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# STANDING MY GROUND: REFLECTIONS OF A QUEER INDIAN IMMIGRANT PROFESSOR IN THE U.S. CLASSROOM

*Umeeta Sadarangani*

A lesbian installation artist who used to be on the faculty at Penn State, Sallie McCorkle, once exhibited a piece that is an apt representation of my experience as a professor in the classroom. Her installation featured a lectern that was topped by a light box that had pictures of her laid out across it: rows of tiny headshots of her, of the kind one takes in photo booths with school friends. The light box replaced the top of the lectern, where a speaker may lay notes. In front of the lectern were benches for the audience, and behind the lectern was a platform the speaker could stand on, so that the speaker would be at the appropriate height. The only thing is, the platform was so small and so positioned that the speaker could only ever have one foot on it, with one foot always dangling off of it, or resting on the floor, leaving the speaker off balance and never fully on the platform. That feeling of not being wholly present and thus not being completely able to occupy a position of "authority" is one I struggle with as a lesbian immigrant professor of Indian origin. I used the word "authority" with quotation marks around it because my pedagogy is student centered, requiring students to be active learners. At the same time, I - and my students - are aware that the final responsibility for the course design and students' course grades rests with me, that I am in a position of authority, no matter what else goes on in the classroom. However, occupying that position comfortably has been a struggle over the years; the nature of the struggle has shifted with my changing identity and circumstances.

I began teaching college in 1988 at Northeastern University in Boston where I was working towards my M.A. in English. I was twenty-one and fresh out of college, having just received a B.A. from Cedar Crest College, a small, liberal arts college for women in Allentown, Pennsylvania. I was also still relatively new to the U.S., having arrived here for the first time only four years earlier after having spent my childhood in India and my teenage years in Kuwait. In the fall of 1988, I went through the orientation for international teaching assistants at Northeastern before I began teaching. In those days, I very much identified as an Indian from Kuwait, and I also identified with other international students, feeling grateful for their company after coming from a very small college which in those days had very few students from abroad. At the same time, surrounded by left-leaning English graduate students, I

began to become aware of race issues in Boston and in the nation. However, these race issues did not seem to affect me personally: I was a foreigner and still felt like one, even though my accent grew more American every day. I felt secure in my "international" identity and in my place in the English department; as a result, I felt fairly comfortable as a teacher despite my inexperience. The platform in front of the metaphorical lectern felt stable. I believe my comfort stemmed in part from my place in Indian society; I came from an upper-middle-class family, had received an English-medium education, and had light skin. In Kuwait, Indians were on the lower rungs of the social ladder, but *within* the Indian community, my father's professional, white-collar job placed me with the more privileged Indians. The foreign currency my father earned had paid for my undergraduate education, so although I was now living on a stipend that was near the poverty level, I was cushioned by the knowledge that I did not have to. Help was a phone call away, and, theoretically, I could always go home if things got too difficult.

In the summer of 1990, I returned to Pennsylvania to begin a doctoral degree at Penn State. Before classes had even begun, Iraq invaded Kuwait, where my parents still lived. Cut off from contact with them for several weeks and increasingly aware of the emotional and financial challenges I faced, my perspective started to change. In addition, I was now working towards my terminal degree, and the permanent job I hoped to find at the end of my degree started to feel more attainable. If all went well, the next step after getting my Ph.D. would be making a permanent home in the U.S.

Throughout graduate school, I felt comfortable wearing salwaar kameezes to teach in whenever the weather cooperated. My students were used to international teaching assistants, so my being Indian did not mark me in negative ways. My increasingly American accent also allowed me blend in and neutralized some of my "foreignness." Besides, my mother sent me the salwaar kameezes, so I did not have to spend dollars buying them. Since my parents had to leave Kuwait while my brother was still in college and before they had been able to put away their nest egg for retirement, the financial constraints were real. As an international student restricted to working on campus, I was grateful for the practical solution the salwaar kameezes offered. I occasionally faced racial slurs when dressed in Indian clothes, but never from students. So I was comfortable in my blended identity, and I felt like I belonged in the small university town of State College, the place where I had lived longest since I was eleven.

