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THE ROLE OF FEMALE VOICES
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Introduction

Giovanna Buonanno

Devoting an issue of *Interactions* to the role of female voices in the construction of fictional maps of contemporary Britain stems from the need to document the work of diasporic-transnational women writers who over the last decades have drawn new contours of literary Britain.

The work of women writers of dual or multiple cultural heritages in Britain contributes to the positioning of English literature at a cultural crossroads of international scope and significance. As writers responding to and incorporating their dual cultural heritage in their writing, often across a variety of genres and media, women writers have managed to chart new geographies of (un)belonging, “rewriting the metropolis” (McLeod), as well as the whole of the country, from a gendered perspective as a multicultural physical and imagined space.

Their writing is informed by post-imperial migrations and translocations and engages with the ongoing legacies of colonialism. Furthermore, many contemporary female writers whose work is discussed in the essays collected in this volume share the common fate and label of second generation citizens in Britain, and therefore they are “uniquely positioned to be agents of intercultural communication and exchange [...] also uniquely capable of transforming adopted homelands into ‘diaspora space’” (Ponnuswami 34). From this shared vantage point, they have drawn new maps of fictional Britain, while contributing to the expanding “internationalization of English literature” (King).

Female voices emerging from culturally contested terrains have become increasingly audible in British writing, particularly since the 1990s. All through the 1980s and early 1990s the works of multicultural women writers were mostly confined to publishers such as Aurora Metro Press, Bloodaxe (for poetry), The Women’s Press, Serpent’s Tail or Virago, which showed an interest in what was often the result of creative writing programmes which had emerged from collectives, such as the Asian Women Writers Collective founded in 1984. More recently women’s voices have begun to move to the centre of the literary arena. This is evident in the gradual erosion of publishers’ negative bias, as well as in the featuring of writing by multicultural women writers in many publishers’ catalogues, which has consequently enabled these works to gain a wider circulation and a growing readership.

A more sustained scholarly interest for multicultural writers—most importantly in the aftermath of the 1998 Windrush celebration and in response to New Labour’s depiction of a “New Britain” and a “Cool” (and culturally diverse) “Britannia”—has prompted growing academic attention to women writers whose work features in programmes in English literature, women studies and cultural studies in academic institutions in Europe and beyond. In the works discussed in this volume there emerges an overarching concern with exploring the remit of gendered identities within the imaginary horizon of post-imperial Britain. In these works identity is fashioned as “a performative location [...] constitutive and positioning, not enclosing and excluding”, as Roger Bromely has noted (6), and rather than indicating a stable state, constitutes a process “that is fuelled by yearning” (Probyn, 19).

The bringing together of articles exploring gendered fictional maps of contemporary Britain is intended to identify aspects that shape women's writing across a variety of genres allowing us to reflect on the ways they respond to what Homi Bhabha has termed "vernacular cosmopolitanism", namely a state of "moving in-between cultural traditions and revealing hybrid forms of life and art" (141) and/or envisage "alternative homes or makeshift shelters which can break down the walls of certain theoretical and critical discourses, enabling otherwise invisible imaginative spaces and histories to emerge" (Nasta, 84).

Though the articles in this volume are not grouped thematically, it is possible to suggest four main thematic paths along which to read them: revisiting and rewriting colonial and postcolonial history (Muñoz-Valdivieso, Pérez Fernández); re-constructing identities through memory and perception (Yeung, Oró Piqueras); investigating the relationship between gender and ethnicity in culturally contested spaces (Kayışçi, Schlote) and exploring the hybridity and performativity of the gendered self (Bozer, Toplu, Atayurt).

Sofia Muñoz-Valdivieso analyses the recreation of slavery and the Black Atlantic in Bernardine Evaristo's *Blonde Roots*, a reversal narrative of "that other history" without which "there is no English history" as argued by Stuart Hall (49). Muñoz-Valdivieso reads the novel in the context of Evaristo's previous work as a woman writer of mixed heritage in Britain, as well as in relation to the renewed visibility of slavery and the slave trade in Britain in recent years. Irene Pérez Fernández's discussion of *Small Island*, Andrea Levy's much acclaimed fourth novel which has been recently turned into a BBC two-part drama, points out the ways in which gender and racial relations have operated in Britain during the historical period of the post-war years and argues for a reassessment of the role of women in the processes of re-constructing new senses of identity and new cartographies of the city of London after the Second World War.

Heather Yeung's article looks at the early poetry of the Anglo-Iranian poet Mimi Khalvati in terms of the poet's own concerns with ideas of visual perception. It discusses the ways in which Khalvati's poetic explorations of perception lead the poet to investigate her mixed cultural (Iranian and British) and linguistic (English and Farsi) heritage, and question otherness in respect both to mixed cultural heritage and language. Maricel Oró Piqueras's reading of Doris Lessing's *The Grandmothers*, a collection of short stories focussing on the largely invisible figure of the elderly woman, explores how memories enlighten the process of ageing that scandalously makes the older person invisible within society. The article interrogates the complex interconnection between emotion and norm, memory and trauma, ageing and society, topics which have long inhabited the fictional world of Doris Lessing.

Drawing on conceptual frameworks from transnationalism and diaspora studies, Christiane Schlote examines the gendered and class-inflected portrayals of London in Hanan Al-Shaykh's *Only in London* and Meera Syal's *Life Isn't All Ha Ha Hee Hee*, with a particular focus on intercultural encounters and the appropriation and consumption of cultural markers. Schlote's exploration of the London novels also intends to trace Al-Shaykh and Syal's thematic and structural reconfigurations of the genre of the urban novel. Burcu Kayışçi looks at ways in which the novels *Anita and Me* by Meera Syal and *White Teeth* by Zadie Smith problematize "Englishness" and the idea of a stable national identity rooted in the myth of origins and a fixed homeland. Kayışçi argues that these works aim to break the closure of limiting conceptions and

stereotypical representations by favouring flux over fixity and multiplicity over unilateral interpretations of identity. The investigation of home and roots contribute to a new formulation of British identity and transform rigid boundaries into more permeable and encompassing points of reference.

