for many Black, Indigenous, and young people of colour growing up in the country. Often times, experiences of racialized young people are dismissed and cast aside. This article explores how Anita Majumdar’s *The Fish Eyes Trilogy* acts as a tactic of resistance to this reality. Tactics of resistance as argued by feminist media scholar Yasmin Jiwani help us to imagine different ways of seeing the world that is often presented to us. As a tactic of resistance, *The Fish Eyes Trilogy* uses parody, disrupts homogeneity of South Asian experiences in Canada, and reverses the dominant white gaze. This three-part play offers a curious site for reimagining *how* we can expand and critique discussions of race with young people in Canadian theatre.

Keywords: South Asian, diaspora, tactic of resistance, race, Canada



Told from three teenage perspectives, *The Fish Eyes Trilogy* unfolds a story that is often concealed from mainstream discussions of adolescent experience in Canada. “Coming of age” narratives often construct an ideal that is not attainable for many Black, Indigenous, and young people of colour growing up in the country (Rajiva). How do we complicate narratives of what

it means to be a young person in Canada? Why is there little to no acknowledgement of the complexities of BIPOC experiences in these particular narratives? How can theatre be a site of resistance that offers diverse young people with opportunities to see themselves represented?

The Fish Eyes Trilogy by award-winning multidisciplinary artist Anita Majumdar presents a compelling case to think through these questions. Showcased at the Monsoon Festival of Performing Arts in August 2018, the *Fish Eyes Trilogy* is a three-part performance that follows the lives of three young women (all played by Majumdar) through their senior year at Port Moody Senior Secondary School. Together, Naznin in *Boys With Cars*, Candice in *Let Me Borrow That Top*, and Meena in *Fish Eyes* walk us through their high school lives as they prepare to enter the adult world. I investigate how each of the three parts are acts of subversion, or “tactics of resistance” in feminist scholar Yasmin Jiwani’s nomenclature. According to Jiwani, tactics of resistance are key ingredients in provoking *possibilities* of alternative storytelling. Tactics of resistance involve multimodal forms and “varied tools,” which contribute to different ways of seeing the world (Jiwani 334). Tactics of resistance can often make visible what colonial narratives persist to silence and erase. Written from the perspective of a Canadian-born South Asian settler, the purpose of this article is twofold. First, it will draw on theoretical strands of Jiwani’s work pertaining to “tactics of resistance.” Second, this theoretical frame provides an opportunity to broadly explore how key narrative arcs in *Fish Eyes* construct a counternarrative, where young people are *included* in discussions about race and the nation.

As a counternarrative, *The Fish Eyes Trilogy* is a representation that celebrates the multi-dimensional nature of identity and the embodiment of culture. Rather than concealing or erasing the complexity of racism, Majumdar’s work confronts the inadequacies of “post-race” rhetoric that becomes a product of multiculturalism in Canada. Multiculturalism often solely focuses on “celebrating” racial differences in the form of tolerance, without understanding interlocking sociohistorical systems of oppression that are present in contemporary times. There is little space in this model to understand how race as a social construct is deeply rooted in the nation’s dark colonial past, which is still felt in the everyday diverse experiences of BIPOC communities. As a result, young people are often dismissed when speaking to the day-to-day or systemic impact of racial violence. It is here where young people learn in many ways to be silent or not acknowledge the reality of race relations. As a counternarrative, *The Fish Eyes Trilogy* responds to stereotypes of brown bodies by “reversing the gaze by showing the hollowness of one-dimensional stereotypes and revealing the nuances between the binaries” (Jiwani 339).

There’s something to be said about the nuances of experience in the “everydayness” of being a person of colour in Canada. This nuance is often not grappled with, touched, or felt in mainstream conversations around race or “diversity and inclusion.” Discussions of race often fail to capture sociohistorical conditions of race that are bound to the nation. The experience of generation as a characteristic of race is often glossed over, as Canadian-born children have different experiences with identity formation and cultural belonging (Rajiva). The nuance of generation is especially relevant to the lives of Naznin and Meena, who are two children of the South Asian diaspora.

