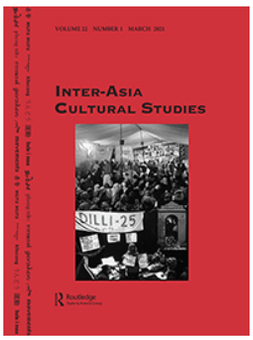

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Multiethnicity in multicultural Singapore: critical autoethnography to understand racism in Singapore

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ABSTRACT

In this article, I chronologically trace my lived experiences as a woman of color, growing up in multicultural Singapore. Exploring these moments while considering the racial politics embedded within institutionalized multiculturalism serves as an evocative illustration of the challenges and nuances of navigating multi-ethnicity in Singapore. These vignettes though personal, reveal the ways in which my multi-ethnic background manifests in different experiences, varying according to the ethnicity I openly identify with. Simultaneously, I unpack the double burden of being multi-ethnic in Chinese-majority Singapore—from identity-crises and the inescapability of phenotype. Often in these vignettes, I am silent, and respond only in thought. These thoughts however are lent a voice, in this auto-ethnographic text, liberating me from the silences that often characterize my position as a minority. These described moments also are revelatory of the hegemonic ideologies that are socially integrated and communicated insidiously albeit subtly, and their hierarchizing effects on ethnicity.

KEYWORDS

Autoethnography; multiculturalism in Singapore; ethnic minority; multi-ethnic; racism

1997 / age 7

It's my first day in Primary School. Mrs. Truscott tells us to sit in circles of five and tell each other our names. Bhindia goes first. She is tugging at her skirt so hard, wrapping the hems over her ashy knees and brown calves; its certain she wishes her amber pinafore would swallow her whole. I notice that there is a larger gap between her and the other girls whose knees brushed and overlapped each other, than the gap between my knees and the two girls flanking me. This is the first time I will experience the unwritten rule that the Chinese girls in my all-girls school know, but me and the other girls of color will slowly (and painfully) learn. The Indian gap, a self-explanatory heuristic device I will use here to refer to how Chinese girls would instinctively flinch and retreat upon physical contact with an Indian girl and prevent said contact at all costs. I will learn to gingerly tuck my limbs away, shrinking myself as much as possible so that I would not have to bear the mortification of one of my classmates shrieking "EEE YOU TOUCH HER LEG! QUICKLY WASH WAIT YOU ALSO BECOME BLACK."

But Bhindia always had it worst. No amount of coconut oil would keep her defiant curls from persistently springing out of her tight braid. Classmates would snicker and jeer at her, holding their noses whenever they had to stood behind her because "her hair very smelly." They would insist her thick voluminous shiny hair was a breeding ground for

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lice and nits and would run to wash themselves if her long braid would accidentally brush against them. The teachers were no better. Mdm Lim seemed to take it upon herself to belligerently remind the class of Bhindia's hair—though the relation between her hair and Math was always lost on me. "Eeeyer, Beendiar, your hair is so messy, poor Melissa cannot see the board because your hair come out everrrrywherrrre," pointing to Bhindia's flyaways while shaking her head side to side, and rolling her "r"s in her mocking, condescending rendition of Bhindia's Tamil accent.

The irony will probably escape them, when 20 years later, coconut oil will become a staple of the beauty, health and fitness economy. Of course, once a White woman sells you overpriced coconut oil and tells you it will solve everything from gingivitis to vaginal dryness, it becomes the Singaporean Chinese girl's marker of sophistication—my colleague will later tell me about how she's given up shampoo and instead uses baking soda and coconut oil in her hair. The entire department will ooh and ah, at her thick (permed) curls. It's the inherent superiority of the Chinese girl's body.

2000 / age 10

> I tell you all a joke ah. When God created mankind, he first made a river. First, he called the Chinese people to bathe in the river, so they were all clean, but the water was a bit brown. Then he called the Malay people to bathe in the river, only a bit of their dirt could come out in the dirty water that's why Malay people quite brown. Then, last of all, he called the Indian people to the river. The Indian people damn dirty but then they see the water also super dirty, so they only wash their palms and soles of their feet. That's why until now Indian people are black except for their palms and feet.

I press my mother's razor against my skin, perhaps it won't be so dark once I shave myself. Perhaps then, they won't think I'm dirty.