In her discussion of the play *Leonora's Dance* by black British playwright Zindika, Deniz Bozer foregrounds the play's deep exploration of themes such as migration, diasporic subjectivities, fragmented identities, alienation and racism and assesses the play's contribution to the lively though largely under-researched area of black theatre in Britain that, thanks also to the active role of women playwrights, should be rightly considered to be "part of British theatre" (Griffin, 9). Şebnem Toplu explores the trajectory of the hybrid self in Meera Syal's *Life Isn't All Ha Ha Hee Hee* and Leila Aboulela's *Minaret*. In her article she argues that the intersections of social categories such as race, gender and class are essential for understanding contemporary identity which is an open, flexible and changeable entity and argues that the authors' portrayals of female characters project the emerging millennial tendencies of gender solidarity in the case of Syal's characters and religion in the case of Aboulela's. In her article on Grace Nichols' *The Fat Black Woman Poems*, Zeynep Atayurt argues that Nichols challenges the modern and pervasive British cultural tendency to stigmatise fat bodies by making them either invisible or too visible. Nichols' poems challenge the oppressive regulations of the female body and reconstruct the image of the fat black woman from its triply displaced position with regard to size, race and gender.

On a final note, I would like to express my gratitude to the editorial team at *Interactions* for their assistance and to the external reviewers for their careful reading of the essays included in this volume; a special thanks to Şebnem Toplu for inviting me to edit this special issue with her.

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“Beauty is a fat black woman”: Aesthetization of the (Dis)placed Body in Grace Nichols’s *Fat Black Woman’s Poems*

Zeynep Z. Atayurt

Abstract: Grace Nichols in her *Fat Black Woman’s Poems* (1984) offers a multi-faceted portrayal of her eponymous character fluctuating between the postcolonial Caribbean and Britain. Her poems have been studied in various parameters specifically focusing on the postcolonial context of her poetry exploring the “historical freight of slavery” and “images of institutionalised racism”. While slavery and racism are significant to Nichols’s poetry, this essay examines another aspect of oppression prevalent in Nichols’s work: the modern and pervasive British cultural tendency to stigmatise fat bodies by making them either invisible or too visible. In a cultural climate where women are often made to feel uncomfortable with their bodies, and are encouraged to conceal their fat, Nichols renders a certain empowering visibility to fat embodiment via situating the fat black woman at the heart of her work. By virtue of the unruly spirit embedded in her poems, Nichols challenges various social and cultural tendencies to displace fat bodies. Thus, her selected poems, as this essay argues, act as a feminist salvo against the oppressive and repressive regulations of the female body, enabling Nichols to rescue the image of the fat black woman from its triply displaced position with regard to size, race and gender.

Keywords: Grace Nichols, *The Fat Black Woman’s Poems*, the displaced body, fatness, antifat rhetoric, Caribbean writing, transnationalism, translocality.

The notion of displacement has often been employed in social and political narratives with a specific focus on spatial dislocation. There is a considerable body of critical work¹ on the contemporary Caribbean-British poet Grace Nichols, exploring her writing in relation to the poetry of geographic and cultural displacement within the frame of West Indian diaspora in Britain. However, this study aims to look into the representation of the notion of displacement from a somatic perspective to discuss how Grace Nichols attaches an empowering position to the displaced body of the fat black woman as represented in her *Fat Black Woman’s Poems* (1984), and hence reclaims the fat black female embodiment, a territory which has been scarcely explored in Western cultural, theoretical and even feminist discourses. Thus, the growing popularity of her *Fat Black Woman’s Poems*, which came out in 1984 and was re-printed 15 times since its publication (8 times since 2000), points to the increasing relevance of her work when viewed in relation to the antifat bias prevailing in the current Western cultural landscape.

¹ See for instance, Gina Wisker’s *Black Women’s Writing* (1993), Carole Boyce Davies’ *Black Women and Identity: Migrations of the Subject* (1994), Avtar Brah’s *Cartographies of Diaspora: Contesting Identities* (1996), Dennis Walder’s *Post-colonial Literatures in English* (1998).

As the title of her poetry collection suggests, the poems explore three prevalent conditions with regard to size, race and gender: “being fat, being black and being a woman”. This essay engages with the ways in which Nichols recovers the fat black female embodiment from its triply displaced position, and re-places this image into the realm of power and bodily pride. As Laurretta Ngcobo assertively states in her “Introduction” to *Let It Be Told* (1988), a collection of essays by Black Women in Britain, “Black women are caught between white prejudice, class prejudice, male power and the burden of history” (1). In addition to these prejudices, Western standards of beauty and the body prejudice inherent therein serve as yet another means of bias inflicted on the black women.

It is interesting to note that while fatness has often been equated with physical strength and in some African and West Indian traditions is considered desirable (for example in certain countries in Africa like Mauritania the larger female figure is valued and favoured over the slender²), with the pervasive beauty and cosmetics industry, slenderness has become the desirable body image across continents. Grace Nichols, through her *Fat Black Women’s Poems*, counterpoints the oppressive antifat rhetoric in current Western popular culture and attempts to undo the repressive stereotypes ascribed to the fat black woman. In this way, her poems speak back to the stereotyping of fat women as “physically unfit”, void of “sexuality” or “personal power” (Brown and Rothblum 3). Furthermore, with the frequent and uninhibited use of the word “fat” in her poems, the commonplace derogatory implications of the word, associated with “wrongness” or “deviation” (Brown 28), are removed, and thus the very word is transformed to a site epitomised by power.

The Fat Black Woman’s Poems consists of 17 poems, each of which represents a distinct state of empowerment and strength offering a persistent resistance to stigmatisation of the fat black woman and the hegemonic ideals imposed on the female body, working, as Nichols herself said, “against stereotypes” (“The Battle with Language” 289). Of these, 7 poems—in particular, “Beauty”, “The Assertion”, “The Fat Black Woman Remembers”, “The Fat Black Woman Goes Shopping”, “Thoughts drifting through the fat black woman’s head while having a full bubble bath”, “Looking at Miss World” and “Afterword”—display poignantly the black woman’s conflicting experience with her embodiment, juxtaposing her nostalgic contentment with her body in her home land with the antagonistic appropriation of her size in Britain. In order to explore how Nichols’s poems, as in Nichols’s own words, “questions the acceptance of the ‘thin’ European model as the ideal figure of beauty” (“The Battle with Language” 287) this essay first looks at current Western perceptions of fatness. Engaging with various critical responses to fatness, this essay then sets out to examine the ways in which Nichols’s Anglophone Caribbean poems offer multifarious re-imaginings of the excessive embodiment, whilst throwing down a critical challenge to British culture’s fear of fatness that have been largely framed and championed by popular cultural concerns.