Just as I was feeling more at home in the U.S., I came out as a lesbian early in 1991. This changed my experience of belonging, shifting the platform under me in

the classroom even while I began to feel more like myself, more at home in my own skin. I was aware of homophobia and could see its effects on the lives of the queer people I met on campus. However, I was excited about my newfound comfort with myself, grateful that so many things finally made sense. Also, as one of many English teaching assistants - each of us responsible for teaching our own sections of composition - and working in a liberal department at a university that had just added sexual orientation to its non-discrimination policy, I felt relatively safe and fairly inconspicuous. In addition, by the time Clinton was inaugurated in 1993, it was clear that equal rights for sexual minorities was going to be one of the main civil rights issues of the decade. Strengthened by my context, I occasionally discussed queer issues in the classroom and made connections between institutionalized racism and homophobia. Some of the discussions became emotional and tense, but we were able to have productive conversations about why this was the case. When a parent called the composition coordinator to complain about the topics being discussed in my classroom, the coordinator was supportive of my pedagogy and of my academic freedom. As a result, I felt safe coming out to my classes at the end of that semester, hoping the students would replace some of their stereotypes with their more complex knowledge of me.

Soon after I came out to myself, I also came out to my brother - who lived in Connecticut - and to my parents - who now lived in Bombay. By the time I received my Ph.D. in 1997, my family had come to accept my being an out lesbian even though it was sometimes a tough reality for them. My brother would tell relatives not to keep badgering me about getting married, and my parents told those who asked that I was happy and was not interested in marriage. My mother even began to tell some relatives that I am a lesbian and in a long-term relationship. While I gave my parents the choice about which relatives and family friends to inform about my sexual orientation, I felt comfortable knowing that they at least knew and accepted the truth about me. Their acceptance made it easier for me to be out in other aspects of my life, including at job interviews as I neared the end of my Ph.D.

When I moved to Champaign, Illinois, in 1997 to teach full-time at Parkland College, a comprehensive community college, I found my experience in the classroom to be different, at least partly because I was now a member of the full-time faculty and therefore both more visible *and* more scrutinized. While my being Indian and lesbian both seemed to be assets among my colleagues, reactions from students to these aspects of my identity were not always positive. Their criticisms concerned my department chair, who had to evaluate me for tenure based at least partly on my course evaluations. The students' reactions concerned me, too, because I am passionate about teaching and wished to be successful in the classroom and at this

college, where I wanted to make my career. My department chair at the time was an out lesbian herself and understood some of the challenges I faced. She suggested I find ways to emphasize the common ground my students and I share and to downplay the differences between us; perhaps that would help my students to relate to me more easily and thus be more receptive to my course. While I was troubled by what this meant for "diversity initiatives" at our college - was it a good idea to have a diverse faculty only so long as we all behaved the same? - I understood her practical concerns. If I took her advice, though, the metaphorical platform beneath my feet would be shaky indeed, and important parts of me would not fit on it at all.

My department chair's suggestions came to mind a few years later as I listened to a presentation by a candidate for a faculty position in my department. The candidate spoke with pleasure and pride about her openness in the classroom. She explained that she discusses her German-American heritage, her family and her interests with her composition students. By sharing of herself and allowing students to hear her voice, she found she made it easier for them to find their own voices, to share their experiences, and to write with authority. As I listened to this white, Midwestern woman who was married to a man and had children, I was struck by how different my own experiences had been when I had shared of myself, especially in composition classes or in literature classes that are not labeled "non-Western." Every time I discussed an aspect of my personal life, especially if it revealed any of my cultural affiliations, either to the lesbian community or to the Indian community, I marked myself as other and opened myself to charges of having a personal agenda.

I noticed such charges in comments on course evaluations at the end of my first year of teaching full-time, in the spring of 1998, and those were the evaluations that had concerned my department chair as well. Some students in an Introduction to Literature class felt they should not have to study literature of other cultures in a course that was not marked "non-Western" and objected especially to the texts set in Indian cultures-even though one was set in the Detroit home of immigrants and the other in a New Jersey movie theater. Students in a composition class felt they should not have to know the teacher's sexual orientation; this was in reaction to my having come out to them earlier that semester. (Of course, they do not react the same way to heterosexual professors mentioning their spouses or children). The painful experience of reading those evaluations made me re-think how much of my own life I wanted to share with my students. This questioning felt awkward; I felt I was regressing after having been a queer activist ever since I had come out in 1991. Yet, after reading those evaluations, I felt as though the metaphorical platform I had been standing on had been knocked out from under me. When I got back on, the platform

had shrunk, and, like the platform in McCorkle's installation art, it allowed only part of me to stand on it. This left me feeling off balance and partly invisible.

