

ERASING RACE: THE STORY OF REENA VIRK

Reena Virk, a fourteen year-old teenager from Victoria, B.C., was murdered on November 14, 1997, by a group of seven girls and one boy aged fourteen to sixteen. The brutality of the murder and the young ages of the victim and the perpetrators attracted widespread media attention. The issues of girl-on-girl violence and bullying were highlighted, as well as Reena's status as an "outsider". Her weight and height were frequently brought up as reasons for why she struggled to fit in, but her ethnicity, as the child of Indian immigrants, was rarely addressed as a factor.

women & girls face high amounts of violence and comprise 84% of reported cases of sexual violence, 60% of physical child abuse, and 52% of cases of neglect. this violence is compounded for women & girls who also have to contend with racism, homophobia, ableism and classism as well as misogyny.

Many studies, rather than focussing on how racialized girls are inferiorized by internalizing the cultural framework which rejects them and their communities, instead portray these communities as being problematically steeped in conservative and patriarchal values. This simplifies the narrative and puts the onus of responsibility on racialized people instead of examining how the dominant culture plays a role in othering racialized girls and increasing their exposure to violence.

In surviving the violence of racism, marginalized girls are confronted with systemic barriers which they must navigate. Assimilation is often a survival tactic, but due to the exclusionary nature of racism this is often not permitted to them. The negative portrayals of their cultures by mainstream society often forces them into silence about intercommunity violence as they do not want to give the dominant culture another weapon to use against their communities nor face disapproval for speaking out. This creates a climate of tolerance in which girls are silenced.

The Working Group on Girls reports that immigrant and refugee girls face higher rates of violence because of dislocation, racism, and sexism from both their own communities and outer society. Caught in between two cultures, these girls struggle to "fit" in either and experience backlash when they do not. The patriarchal values of their new society resonate with those of their cultural backgrounds and give these girls a "double dose" of patriarchy to contend with.

Many girls try to assimilate into the dominate culture in order to find a measure of acceptance. However, by internalizing these values they often experience feelings of inferiority and low self esteem.

"Race and gender are two of the primary sites for the particular distribution of social resources that ends up with observable class differences."
- Kimberlé Crenshaw

The experiences of racialized girls, such as Reena, should not be universalized into the categories of "women and girls" or "children and youth". Instead we must examine intersectionally how race interacts with gender, age, and class in creating the particular conditions that racialized girls face.



The complexities of the interaction between race and gender were largely ignored in the coverage of Reena's murder. The media focussed on girl-on-girl violence, capitalizing on its shock value, despite the fact that only 3.83% of violent crimes are committed by girls. Disturbing sexist conclusions surfaced, such as the suggestion that girls could not cope with the increased levels of privilege they had newly attained and that it was making them behave aggressively. The inherent violence of the dominant patriarchal cultural framework was largely left unexamined.

Other than opinion pieces written mainly by South Asian individuals, none of the articles explored how racialization impacted girls who are ethnically different from their peers and how this impacts their ability to fit into social groups. In discussions of Reena not meeting normative beauty standards, the role of race was ignored and she was also implicitly victim-blamed for failing to make herself "acceptable".

Allegations that Reena had been sexually abused by a family member were denied by her church and family, with her mother stating that she was a "troubled child".

Her difficulty fitting in to her family's cultural framework was largely ignored by the media, and no significant inquiry was done into the links between violence in the home and running away (as Reena had done in the past). The focus remained on girl-on-girl violence.

Disturbingly, not only was Reena's racialized identity overlooked, but so was the possibility of racism being a prime motivator of her murder. This was despite the fact that one of her murderers, Warren Glowatski, had previously bragged about picking a fight with an Indigenous man and that his girlfriend at the time of the murdered testified that there was a racial aspect in his involvement in the crime. Persecution of the murder as a hate crime was not pursued, despite racist connotations to the murder, such as the cigarette burn on Reena's forehead, which is the same place a bindi is placed. The silence about racism shows how it is taken for granted as an unrecognizable element because it is so ingrained into the system.

The lack of cultural framing in the coverage of Reena's murder may have been related to the fact that some of the perpetrators of her beating were also South Asian. But this does not negate the fact that many members of a racialized community internalize the normative values and behaviours of the dominant society and reject people of their communities.

Engaging with cultural framework would have allowed critical analysis of the realities of race and racism in Canadian society. However, mention of racism was absent even from Judge Macauley's sentencing decision: it was made a nonissue.

"As an elite institution, the media reproduces hegemonic values, and often does so by reporting on the decisions and perspectives of other elites."
- Yasmin Jiwani

In the coverage of Reena's murder, the issues facing racialized girls were never examined.

By forgoing this analysis, the media played into the narrative that racism is confined to extreme hate groups.

Until we recognize racism as a system of domination that informs every day life, girls like Reena will continue to be marginalized.

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