British culture’s interest in fatness and its apparent panic over weight gain have been increasingly prevalent in the popular daily press. While there were 78 articles on

² See Pascale Harter, “Mauritanians question the ‘fat’ look”, BBC Radio 4, *Crossing Continents*, 26 April 2007. <http://news.bbc.co.uk/2/hi/programmes/crossing_continents/6591835.stm>

“obesity” in *The Guardian*³ between 1996 and 1999, this figure has risen to 4494 between the years 2000 and 2010. The striking rise of the entries is obviously a significant indicator, pointing towards an intensification of the fat oppression. Equally important is that most of the entries explore the issue as a major health and aesthetic concern. In popular culture fat people, as Vivian F. Mayer writes in her “Foreword” to *Shadow on a Tightrope*, are “looked upon with contempt” and “their allegedly ‘abnormal’ appetites” are often linked to “‘deeper problems’ in personality or sexuality” (xi). Marilyn Wann, the co-director of the National Association to Advance Fat Acceptance (NAAFA), associates this increasing “war against obesity” with a similar level of viciousness and discrimination practised in matters of race and gender. She says: “We are in the middle of a witch hunt and we are the witches”.⁴ Even though this analogy may seem exaggerated, it nonetheless draws attention to the current social stigma placed upon fatness which has created an environment that is extremely hostile toward weight gain and fat people. In this social landscape, as Zegman has argued, “there is a greater social hazard for females” (189), since “physical attractiveness is often considered a better predictor of self-concept in females than in males” (190). Viewed in this context, fat women are seen as “repulsive, funny, ugly, unclean” (LeBesco 16).

It is interesting to note that with the dramatic advances in hi-tech visual communication, there has been a specific kind of “visibility” of the female body. This “visibility” constantly perpetuated by advertisements, television reality shows and mainstream women’s magazines⁵, has increasingly standardised the notion of female beauty as a figure idealised in the form of “the slender, full-bosomed, Barbie doll” (Zegman 190). The prioritisation of the lean physique has created a social environment of distress over food and discomfort with one’s body size, and further equating women’s happiness, health and even success in relation to size. This concern over the body has been regarded as an issue targeting mainly white middle-class women. The body of work⁶ on fatness and female body image has mainly conceptualised and theorised the fat oppression experienced by white women.

However, the situating of the fat black women within the wider feminist discourse has often been critically overlooked. As Nichols points out in an interview with Maggie Butcher in the late 80s:

³ See *The Guardian* website. <<http://www.theguardian.co.uk>>

⁴ See Paul Harris, “‘Fat is Fabulous’, insist Anti-Diet Protesters”, in *The Observer*, 8 August 2004. <<http://www.guardian.co.uk/world/2004/aug/08/usa.health>> [accessed 15 November 2009] (para.12 of 17)

⁵ Cover lines of some magazines continuously prescribe the ways to attain a slender body. For instance: “50 Shortcuts to a Sexier Body” (*Glamour*, January 2007), “6 Ways to Thin-Easy Diets that Really Work” (*Allure*, January 2007), “Get a Bikini Body by Spring!” (*Shape*, January 2007).

⁶ For instance, Susie Orbach’s *Fat is a Feminist Issue: The Anti-Diet Guide for Women* (1978), Shelley Bovey’s *The Forbidden Body* (1989), Naomi Wolf’s *The Beauty Myth: How Images of Beauty are Used against Women* (1990) can be considered seminal critical works on the subject, yet without specifically engaging with the issue of race and fatness in their discourses.

Black women have been neglected in literature. It's only within the last twenty years, since the women's movement, that in Europe you've had the upsurge of white women writers. You have presses like Virago, the Women's Press. In the Caribbean, where you don't have these kind of facilities, black women have had less opportunity to be published, for their voices to be heard. So from that point of view [...] I'm also writing or speaking for black women also. (18)

In line with Nichols's observation, it might be argued that the lack of a thorough and multi-faceted voicing of the black women, typically fat black women, has led to a tendency for characterisations to be locked in the narrow confines of domesticity. They are, as Joan Dickenson states, often constructed as "mothers or teachers or comic relief –and they are never successfully sexual beings" (47). Although Dickenson's argument might risk generalising the characterisation of black women, it nevertheless points to an inclination in the literary representation of black women to be depicted as maids in charge of domestic chores or "big mamas" assuring peace and comfort. The portrayal of Mama Johnson in Alice Walker's short story, "Everyday Use" epitomises this tendency. In the story, Mama Johnson describes her embodiment in terms of physical strength, declaring: "I am a big-boned woman with rough, man-working hands. [...] I can kill and clean a hog as mercilessly as a man. My fat keeps me hot in zero weather" (120). As Mary Helen Washington points out, "the black woman was not permitted the dubious luxury of being feminine" (xxi). Thus, Grace Nichols seeks to undo the fat black woman stereotype through these poems. In her poem "The Fat Black Woman Remembers", she writes: "The fat black woman/remembers her Mama/and then days of playing/the Jovial Jemima". She ends her poem saying, "But this fat black woman ain't no Jemima" (9). The Jemima referred to is a character in an American commercial and clearly, Nichols's refusal to associate her fat black woman with this Aunt Jemima could be read as her critique of commonplace stereotyping of the fat black woman as maids and cooks to the white people. Nichols's mordant voice, thus, recognises, deflates and dismantles the repressive social implications attributed to black women's bodies and lives.

It could be argued that in Black feminist criticism, matters of race and gender have proved to be the major preoccupation of the critical response, and these two elements have tended to be regarded as "inextricable in Black women's writings" (Smith 174). However, the study of black women's writing has most often been associated with African-American women's writing where these preoccupations have been at the fore (arguably feeding from the rise of feminism and the Civil Rights Movement). Yet, this tendency seems to homogenise and universalise the category leaving other black literature relatively unknown. "The tradition of Caribbean writing", as in Nichols's words, is "fairly new" (Dawes 141), dating back to 1950s and 60s, a period which was referred to as "the boom years for West Indian literature" (Welsh 3-4) coinciding with the process of decolonisation of a number of Caribbean territories such as Jamaica, Trinidad and Guyana from the British colonial authorities. The Guyanese-born Grace Nichols has been living in Britain since 1977, and she is, in Sarah Welsh's words, "a part of a new generation of literary voices which lay the foundations for the creation of a new literary aesthetic which could be termed 'black British' rather than West Indian or West Indian-British" (7). Nichols herself has drawn attention to her transnationalism in interviews. When asked if she saw herself as a Guyanese poet living and working in Britain or as part of a new tradition in British literature, she replied: "I

suppose I am a writer across two worlds, I just can't forget my Caribbean culture and past, so there's this constant interaction between the two worlds: Britain and the Caribbean" (Welsh 12).