A crimson river meanders through the bath water and I scream. When the scab peels off and the wound heals, a thick, dark scar runs across my shin.

It'll stay there for the rest of my life, a reminder of the time my attempt to shave off melanin resulted in more.

That darn melanin won't leave me be.

2001 / age 11

"XIAO JIE! WEI, XIAO JIE! I CALL YOU SO MANY TIMES YOU CANNOT HEAR AH? HELLO I ASKED YOU TO COME WRITE THE ANSWER ON THE BOARD." Veralynn nudges me in the ribs, her head nodding in the direction of Mdm Ho, my math teacher. Mdm Ho raps her marker aggressively on the board, her fine lips twitching in annoyance. I'm confused. I had not heard my name called out. I kept hearing her call Xiao Ling's name.

I stumble out of my chair and proceed to the front of the class, "Sorry Mdm Ho, I didn't know you were speaking to me." She rolls her eyes and shoves the whiteboard market into my hands. My neck prickles hot, my classmate's eyes boring into my back. I scribble my answer on the whiteboard and dash back to my table. I spend the rest of Math period with my pulse racing so hard, I could hardly hear anything Mdm Ho had said above the drumming of my pounding heart.

During English period, I turn to Vera and I ask her if she had heard Mdm Ho calling Xiao Ling's name instead of mine. She explains, "No leh, she was saying Xiao Jie while looking at you. Xiao Jie means 'Miss.' You don't know that meh?"

I didn't.

But I know Vera will never learn how to say "miss" in Urdu, or Tamil, or Malay for that matter—and she will *never* be expected to know it nor be judged for not knowing it either.

2002 / age 12

My mother cranks up the volume of the car radio. Instead of the usual Earth, Wind & Fire or Gypsy Kings cassette tape, she has on

the Malay radio channel solely for my academic benefit. The newscaster rattles off in a language both familiar and foreign. I grew up with Bahasa Indonesia—a linguistic gift inherited from the transit in Jakarta that my great grandparents had made during the War. My Arab grandmother, a daughter of a rich Yemeni businessman, lived in Jakarta for most of her childhood and youth, picking up a love for the country and its cuisine that I have inherited too.

The syrupy melody of Bahasa Indonesia and its onomatopoeic words are lost, as the newscaster charges through her syllables in "Bahasa Baku" the standardized Malay no one spoke in school—except for me. It was much to my *Cikgu*'s delight, but the bane of my existence as my classmates in Malay class would chortle gleefully at my expense because I pronounced my words the way I had learnt them—from the morning newscaster.

I did not know at the time that the hours of tuition each week, and the morning drills of listening to the Malay news would earn me straight A's for both Mother and Higher Mother Tongue. I also never imagined that as an adult, the language would seem so foreign on my tongue, I would then spend years not speaking it, only to find I could no longer converse in it confidently, or effectively for that matter.

Bahasa Indonesia on the other hand will never leave my tongue, nor my heart, which lights up every time I hear my Indonesian neighbors argue or each time I step into any airport in the Archipelago.

2003 / age 13

It's my first day in Cedar Girls Secondary School. Cedar was my second choice next to Raffles Girls Secondary (RGS). I had made the cut-off point of 264/300—an aggregated score that reflected my performance in the Primary School Leaving Examination (PSLE), but for some reason, had not made it to Raffles, and was offered a place in Cedar.

I meet my classmates and immediately something stands out. I am no longer outnumbered as a person of color. At least three quarters of my classmates consist of largely Indian girls, and some Malay girls while a small percentage is made up of Chinese girls.

I learn that we have been grouped into classes according to our PSLE scores, my class consisting of the top scorers. I also learn that almost all the colored girls had picked RGS as their first choice, but despite having made the cut-off score, were rejected a place.

When I am older, I will look back and realize that while in the morning we were all made to recite the Singaporean pledge that goes, "Regardless of race, language or religion, to build a democratic society, based justice and equality … ," a clerk in RGS calculated racial quotas and dismissed a big pool of colored girls who made the mark to be in the institution but did not have the right *phenotype*.

2006 / age 16

I return to school after having been down with chicken pox for about 10 days. First period is Additional Math and I'm struggling to keep up with Logarithms and Exponents. Mdm Loh sees me and exclaims, "Ah Farah you're back from your holiday?" 10 days of chills, fever and endless itching hardly seemed like a vacation, but not wanting to make waves, I smile and concur. She continues, "You know poor Alicia caught **your** chicken pox. Now her porcelain skin is going to be ruined just because of **you**."