In the opening five minutes of *Boys with Cars*, Naznin declares, “I love dancing, except for the part where people have to look at me.” The paradox of being visible as a performer yet longing for invisibility is a curious site of discussion when thinking about diasporic subjectivities. This paradox can unfold a story that often is hard to articulate in a culture that is flooded

with “post-race” rhetoric. This paradox felt by Naznin shows how one can simultaneously celebrate culture and identity through an art form yet feel as though its incongruencies with the status quo can make one feel as the Other. For Meena, commitment to dance becomes an obstacle in fully participating in her life at Port Moody Senior Secondary. For example, Meena sarcastically exclaims, “I’m so happy that for every weekend of my life my parents dragged me off to some random basement owned by Kalyani Auntie” (Majumdar). While Meena felt pressured by dance and Kalyani Auntie (her dance teacher), her relationship to her dance practice was multi-dimensional. Parts of her felt liberated by her practice, however, simultaneously there were frustrations: “I love being an Indian dancer! And the questions about ‘the dot’ NEVER get old! I LOVE how Indian dance gets into everything I do!” (Tahririha 49). Meena’s self-reflexive commentary weaves together the complexity of diasporic experience and the ambivalent relationship it can have to the movement of culture. The notion of “moving culture” is complex, dynamic, and sometimes contradictory. Often times, against the backdrop of whiteness, movement of culture is seen as a linear process that gets attached to narratives of solely having upward mobility as children of immigrants. Stories of everyday lived experience and affect get dismissed and minimized in narratives of diasporic mobility. *The Fish Eyes Trilogy* draws attention to complex ways young people can experience moving culture.

Let Me Borrow That Top is a story told from the perspective of Candice Paskis, a young white woman who was driven to be accepted into the Coventry School of Bhangra. Candice confidently (and incorrectly) explains, “For those of you who don’t know, bhangra is this super ancient, super hard Indian dance from India, England” (Majumdar). In the form of a YouTube makeup tutorial with problematic commentary, Majumdar employs parody in *Let Me Borrow That Top* as a tactic to bring forward a discussion of what cultural appropriation can look like in practice. As discussed by Jiwani, use of parody is a tactic of counternarratives used to mimic the dominant gaze. In senior year as a part of the planning committee, Candice hosted a “Starlight Taj Mahal” themed graduation dance, where she explains, “Everyone is wearing something Indian. Like a bindi, or a henna tattoo. And some awesome scar[ves] in colours no Indian person would even think of wearing.” While Candice “contin[ue]d in her appropriative vein,” Meena reflects on her experiences of Candice’s Starlight Taj Mahal (Tahririha 59). Presented as internal dialogue in the last act of the trilogy, Meena’s reflections provide a window into how one can “use” culture in a way that dismisses and fetishizes experience while simultaneously oppressing the community they are appropriating (Tahririha 59). Often, racialized young people are challenged or dismissed for raising issues of racism enacted on them or the people around them. Meena’s reflections provide a window into the complexity of how a young person can feel alienated as they question experiences of racism and microaggressions in a world that tells them “racism doesn’t exist here.” Majumdar peels back the layers of cultural appropriation to capture and represent the reality of what racial microaggressions can look like in high school spaces.

The Fish Eyes Trilogy provides a unique story of three Canadian teenagers. It works to grapple with the many dimensions of everyday experience. These dimensions confront what often is erased from public conversations about race—particularly where young people are concerned. As a tactic of resistance, *Fish Eyes* uses parody, disrupts homogeneity of racialized experience, and reverses the dominant white gaze. This powerful solo performance acts as a tactic of resistance, which I argue is a site for reimagining *how* we can expand and critique discussions of race and the nation with young people through Canadian theatre and performance.

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