The oscillation between these two worlds incorporates a touch of hybridity into her writing, a position which makes, as in Robert Young's words, "difference into sameness, and sameness into difference, but in a way that makes the same no longer the same, the different no longer simply different" (158). Perhaps, the interpolation of this polarity is best represented in her *Fat Black Woman's Poems* where Nichols juxtaposes her Guyanese background with the British culture in a way that does not describe "the meeting or fusion of different elements or identities" (Bertram 111) in a syncretic frame, but rather prompts resistance to assimilation, pinpointing the difference of the different. Thus, the notions of "difference, diversity and unpredictability" ("The Battle with Language" 284) play an important role in Nichols's literary imagination, for her poetry places disparate geocultural landscapes and experiences side by side, in relation to one another, which in turn brings to mind Bakhtin's account of polyphony and dialogue regarding cross-cultural interactions. According to Bakhtin, "a dialogic encounter of two cultures does not result in merging or mixing. Each retains its own unity and open totality, but they are mutually enriched" (7). This dialogic interregionality, arguably, affiliates Nichols with Bhabha's conceptualisation of "vernacular cosmopolitan", or a state of "moving in-between cultural traditions and revealing hybrid forms of life and art" (141). Such cross-culturalism and hybridity find its subtle embodiment in Nichols's *Fat Black Woman's Poems* in which Nichols brings a playful re-imagining of two cultures, hand in hand, yet each maintaining its unique elements.

Juxtaposing London with the West Indian experience, Nichols exploits the notion of translocality as a means to challenge the Western metropolitan norms of beauty, and the disempowering regulations of femininity, in that her eponymous fat black woman becomes no longer "simply" different or other to the slender white woman. That is to say, her protagonist's cross-cultural experiences with her embodiment functions as a strategy to normalise the othered and displaced embodiment. Hence, she arguably uses her exotic Caribbean culture as a platform to critique the British body politics by bringing the excessive female embodiment to the fore at a time when there is a constant preoccupation with appearance and size, and most importantly with slenderness.

According to the first international survey of how women rate body image, commissioned by Dove, a large company in the health and beauty sector, in partnership with Nancy Etcoff and Susie Orbach, "only one in five British females consider themselves attractive".⁷ Susie Orbach, who collaborated with Dove's "real women" campaign⁸, says:

Having worked for thirty years in the area of eating disorders, I began to think what visual culture was doing to us—the fact we see a minimum of 12,000

⁷ See Liz Hoggard, "Why We're All Beautiful Now", *The Observer*, 9 January 2005. <<http://www.guardian.co.uk/media/2005/jan/09/advertising.comment>> [accessed 10 March 2010] (par. 11 of 21).

⁸ In 2004 Dove started a campaign featuring some plus size women against the weight-loss advertisement industry. The campaign was initially launched in the UK, and a year later in the US and Canada.

images a week; the way that for the generation of women who felt OK about their bodies it has destroyed that. But it really was a hunch until I read a study showing that in 1995, when TV was first brought into Fiji, a country that had no body-image eating problems, three years later 11.9% of the girls were throwing up over the toilet bowl. Visual culture is that powerful. So when Dove approached me, I felt we needed a way to diversify and challenge the digitally enhanced photos that are out there. (Hoggard par. 14)

As this example shows, the impact of the popular visual imagery is undeniably significant in terms of women's relationships to their bodies, and as Orbach's observation affirms, "the idea of beauty" defined by Western standards is rapidly transmitted across the world. This domineering and invasive tyranny of beauty industry has been considered "an assault on black woman" (Washington xvii)-a new practice to colonise and oppress the black female body through Western ideals. As Washington points out, black women have been "deeply affected by the discrimination of their skin and the texture of their hair" (xv). In addition to this, the issue of weight is emerging as yet another discriminatory site affecting black women. According to a recent study's findings, Black women are considered more biologically prone to fatness and have "higher body fat percentage than white women" (Gallagher *et al* 229). However, the new set of Western definitions of appearance and acceptability spread across the world like a domino effect, showing its influence over women regardless of ethnicity, genetic make-up and age, and thus becoming an oppressive practice of "social control used against all women" (Mabel-Lois 55).

Grace Nichols offers resistance to this in her *Fat Black Woman's Poems* giving an empowering portrayal of her eponymous fat black woman whom she situates in various public and private spaces to unapologetically explore her experiences with her embodiment. The critical reception of her *Fat Black Woman's Poems* has been varied and polarised. While her poems have been considered "ineffectual" and "lightweight" (Welsh 18) or as simplistic poems about an ordinary black woman's everyday experience, the density and the complexity of her poetic message has also been critically acclaimed. Gudrun Webhofer examined Nichols's stylistic use of language⁹, viewing it as "a special language which has the capacity to articulate women's experience" (10). Melissa Johnson contextualised Nichols's *Fat Black Woman's Poems* as "textual space of transgression" (222) within the frame of Bakhtin's liberatory account of the grotesque and carnival. A further critical account by Vicki Bertram has pointed out how Nichols's poems "create a mosaic of individual elements" (112) in the form of polyphony of voices, setting different subject positions and power relations side by side. Through her various depictions of her fat black woman, Nichols, arguably evokes a "cultural metaphor" that promotes "new female bodies and voices within dominant ideological contexts" (Escudero 9). Viewed from a broader perspective, her *Fat Black Woman's Poems* present the notion of fatness as a cultural, social and feminist issue whilst challenging the repressive meanings inscribed upon the fat black woman.

The notion of an empowered state of contentment with one's embodiment pervades Nichols's poetry. In fact, the idea of defiance employed in many of her poems

⁹ See Gabriel Griffin's essay "Writing the Body: Reading Joan Riley, Grace Nichols and Ntozake Shange" for a stimulating exploration of Nichols's writing the body in the female imaginary mode.

could be attributed to Nichols's own dislike of the "victim-mentality", and the tendency to associate the black woman's condition with the stereotype of "the long-suffering woman" ("The Battle with Language" 284). Nichols's defiance of this stereotype is echoed in some of the poems in her *Lazy Thoughts of a Lazy Woman and Other Poems*, particularly in the poem "Of Course When They Ask for Poems About the 'Realities' of Black Women". In this poem, she writes: "Cradle a black woman/and burn fingers as you trace/revolution/beneath her woolly hair" (53). This rebellious spirit against stereotyping of black woman is also employed in her *Fat Black Woman's Poems* in which her black woman resists the repressive regulations of beauty, refusing to be cast in the role of victim, a role that would arise because of her deviance from the normative regulations of femininity. Thus, she disrupts these oppressive structures that tend towards a homogenised view of the female body and in doing so she makes manifest the notions of "difference and heterogeneity [...] rooted in the female body" (Griffin 20). In fact, her protagonist's various experiences with her embodiment gesture towards the idea of difference, thus becoming a gateway to challenge the regularised uniformity of the "idealised" female embodiment.