I look down at the dark scars that overrun my arms.

I learn that brown skin cannot be ruined.

See, you cannot destroy something already in decay.

2006 / age 16

A few of my cousins study in the same school.

Their names all begin with Sharifah—an honorific title taken by Arabs of direct lineage to the Prophet Muhammad (peace and blessings be upon him). My grandmother is a Sharifah too, but having broken tradition and marrying a Gujarati man instead of Syed (an Arab man of direct lineage to the Prophet), she was effectively disowned, removed from her family's extensive will and her children never bore the title that highlighted their lineage to the Prophet.

Ahlul Bayt—people of the (Prophet's) house—are deeply revered in Islamic tradition. But this tradition has been adulterated. It went awry when intertwined with Arab pride, racism and misogyny. Misogyny because the Prophet never did have sons—and his lineage was passed through his daughter, Fatima and then her two sons, Hassan and Hussein. But honoring women as the rightful gatekeepers to an honorable lineage was beyond men's comprehension. Even for the descendants of a Prophet who had married his boss, a high-earning Businesswoman with unparalleled success in trading.

It seems that these Arab girls escaped the difficulties I did. Their skin was brown too, olive like mine, sometimes fairer, sometimes more tanned. But their Malay classmates didn't laugh at them for mispronouncing—rather, pronouncing Malay words accurately. Nor did their Chinese classmates flinch upon contact with their tanned skin. Instead, they made it a point to make sure everyone knew they were *Arab*.

They didn't tick "Malay," "Chinese" or "Indian" when they were asked for their ethnicity (a common practice in Singaporean paperwork—though as an adult, I am still lost as to what my ethnicity has to do with getting a wax), they ticked "Others."

"Others" was reserved for Arabs, and Eurasians, and all the other ethnicities that did not fall into the prior options. Ethnic categories that treated vastly diverse groups of people monolithically. Look at the number of languages spoken in India and the cultural diversity across the continent and you'd understand.

Ticking "Others" immediately gave them a free hall pass from specific instances of prejudice I had faced. I don't reckon I had consciously noticed nor internalized this, but I learnt from it.

"Hey Farah, you're Indian ah??" Nurul asks, peering at my report card.

> Well technically no. See, both my grandparents are biracial. My Father's parents are Pakistani and Chinese, and my Mother's parents are Arab and Persian. My maternal grandfather grew up in Suret, the Parsees and Arabs made up the population of the port city from the seventeenth century so although he identifies as Indian, he is Persian. Also, his Grandmother is French.

I do not mention that my Grandmother's grandmother was Sudanese.

Speaking louder now, noticing I have earned several spectators.

"That's why I don't speak Malay well—because I'm *not* Malay and my grandparents had to speak in English to each other as a common language."

I obscure that though my paternal grandparents are Pakistani and Chinese, they both grew up in a predominantly Malay *kampung*[1] and while my grandmother would warn me not to go to the beach on the seventh month of the lunar calendar,[2] and would play Mahjong, while my grandfather would watch reruns of Hindi movies all day long, they both only ever spoke in Malay to each other.

My maternal grandparents truly did speak English at home. Both having come from wealthy families, were exposed to a colonial childhood which gave them the benefit of a strong command of the language. My grandmother studied in convents and held a job in the jazzy 40s, not something most women at the time had access to. But truly, she had as an adult studied Urdu, the childhood language of my Grandfather, and while they did not

teach it to their children or grandparents, they covertly conversed in it between each other.

I hide these details because I've learnt which ones give me a hall pass, and which ones land me in detention.

I am suddenly "*exotic*."

My self-exotification trades disgust for desire, and I am the epicenter of attention for being what my Chinese friends enthusiastically describe as "Rojak"—A Malay word for "eclectic mix" typically used to describe a salad. The irony is palpable. But the liberation is sweet.

I steadily keep the company of the Arab girls in school, and soon everyone knows me as an Arab girl too. And so, did lighten my brown girl baggage.

2006 / age 16

In adolescence, my brown body is no longer cancer.

The girls in my class tell me how they envy my curves, I had developed faster than most of the other young girls and have come into a woman's body. They tell me they wish they had my long lashes, and my sharp nose.