The painful experiences of that first year led to my self-consciously changing how I represented my minority identities. For instance, I chose deliberately what I wore to different classes. On Monday, Wednesday, and Friday, I taught composition, and on those days, I made a point of wearing Western clothes. On Tuesdays and Thursdays, however, I taught non-Western literature, and in the first half of the semester, that meant South Asian literature. So on Tuesdays and Thursdays, I often wore salwaar kameezes, starting with the day when I modeled it so the students could visualize a character in a Pakistani short story. My decisions had to do with my comfort level at the time and with my desire to keep the students engaged and thus to maintain "authority" in the classroom.

In my composition classes, where we focus on a semiotic analysis of U.S. popular culture, I found it advantageous to be a part of the "we" that makes up this culture. I wanted to be seen as an insider. This did not mean that the class was unaware that I am Indian. In fact, I told them that very early on, when we discussed how the swastika means different things in different cultures (Hindu culture vs. post-WWII Western culture) and in different times (pre-WWII and post-WWII). However, I wanted them to see me as someone familiar with U.S. culture, and I wanted them to trust that I could teach them "English." I was teaching the students to read signs; when they read my clothing as a sign, I wanted them to read that I belonged in this culture. One could argue that I could have broadened their definition of U.S. culture by defining salwaar kameezes as one of many American forms of dress, but I was not always up to the personal price I had to pay to make that point. My early experiences had made me wary of being perceived as an outsider. In contrast, in the non-Western literature course, for which most students sign up because they enjoy the subject and not because they are required to take the course, I felt comfortable making my ethnic identity visible, in part because I could see that it strengthened my credibility. In my students' eyes, my connection to Indian culture made me more of an "authority" on the subject they were studying.

During those years, I also steered away from assignments directly related to race, sexual orientation, and power, even though those issues are important to me and are topics I believe the students benefit from discussing. I did not want to have to defend against charges of a "personal agenda." Over the years, though, I have grown braver. Although I had not gone back into the closet - that would be nearly impossible - I had grown tentative about my being out with my students. I am now more open about my own identity, more likely to mention a female life partner or parents who live in India. This openness is made possible by various forms of support and security I now

have: friends in the department, including a fellow lesbian of color and other queer faculty; an established Ally Team at the college that recently helped to bring us comprehensive domestic partner benefits; a connection to the women of Khuli Zaban, a Chicago-based group of lesbian and bisexual women of South Asian and Middle-Eastern origins; a supportive partner and a strong network of friends in the community, all of whom make a concerted effort to understand my larger context. In addition, and very importantly, I have tenure and a green card.

Even with all this support and security, I am struck by the fact that, though I am usually comfortable being out as a lesbian and talking about immigrant issues with my colleagues, I am still often nervous about being as open with my students. I think there are several reasons for these contrasting feelings. I am comfortable with my colleagues because I work in a liberal department in a fairly diverse and accepting college in a university town. The college offers faculty and staff many opportunities for Respectful Workplace Training, much of which focuses on understanding issues faced by queer faculty and staff. In contrast, the students I encounter in the classroom come from a variety of socioeconomic and educational backgrounds and run the gamut from a small number of radical leftists to the more numerous religious conservatives. They might come from small rural communities, the affluent Chicago suburbs, or the South Side of Chicago. Some might come to class from eight-hour shifts at factories while others are full-time students planning to transfer to the University of Illinois after two years. Though a majority of students today seem to be more accepting of queers than they were a decade and a half ago when I first came out, some can be harsh in their homophobia, fueled as it is by the backlash queers face as we become more visible. My concern for my own emotional well-being explains in part my flirtation with the closet in recent years; I need to protect myself in order to function in the classroom.