The first poem in the collection, entitled "Beauty" is a poem that asserts that "beauty is a fat black woman" (7). The poem associates the notion of beauty with a fat black woman who is "walking the fields", "riding the waves" "while the sea turns back/to hug her shape" (7). The imagery of the fat black woman drifting in a total sense of freedom operates on two levels with regard to space and embodiment. In terms of spatiality, it could be argued that the fat black woman represented in the poem defies being locked in narrow spaces. In the poem, the woman is out on the shore, enjoying the gentle breeze, and her harmonious alliance with nature suggesting that she is empowered by her physicality, "a physicality closely welded to nature" (DeCaires Narain 2003, 16). This also recurs in her poem "Thoughts drifting through the fat black woman's head while having a full bubble bath" in which the fat black woman equates the immensity of her embodiment (here denoted by the frequent use of the word "steatopygous" (15) with that of the sky, the sea, and the waves. Nichols's choice of the word "steatopygous" is noteworthy: the Oxford English Dictionary (1989, second edition) defines the word as "a protuberance of the buttocks, due to an abnormal accumulation of fat in and behind the hips and thighs, found (more markedly in women than in men) as a racial characteristic of certain peoples, esp. the Hottentots and Bushmen of South Africa". According to Webhofer, Nichols uses the word to critique its "racial implications" (24). In line with this, it could also be argued that Nichols's uninhibited use of the word functions as a means to re-ascribe this particular physical feature of the black woman to the realm of strength and power.

The connection between nature and the fat black woman is further brought to the fore in the last poem in the sequence entitled "Afterword". In this poem, Nichols once more furnishes her protagonist with power, writing: "The fat black woman/will come out of the forest", "the fat black woman will emerge/and tremblingly fearlessly" (24). The sense of empowerment ascribed to the central character in both poems operates on both physical and emotional levels. On a physical level, the protagonist's empowerment is epitomised by her strength, enabling her to rise above the fear of fatness. On an emotional level, her empowered status could be attributed to her contentment with her figure, reinstating the idea that she feels totally secure with her embodiment. With this construction, Nichols reinforces the notion of "an independent, inventive and self-confident woman" (Webhofer 18) who defiantly resists victimisation. The fat black

woman in these poems is portrayed in a way that speaks back to the imposition of the idea that women's bodies are "in need of change, repair or improvement" (Wooley 19). Nichols situates her protagonist in a benign and empowering natural environment, and in these surroundings her fat black woman's natural beauty, a beauty not falsely enhanced by the aid of cosmetics, finds sympathetic resonance with the natural beauty around her. This empowered natural beauty of the fat black woman is reiterated in another poem entitled "Invitation" which again celebrates the fat female body. In the first part of the poem, Nichols writes: "I'm feeling fine/feel no need/to change my lines/when I move I'm the target light" (12). In the second part, she points to the eroticism of the fat black woman by saying, "my breasts are huge exciting/amnions of watermelon" (13). Appropriating the famous line of Mae West, "Come up and see me some time" (12), Nichols renders an empowering visibility to the image of the fat black woman. Although the "insistent somaticism" employed in Nichols's poems, as in Mara Scanlon's words, may risk "situating a reclamation of identity too resolutely in the body" (62), I take the view that her poems subvert the derogatory stereotypes associated with the excessive embodiment that tend to construct fat bodies either too visible or invisible (these two seemingly contradictory positions conversely operate on a similar conjecture based on the condescending and antagonistic appropriations of the excessive embodiment). In the case of Nichols's protagonist, visibility becomes a way of reclaiming her subjectivity.

The positive appropriation of the fat body is further reinforced in the poem "The Assertion" in which Nichols depicts her protagonist as a forceful woman endorsing her embodiment with a spirit of self-confidence. "The fat black woman sits/on the golden stool/and refuses to move" (8) says the speaker of the poem. Here, the state of immobility ascribed to the fat black woman could be read metaphorically as an implication of the determination not to submit to the externally imposed standards of beauty. The last stanza of the poem depicts this assertiveness: "*This is my birthright/says the fat black woman/giving a fat black chuckle/showing her fat black toes*" (8). It is interesting to note that the fat black woman's contentment with her physicality in her homeland transforms into a kind of anxiety in the streets of London.

The poem entitled "The Fat Black Woman Goes Shopping" depicts the anxiety of a fat black Caribbean woman who is "translocated" (Ramazani 209) to the centre of London. In the poem, the fat black woman goes shopping in London, and to her surprise, she finds out that "[...] when it come to fashion/the choice is lean/nothing much beyond size 14" (11). The poem, on the whole, prompts a critical examination of the fashion industry with its tendency to make women feel uncomfortable with the size they are, and further attacks Western standards of beauty that seem to exclude the fat black woman. Viewed from another perspective, the poem deals with "the colonisation of the body by the fashion industry" (Webhofer 20). The poem, as DeCaires Narain has argued, "exposes the various ways in which capitalism attempts to harness woman's sexuality as a marketing strategy in the slimming and beauty industries" (2003, 30). Perhaps, "The Fat Black Woman Goes Shopping" is the poem that best illustrates Nichols's own critique of the "ideal figure of beauty" based on Western standards. Western norms of beauty are subjected to further scrutiny in another poem entitled "Looking at Miss World", a critical take on beauty contests. The tendency to associate beauty with slenderness and whiteness is highlighted in the poem as "The fat black woman awaits in vain" as "slim after slim aspirant appears" (20).

Drawing upon the poems discussed, one might possibly think that by constructing a series of poems about an anonymous fat black woman, Nichols may endanger categorising and homogenising her very subject. However, I take the view that Nichols's *Fat Black Woman's Poems* offer a challenge to the arising stigma attached to fat black women, and serves as a counterbalance to this increasing area of suppression. Through her *Fat Black Woman's Poems*, Nichols obliterates this suppressive condition via the recovery of the fat black woman from her triply displaced position and furnishes her with such power and bodily pride that her displaced embodiment not only rises above, but also elaborately voices a re-defining of the Western norms of beauty.