I secretly purchase dangerous melanin-blocking products—even while passionately espousing anti-colonial ideology, reminding people of how their perceptions of beauty are transnationally produced and consumed to support the desires of misogynistic White men.

By day I crusade against dark-skin biases and colorism, and by night I lather on, Fair & Lovely, a notorious Indian skin-lightening cream.

No adoration, empowerment nor advocacy could lift the self-loathing I had internalized.

2007 / age 17

Alex is a glorious boy with Hazel eyes. Bright, funny and a natural leader. I find myself drawn to him like a moth to a flame. I wonder what he thinks of me.

I'm a cliché.

The brown girl fresh out of a series of all-girl's institutions, falls for a Chinese boy in her co-ed Junior College.

There are at least three boys who are infatuated with me, and have made it their plight to make sure I know it.

Two Malay boys. One Indian boy.

But I am completely disinterested. I dismiss them as silly *jocks*. They play soccer and laugh too loudly. They yell in Malay and are rude and rowdy.

Alex is articulate. And smart. And funny. And unbelievably cute.

He is also Catholic.

And Gay.

We perform in Midsummers Nights' Dream together. We play the lovers, Hermia and Lysander. Our chemistry is so palpable teachers and students are convinced we are a real couple.

We spend months together running lines and laughing and Alex "asks" me to be his girlfriend.

He tells me he was gay, but he wants to repent. His mother has blamed him for her anxiety attacks. His parents are embarrassed of the Church community finding out. They head the Church's marriage counselling team. They told him his sexuality was a test of his faith and invested in conversion camps in hopes of driving the spirit of George Michael out of him.

All the Catholic guilt has paid off, and Alex is reborn heterosexual.

I start attending family events and mass. Alex's mom is completely charmed, as I am. He comes from a warm, loving Peranakan family who remind me so much of my own. We will discover as adults that for some uncanny, inexplicable reason, our families will remind us of our own homes more than anyone else we would come to meet.

Alex's mother's reverie was rudely interrupted when he highlights that I am in fact, Muslim.

Alex is back at church camp, lest he marries a Muslim and changes his name to Mohamed. His mother's panic attacks intensify.

In the meantime, it becomes clear to both Alex and I that while we love each other immensely, his sexuality was not as fluid as he had imagined and we part ways as a couple but continue to stay best friends—the clichés[3] are inescapable.

Alex's mother's anxiety attacks return to their normal frequency.

15 years later, Alex will be moving into an apartment that he has bought with his boyfriend, after co-habiting in his parents' home.

This does nothing to my identity as a Muslim.

I am not hurt by Alex's mother's horror. I understand the rigidity of our Abrahamic faiths.

I am however amused, and wonder if and how one prejudice outweighs another on a scale.

2019 / age 19

Like my Arab cousins and friends, I too am dating a Syed.

I have finally found a community for myself. In earlier years I had struggled with crafting an identity for myself. My divorced parents left me distant from my paternal family—besides, even when I would meet them, my Chinese cousins would never accept me as one of theirs, and my Pakistani cousins who rattled away in street Malay, made fun of my inability to speak the language and mocked me for speaking in English.

I was never good enough for them.

But with the Arabs, I fit right in. We shared a love for Indonesia, as most of their grandparents too, transited in Jakarta during the war. They spoke English at home too since they too came from old money with a colonial past. We shared the same culture, the same routines and traditions.

Over the span of three years, I will float through two relationships with Arab boys.

Relationships that will face an inevitable demise because the Arabs *know* I am not Arab enough. Even if I read and speak Arabic better than they do. Even if our grandparents grew up together in the same clan.

I do not bear the honorific title of Sharifah. Many of them were not purely Arab either—but fortuitously for them, their fathers and grandfathers (not grandmothers or mothers) had married out and since lineage passed through men, they still bore their honorific titles, making them far more eligible for Arab matrimony.

When the second relationship with an Arab boy ends, I vow to myself I will do better.

I will not hinge upon a part of my identity just to feel better about myself.

My attempt to flee from embarrassment and shame has only brought me affliction.

I learn that I need to be good enough for myself, because I would never be enough for anyone else. It is incredulous, the ways in which institutionalized multi-culturalism in Singapore has impaired my identity formation.

I don't fit into any of these boxes. I hate these boxes. But they're inescapable.