Another reason for my being tentative about coming out to my students is specific to the nature of the college course. Once a group of students is enrolled in my class, I am responsible for nurturing that class community through the end of the semester. I meet with that group every week for the required meetings. Students can decide whether to show up, whether to withdraw, whether to quit my class; they will face certain consequences, but they have some choices albeit limited ones. On the other hand, I do not. I need to be in that class interacting with those students, and as the main authority in the classroom, I need to make it a space that works for all of us - to the extent that I can. The class needs to be a safe space where students feel able to speak up and where they can learn effectively. Understanding my role in the classroom affects my decisions about coming out. If I come out at the beginning of the semester, telling them about my family and my history the way the German

American candidate said she did, then I risk many of them never seeing past my lesbianism. The charge that minority sexual orientations carry in our society is so strong that it may quite likely overshadow other information students receive about me. However, if I wait to come out later in the semester, then students might feel I have deceived them and also might feel jolted out of the way they have come to view the classroom. Of course, the only reason they would think I am heterosexual is because they would assume it in this heterosexist society; one could argue that having their assumptions questioned could be productive. However, what about the rest of the work of the writing classroom? How would it be impacted? And, since each class is an unknown, how will I be impacted by the class's reaction, and how will that in turn impact my ability to teach the class? I am a passionate and devoted teacher, and these questions matter to me. I want my classroom to be a dynamic place where exciting learning takes place. How can I have that happen while being true to myself? Is that even possible in the xenophobic, homophobic society in which we live?

While I am not sure how I can feel safe while being out in the classroom, I do know that my being out in the classroom has contributed to many of my students feeling safe and even becoming more effective learners. A former student wrote to me from the prestigious women's college she had transferred to after graduating from Parkland; in her letter, she thanked me for coming out to her while she was at Parkland and said it encouraged her to be more out in classes. I had come out to her as we were discussing a paper she was having trouble with; she had written about that experience in her application to transfer, and she also had told me I could mention her lesbianism if needed in my letter of recommendation. Her application led to a full scholarship. Upon his first visit to my office, another student said to me in surprise and pleasure, "I didn't know you were so supportive!" He gestured to the "Safe Zone" sign on my door, a sign the college gives to everyone who has participated in the relevant Respectful Workplace Training. "I'm bisexual," he added. I said, "I'm lesbian." He was surprised but even more pleased and then noticed the double-woman symbol postcard on my bulletin board, at eye level with him as he sat in the chair reserved for students. I realized I had thought he was heterosexual because he had mentioned a girlfriend, and he had thought I was lesbian because I had not. I wished he had known sooner about my lesbianism, but I was glad he found out when he did. I have also had lesbian and gay students in my classes who have felt safer writing about queer issues or simply mentioning their partners in their papers once they know I am lesbian. As I have been at Parkland longer and students have got to know me, some queer students have signed up for my classes partly because they wanted a queer instructor, someone who "gets it."

In addition to the personal relationships I form with students, as an out lesbian, I get called on to be a resource. Journalism students from the University of Illinois have interviewed me for articles they were writing about Asian American queer women or about Indian women and sexuality. These young Asian American women have made a point of saying it mattered to them to meet an out Asian lesbian, even if the students were not lesbians themselves. In addition, the Indian Students Association at the University invited me to give a talk about my sexual orientation and about choosing to be out. The room was packed, mostly by fellow South Asians. While I am glad to contribute in these ways, I am also aware that making my lesbianism visible in other South Asian contexts does not mean I will be met with open arms or will be made to feel at home. In a town with a non-existent South Asian queer community, I have created communities elsewhere.

As a teacher, I realize it might be decades before my identity becomes a non-issue, before it becomes the kind of neutral information that might help me feel like an "authority" in the classroom or might help my students to hear my "voice" but not lead to stereotypes. It will also be a while before I will use my work on an article like this to share my writing process with my students. The material would be so rich for a writing class: scribbled-on word processed drafts, handwritten additions, sections crossed out or moved, a descriptive outline to make sense of the whole. But can I trust that the students will learn enough about writing? Or will they focus only on my having come out to them? Despite these limits, despite the metaphorical platform being too small to hold my complex identity, I would rather be on the platform than not.

My classes do not exist in a vacuum. Especially in a community college, the required composition class is often a cross-section of the community. As long as homophobia, xenophobia, and racism are forces in our society, I will face tough choices and the platform I stand on will feel too small, leaving me off balance. However, idealistic as it may sound, I do believe that by taking risks and coming out as a lesbian and an immigrant, I might in some small way chip away at the stereotypes and fears that bolster bigotry. If enough of us are in a position to take risks over time, the platforms we stand on in our classrooms might eventually be able to hold us, complex and whole.