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Özet

"Güzellik, şişman siyahi bir kadındır": Grace Nichols'un *Şişman Siyahi Kadın'ın Şiirleri*'nde Yerinden Edilmiş Bedenin Estetiksel Yer Edinimi

Grace Nichols, *Şişman Siyahi Kadın'ın Şiirleri*'nde (1984) şiirlerine ilham veren karakterinin, Birleşik Krallık ve post-kolonyal Karayip arasında değişkenlik gösteren çok yönlü tasvirlerini sunar. Nichols'un şiirleri çeşitli parametrelerde, belirgin olarak post-kolonyal eleştiri kuramları çerçevesinde, şiirlerinde vurgulanan post-kolonyal izleklere yönelik "köleliğin tarihsel yükü" ve "kurumsallaştırılmış ırkçılık imgeleri" bağlamında incelenmiştir. Kölelik ve ırkçılık gibi kavramlar Nichols'un *Şişman Siyahi Kadın'ın Şiirleri*'nde dikkate değer unsurlar olmakla birlikte, bu makale Nichols'un şiirlerinde yaygın olarak karşımıza çıkan bir diğer baskılayıcı durumu irdeler. Bu baskılayıcı durum, Nichols'un şiirlerinde, modern ve geniş bir etki alanına sahip İngiliz kültürünün, şişman bedenleri aşırı görünür ya da hiç görünmez kılarak, damgalayan eğilimi ile ilişkilendirilmiştir. Kadınları, sıklıkla, bedenlerinden rahatsız olmaya ve kilolarını gizlemeye teşvik eden böyle bir kültürel ortamda, Nichols, şişman siyahi kadını bu eserin merkezinde yerleştirerek, şişman bedene kesin, ayrıcalıklı bir görünürlük katar. Böylelikle, şiirlerinin boyun eğmeyen tabiatı, şişman bedenleri azleden çeşitli toplumsal ve kültürel eğilimlerin sorgulanmasına olanak tanır. Bu makale, incelediği seçili şiirlerde, Nichols'un şişman siyahi kadının beden, ırk ve toplumsal cinsiyet olmak üzere maruz bırakıldığı üçlü zulmün esaretinden kurtarışını mümkün kılan; kadın bedenini baskılayan ve bastıran normatif kurallara meydan okuyan bir feminist savaşım olarak tartışır.

Anahtar sözcükler: Grace Nichols, *Şişman Siyahi Kadının Şiirleri*, yerinden edilmiş beden, şişmanlık, şişmanlık karşıtı söylem, Karayip yazını, yerel ötesicilik, çok ulusluluk.

The Problematic of a Diasporic Life: Fragmented Identities in Zindika's *Leonora's Dance*

A. Deniz Bozer

Abstract: In this article the black British dramatist Zindika's play *Leonora's Dance* (1992) will be used to illustrate through two Caribbean women and a Chinese girl; the financial and emotional difficulties encountered as a diasporic subjectivity in England. These difficulties will be examined with reference to the themes dealt with in the play such as fragmented identities, racism, discrimination in education, class conflict, stereotyping in art, the restricting nature of traditions, mother-daughter and generational conflicts, women being sexually and economically exploited, and spiritualism. On the axis of colonial-minded English and the black diaspora in England, the negative impact of othering on the human soul is analysed with regard to agoraphobia and fragmented identities. It is discussed that as long as the white English mentality does not change, the black diaspora in England cannot have much hope for a healthy and happy life there.

Keywords: Zindika, *Leonora's Dance*, black British women playwrights, diaspora, fragmented identities, migration, racism, stereotyping in art.

Although "[a] good number of plays by black men were being produced by the end of the 1960s" (Ponnuswami 217), black women playwrights remained invisible until the 1970s (Croft 84-5). Black theatre, as a whole, actually developed in Britain in the late 1970s and early 1980s. As for black women playwrights, their number seems to have increased dramatically since the early eighties. Yet, as Karen Dahl states, "[w]hen I began looking for voices speaking directly 'from the postcolonial space,' I found a significant body of work based not only in the former colonies, but (as Homi K. Bhabha implies) in the heart of empire itself" (39). Hence, "[b]lack theater presented the dilemma of being Black and British" (May 95).

One of those writers from London is Zindika who may not be as well-known as Winsome Pinnock, another contemporary woman dramatist of Caribbean origin, but her work is well-worth looking into. Zindika, aka Zindika Macheol and Zindika Kamauesi is a representative of contemporary black British writing; "as a playwright Zindika mainly used her first name but for other publications she has used both the surnames" (Gabriele Griffin 2010). Although very little is known about her life, it can be deduced from Gabriele Griffin's interview conducted with the playwright in 2001 that Zindika made use of some of her own experiences in her plays: "Zindika talked of [the] trauma and the difficulties of being reunited with parents and siblings one did not grow up with as a teenager" (Griffin 2003a, 244). Although she has written in other genres, Zindika "is best known as a playwright and her plays have toured nationally. Her work has been performed in collaboration with the Adzido Dance Company at Sadlers Wells and the Royal Festival Hall; she is also "a teacher and an educationalist" (*When Will I See You Again?*). Her first play, *Paper and Stone* (1989) is "a didactic play addressed to young women who try to break away from the stranglehold of their (stereotypically imagined) conservative immigrant parents"; the play upholds "hard-work, higher education, and

personal modesty [...] as safeguards against the depravity of the modern” (Aston and Reinelt 223). This play was followed by another play, *Leonora's Dance* (1992), and later by *A Daughter's Grace* (1999) which is a work of fiction. *When Will I See You Again?* (2002), co-written with Natalie Smith, is “about the experiences of a group of Caribbean people who came to Britain as children between the 1950s and 1970s and began a new life, often parted from their immediate family. It features both prose and verse”. Zindika's next work, co-edited with Michael Williams and Cindy Soso, is a book for children: *Valiant Women: Profile of African Women in the Struggle from 1583-1965* (2009), which “is a series of biographical profiles dedicated to the outstanding achievements of Black/African women whose courageous lives and works have contributed significantly to the struggles of African people worldwide” (*Valiant Women*).

Leonora's Dance is rich in terms of portraying diasporic subjects as it constitutes two different races and ethnicities, the two Caribbeans Leonora and Daphine from a former colony, and the Chinese Melisa. Black refers to “anyone in Britain who is not ‘white’”, hence encompassing citizens of both African and Asian descent (Bygott 6). Therefore this term will be used with reference to these three characters in the play. Leonora, born in Jamaica to a white father and a black mother is “a young middle-aged woman” (Zindika 77) who has migrated to Britain. She is not an “economic migrant” or an “asylum seeker”; her reason for coming to Britain has been to seek a career in ballet which eventually results in her being a “diasporic subject” (Griffin 2003b, 224). Her failure, and the racism she encounters in the host country leave her bitter. Moreover, under stress, she develops agoraphobia. In the meantime, she is also haunted by Medusa, her other half, and becomes a schizophrenic. Leonora shares her house with two lodgers: Melisa the Chinese-British student studying medicine, and Daphine who is a distant relative. All three women represent the new British. Leonora's mother, Frieda, concerned about her daughter's health, travels from the Caribbean to visit her. She wants Leonora to return to the Caribbean with her and take “her rightful place as eldest daughter” (2.2.98). The play is rich in conflicts as Leonora versus Daphine, Melisa, her mother, and herself through the Medusa. Furthermore, Daphine and Melisa are often in a strife, and Melisa is confronted by Frieda. The three women who reside in England, Leonora, Daphine and Melisa are at odds not just with their family members, but also with the society. Thus, the play is also rich in themes such as migration, diasporic subjectivities, fragmented identities, alienation, isolation, racism, mother-daughter relationship, generational gap, illiteracy, elitism in art, unemployment, destructiveness of traditions, psychological disturbance, and spiritualism. However, some of these themes are not developed and hang as loose threads. Nevertheless, the realisation of all these is triggered by migration.