Apparently, in Singapore, my ethnicity is relevant in filling up a lucky-draw form to win a Vacuum Cleaner.

I don't win anyway.

2015 / age 25

A heavily beaded gaudy red and green saree hangs clumsily from my emaciated frame. My face sears hot as I look in the mirror. I have come to avoid looking at myself at all costs.

My hair that used to fall in bouncy waves about my shoulders is perpetually swept back and oiled. I am struggling to keep my silky hair in a French plait the way *Bhabi*[4] does. The pulled back hairdo reveals my angular face, that no longer exudes mirth and laughter, but instead is awash with a greyish, pale pallor. My lifeless eyes, heavily lined in *kajal*,[5] only serve to accentuate the deep and dark circles that have formed above my sunken cheekbones. I am decked in gold. Multiple chains

and necklaces hang from my neck, bangles on both of my wrists and rings on several fingers weigh me down like shackles.

It's hard to recognize myself anymore. My elegant and chic wardrobe has given way to a series of floral dresses, cotton *Kurtas*,[6] *Selwar Khameezes*[7] and *Sarees*[8] personally, curated by my soon to be mother-in-law. She has even prescribed a series of nightgowns to wear to sleep.

Afterall, who better knows what a man would like to see his wife in other than his mother?

I do not carry off these Indian outfits as well as all the other women in this house. Khan's sister always points out that I do not have the body for a *Saree*—but she will say it more vividly—"you can't carry a saree when you look like a starving African child, Farah."

Everyone will laugh, and I wonder if any of them will notice how I had lost 11 kilos since dating their son. That is what chronic depression and anxiety induced Irritable Bowel Syndrome will do to you.

Khan's family speaks only in Tamil and Urdu, languages I never knew but have come to learn. A testimony to the power of cultural and linguistic immersion—no wonder we curate these trips to university students who want to pick up new languages. Feeling isolated does a disservice to the complete and utter loneliness and despondency I have come to learn through the course of this relationship. Khan morphed from a charming and warm lover, to a stern, cold, manipulative, and abusive authoritarian who wanted me to contort myself to fit into his mother's expectations.

I had to learn the hard way that the Tamil culture here expected I relinquished ties with my family to serve his. This, I saw as more Hindu than Tamil, and as far as I was concerned, completely unIslamic.

"Cheeh,[9] all these Indian girls are so wild these days. That is the problem, they have become Malay already. They all don't tie their hair, look at their clothes, Beh Sharam."[10]

It is beyond me how wearing pants and blouses are considered shameful while baring your mid-riff in a saree is not. I am one of these *Malaynised* Indians Khan's family makes no effort to hide they hate, even in my presence.

I peel off the jewelry and saree, and dial Khan's number.

I call off our Wedding.

2019 / age 29

I am pregnant with my first child. As she tumbles about my womb, I place my hand over her and make a silent wish.

I imagine her father's shapely eyebrows and pray she inherits them. I picture his eyes with my nose, and reckon they would look adorable on this unborn child. I hope she has a head of thick hair, straight on the top like mine, ending off with thick locks like his.

And then I imagine her skin.

And after all this time …

I close my eyes and wish hard, that she will inherit her father's milky ivory skin. Not my tanned olive skin.

Not because she would be any less beautiful, but because I never want someone to flinch when they touch her skin, I never want her to be warned to stay out of the sun, to lather on melanin blockers or shave her skin off.

I never want her to inherit the self-loathing I have for my warm olive skin.

Epilogue

This has been the most unconventional paper I've written. In form, the least "academic."

But in content, the most personal and honest piece of writing I have ever done. The introspection and reflection required has brought along an onslaught of emotions, and internal conflicts.

See, no amount of education nor awareness can undo childhood belief systems particularly those born from prejudice and pain. They stay alive and fester well into adulthood, even if you

are endowed with all the tools to pick them apart and debunk them.

Particularly when these systems are rooted in larger structures of daily life.

Race or ethnicity, in contemporary Singapore was conceptually inherited from the attitudes of the ex-colony's British masters. The Chinese–Malay–Indian–Others framework informs government policies on issues ranging from education, political participation, and housing. Beyond the pragmatic utility as an organizing framework, it is inherently divisive and has normalized structural racial segregation, stereotyping and discrimination that are antipodal to the country's narrative of racial harmony, meritocracy, and equality (Rocha and Yeoh 2020). The Brits seem to have also left an indelible mark colloquially referred to as Pinkerton Syndrome, a term describing Singaporeans' tendency to regard Caucasians as superior. A manifestation of which is the Sarong Party Girl, a term describing local girls who exclusively date and marry White men for upward social and financial mobility (Ho and Ho 2020).

The politics of race in Singapore exists in the personal, day to day living. The moments I have penned are but a few of many that have shaped my understanding of ethnicity and culture. The formation of my self-identity is a journey meandering around these moments—not one that sees a conclusion any time soon as I still struggle with the limitations of race, even well knowing its merely a human construct. And so, persists the frustrating tension of knowing—knowledge empowers but is futile next to shame, pain and prejudice drummed into our very DNA.

The politics of race are also constantly evolving, and at this turn in local history, gaining more traction as ideas of anti-racism and privilege are also (ironically) imperially adopted and proliferated through social media.

Concepts like Chinese Privilege, casual racism and systemic discrimination rears their head to much contention. As a teacher in a local university, I dabble in these topics. Struggling to keep the pain and shame from bursting forth when a class consisting entirely of Chinese students insist there is no such thing as racism in Singapore, and then proceed to laugh when I say the racial slur "Apu neh neh."[11]

Its tiring work, and even more frustrating that like many people of color, the labor—emotional, mental, physical, political—all falls squarely on the shoulders of those who already carry the burden of discrimination. It is a cruel reality, a double-whammy, the perennial curse of the minority.

The work is made harder because these politics of ethnicity and race not only intersect with our checkered colonial past, but also other demographic categories we have caged ourselves in—social economic status, house ownership, education, religious affiliation et cetera. These categories sear into us, sawing off parts that are too much, while deafening silences ricochet off the walls of expansive rooms where we are not good enough.

I glance over to my Caucasian neighbor lounging by the pool. I wonder what it must feel like to wear one's skin so comfortably. I am not claiming she does not have insecurities; I am sure they are abundant, even solely on account of her being a woman in a world made for men.

But it must be nice, being at the top of the food chain, or somewhere in the vicinity. It must be nice to simply be, without having to constantly judge yourself by society's prejudice. An epidermal liberation.

The pathologies of our colonial past and fallout of ethnic categories are neurotic, emotional, and inescapable. I am testimony to the fact that knowing, the mere raising of consciousness, is simply not enough.

I wish I could conclude with wisdom of how to change, or to rise above these synthetic limitations that serve to benefit another's unearned privilege. But I am still without an answer.

My personal salve is in teaching. Without which, I am perpetually faced with my own

infertility in producing meaningful change beneath the inescapable guilt and shame that accompanies self-loathing.

Borrowing from Stuart Hall, there is no escaping the tensions, we can only live with them (Hall 1996). I strive to become an organic intellectual, and while teaching, to produce them too (Hall 1996). Even if the interruptions are minimal, there is hope in the idea that they can be incremental.

Perhaps, the restitution is in giving greater gravitas to alternative voices. Maybe, the first step is to stop considering them "alternative." To introduce students to voices beyond the White men we repeat ad nauseam through academia. To expose them to the diversity of thought outside the Occident. To remind them of the veracity of emotion and personal story, over the quantum and empirical.

To liberate them from the impersonal, sterile, and suffocating structures that order their work, lives, and selves.

And eventually perhaps there will be some liberation for me, too.

Notes

1. "Village" in Malay.
2. The seventh month of the Lunar Calendar is known as Hungry Ghost Month, where spirits come forth from the "lower realms."
3. The cliché of the "gay best friend" has been notoriously overused in pop culture (Ellis 2018).
4. Elder sister in law in Hindi.
5. Traditional eye-liner in Indian tradition.
6. Traditional Indian blouse.
7. A traditional South Asian pants and top suit.
8. A traditional South Asian dress consisting of a blouse and a long cloth artfully wrapped around.
9. A term to express disgust.
10. Translates to "without shame" in Hindi.
11. Derogatory slang used in Singapore to refer to Tamil people.

Notes on contributor

Farah Bawany identifies as a critical anthropologist and ethnographer of digital cultures. Her research interests span social media, online identity, cultural studies, gender studies and media representations. As a woman of color, she is personally invested in using research, writing, and teaching as modalities to forward practical projects in creating a future that is egalitarian, just and kind.

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