In the post-World War II era, many people from the east European countries and the former colonies migrated to Britain mainly to improve their economic status. Because of much needed labour force to reconstruct Britain, the British welcomed these first major waves of immigrants by easing legal measures. Hence, the 1948 British Nationality Act allowed subjects from former colonies to live and work in Britain. In 1954, almost 11,000 West Indians came to Britain, with the number more than doubling in a year (Hiro 6), and between 1955 and 1960, West Indian immigrants highly outnumbered Asians (Green 4). The number of British persons born in the West Indies had increased from 15,000 in 1951 to 172,000 in 1961 when Britain passed the Commonwealth Immigrants Act restricting the entry of non-white Commonwealth

citizens to Britain. Nevertheless, West Indians continued to migrate to the Mother Country and by 1981 the total population of “persons of West Indian ethnicity were between 500,000 and 550,000, depending upon the official source used” (*General Timeline of Blacks in Britain*).

As a result of a massive influx of immigration, Britain transformed into a multi-racial society, however, especially for black immigrants life did not prove any easier in the Mother Country, either as they not only were offered low-paying jobs that forced them to usually share accommodation in the poorer and decaying parts of the cities, but they also suffered from “racial barriers which were difficult to overcome” (Spencer 92). As a result of racial discrimination, black people had to struggle more in order to “achieve equal opportunity, fairness in criminal justice system, equal access to good housing and obtaining satisfactory education” (Goulbourne 75). Compared to Asians and Africans, the Caribbean immigrants suffered most from racial discrimination probably because of their “darker skin colour”, hence they worked “in the lowest paying jobs with lowest-grade positions” (Green 5). Black immigrants were also considered a problem as they “were widely blamed for crime, violence and riots” (Hayter 29), thus creating social decay. In 1958, in Notting Hill for instance, racial clashes between whites and blacks occurred as whites rioters attacked especially West Indian immigrants who lived there in high numbers; and they threw petrol bombs at their houses (Goulbourne 57). On the other hand, as claimed by Dear “the majority of rioters [...] were young, black, and of Caribbean origin” (in Macgregor and Pimlott 33). Furthermore, in 1981 there were race riots in Brixton and other cities with a dense immigrant or diasporic population; the riots continued on and off throughout the 1980s. Black immigrants were not only believed to present a threat to social stability but also—and more importantly—to Englishness; “[a]s Britain ceased to be a white man’s country” (Spencer 2), Englishness “slowly gave way to a postcolonial Britishness” (May 90). Thus, in 1981 the Thatcher government passed the British Nationality Act with even more strict measures taken with regard to owning British citizenship.

Born in the West Indies, Leonora, the diasporic protagonist of *Leonora’s Dance*, states: “I was only sixteen when I came to England. I had no mother or father to look after me. I was vulnerable. I lived in a cramped bedsit over a fish and chip shop for years. The air vent came right underneath my window. You can imagine the smell. I couldn’t make friends” (1.5.92). Her mother was not pleased with Leonora’s migrating to England as she warned her daughter “that there [were] no doors to be opened [there]. Just closed ones” (1.3.85). Frieda’s words foreshadow Leonora’s fate in the Mother Country where she comes on a dance scholarship and does not go back. While at first full of hope, later she is disillusioned as a result of discrimination and rejection. Leonora experiences rejection as she is not accepted as a black person among the white majority. Secondly, she is rejected as a ballet dancer, again because of the colour of her skin. The third rejection she experiences is by her lover who leaves her at the altar. Later in the play she refers to him as her ex-husband, George. Her dreams are shattered, yet, she has no longing for her native Jamaica, no wish to go back. Frieda scolds her: “[Y]ou came here thinking that they were going to welcome you with open arms. Instead all you got was a slap in the face and that set you back” (2.5.107). Disillusioned and bitter, Leonora “was trapped both physically and mentally” (Zindika 76). As she feels threatened and unsafe as a result of racial threats, she is reduced to a psychologically disturbed recluse who talks to herself/Medusa resulting in Daphine’s arriving at the conclusion that Leonora is “wasted” (1.1.82).

Leonora's Dance draws upon the problematic nature of identity in diasporic space. Stuart Hall states, identity is "never static and always subject to ruptures and discontinuities" (394), as can be observed in Leonora. According to Gilroy, black cultural identity is a product of the "dense hybrid, and multiple formations of postcolonial culture" (77). Leonora denies her black identity, her black self:

Daphine: Yes, Miss Leonora. We're Africans...you and me.

Leonora: Don't tar me with the same brush.

Daphine: It's nothing to be ashamed of... (1.1.81)

Similarly:

Medusa: You too black [...]

Leonora: I'm not black, I'm brown. (1.3.85)

Leonora also describes herself to Melisa as a "brown and thin" (1.3.84) young girl. Thus, it can be observed that Leonora has a misconception about herself with regard to her skin colour. Yet, deep down she seems to know who and what she is as for instance when she tells Daphine: "The black race will never prosper- not with people like you bringing *us* down" (1.1.81) (emphasis mine). Moreover, she is well aware that "one percent black can ruin your life" (1.2.85). However, Leonora tries to escape her blackness in vain, for as Fanon claims, in assertion of the fixity of stereotypes, "[w]herever he goes, the Negro remains a Negro" (173).

It is through mimicry that Leonora tries to assume power and superiority, characteristics associated with her white father, the master. Hence, assuming a white self she strives to become, as Bhabba states, an "authorized version of otherness" (88). Looking down on her indigenous culture and denying her black self, Leonora "side[s] with the symbols of power which are logically associated with Europe" (Nettleford 4). However, while Leonora identifies herself with her white father, society identifies her as a black person, that is with her mother's side. Moreover, as the "adoption of the language of the civilising nation" (Fanon 18) is a means of being accepted into white society (34), Leonora's use of English is better than her mother's and Daphine's, yet she still occasionally slips into a substandard accent as can be observed in her address to Daphine as a "good fe nuttin' girl" (1.1.78). Despite the fact that English is the official language of the former British West Indies, Caribbean immigrants still have some difficulty speaking Standard English. Especially, the Caribbean dialect and the use of Creole words make them stand out among the white British.

Although Leonora suffers from racism herself, ironically she acts in a racist manner towards her Chinese lodger who is actually born and bred in Britain. She others Melisa considering herself among the English as she does so: "Still not used to our English weather yet I see [...] You'll soon get used to it like us English" (1.1.78). As Griffin states, "Leonora [...] carefully distinguishes between 'them', that is the Chinese lodger, and 'us', the English among whom she includes herself in the process of 'othering' [...]" (2003b, 114). Her mother wants Leonora to come to terms with her identity as she states: "Face realities girl. [...] come back home with me. You see what happens when you stay away too long-you forget where you belong" (2.5.107). Leonora rejects going back with her mother: "But can't you see mama, this is where I belong. This is my father's land. Where else should I belong? It's my birthright" (2.5.107). As

Gabriele Griffin states “[a] diasporic subject is one who experiences displacement and estrangement” (2003a, 36), and so does Leonora. Thus, Medusa foreshadows Leonora’s struggle as “a [o]ne woman’s crusade [which] will cost her dearly” (1.1.80).

Indeed, Leonora’s diasporic existence costs her her sanity. “There is confusion and panic in her movements” (1.1.77). Medusa tells us that Leonora is “disturbed, demented” (1.1.80); therefore she has a therapist and is on medication. She is paranoid for she believes London is “full of strange people with evil intent” (1.1.80). However, Zindika refers to her protagonist’s unstable psychological condition as “negativity” (76) which “is occasioned by her leading a diasporic life in a postcolonial culture” (Griffin 2003b, 110). This “negativity” develops into agoraphobia, the fear of open spaces, as Leonora stops going out claiming that the streets are full of rough people who shout abusive words at you and cars that can run you over; moreover there is acid rain, pollution and possibility of nuclear fallout, “Leonora: Deterioration. Deterioration all around. Who wants to be out there? Out there where they snatch away every last bit of dignity you got.” (1.1.78)

Agoraphobia, more often a women’s complaint, is a neurotic problem caused mainly as a result of stress. Immigration, a stressful event in itself, is often accompanied by social isolation and rejection that may lead to stress on a traumatic scale. In addition, Leonora is unemployed and discriminated racially. Furthermore, she also seems to be financially distressed as she takes in lodgers who also help relieve her loneliness. Hence, as Hudson claims, “[s]ocial factors may set the scene for onset of agoraphobia” (63). An immigrant in a different culture can experience not just social adjustment problems, but psychological ones as well since society’s ostracizing may influence one’s psychological well-being. Thus, one “develops the anxiety and avoidance that make up the agoraphobic syndrome” (Hudson 63).

It is not just the stress caused by migrating to a different country with an unfamiliar culture, but the often ensuing unemployment, poverty and poor housing adds to the emotional disturbances of the migrant. Postcolonial theory is founded on doubleness with regard to identity. Caught between two cultures, Leonora, as a postcolonial diasporic subject, has no unified sense of self. Furthermore, “West Indians more than any [. . .] other group seem likely to have *schizophrenia*” (Littlewood and Lipsedge 91). In addition, “[m]ental illness appears to be found most frequently in those immigrant groups who are forced migrants and those who have a comparatively easy voluntary migration and least commonly in those who have a difficult voluntary migration plus lower expectations” (Littlewood and Lipsedge 103). Leonora, too, voluntarily migrated to Britain, even against the wishes of her own mother. Littlewood and Lipsedge further state that “[p]ossibly immigrants from urban areas and with middle-class aspirations are likely to become ill earlier” (98). There is no doubt that Leonora’s vanity causes her to have much more than middle-class aspirations, hence, her schizophrenia eventually leads to a mental breakdown resulting in her being hospitalised in the country she arrived about twenty-five years ago. “It is possible that the pressures on a migrant are greatest, not immediately after a change which has been anticipated and prepared for, but after some years of settlement if it has become clear that the new life in the adopted country has fallen short of expectations” (Littlewood and Lipsedge 86). As Littlewood and Lipsedge also maintain, “it is likely that the longer the time the migrant stays in Britain, the longer his or her goals remain unfulfilled and the greater the realization of failure. For serious psychiatric illness the West Indians are likely to have been in Britain for more than five years when they first become ill”, a

comparatively longer period than other immigrants (97).

Frieda had never talked about Leonora's father or his family. "It's not that I didn't want you to know your father, or benefit from his success. It's just that I thought once you got to know him, you wouldn't want to know me, and I was right. The minute you set foot into that posh school. You changed" (2.2.97). Racially mixed children often seemed to have a slightly higher status and an advantageous position both among the blacks and the whites compared to the regular slave. Being the illegitimate daughter of a white master, Leonora, too, probably had a comparatively higher status than the other blacks. "'the coloureds' (the so-called 'mulattoes')-offspring of the union of Europeans (almost invariably men) and Africans (almost invariably women)-were regarded as congenitally superior to 'pure Africans' and moreover, *were treated as such*" (James 234).

Therefore, the racial abuses Leonora was exposed to in England were probably even more offending for her than another black person. "Some immigrants arrive in the host country only to find that they are seen as representatives of a despised minority group, or one that has little, if any, status" (Gaines 411). In the Caribbean, Leonora was fifteen the first time she danced "at the colonial club-an exclusive joint" (1.3.84), which she obviously had the opportunity to be about because of her white father. It was because of her brownness that she could afford to be so vain and have unrealistic aspirations not meant for her race and class as the illegitimate mulatto daughter of a black working-class woman: "I wanted to tour Japan, Copenhagen, USA, Australia, places where I had never been before. I would be the toast of London. They would throw roses at my feet, play music on my entrance-I would be at the top of every millionaire's guest list" (1.3.84-85). Thereby, siding with her father's race and class and rejecting her blackness make her suffer more than most other black people in England. In the Mother Country "no regard was paid to the complex hierarchy of shades by the 'host' society: the pattern of racism which the Caribbean migrants experienced here did not correspond to the pigmentocracy which they left behind in the Caribbean. They were regarded monolithically as 'coloureds', 'West Indians', 'blacks', 'immigrants', and even 'wogs' with no reference to differential shade" (James 239). Hence, being brown or black made no difference in England, one was still othered.

In *Leonora's Dance*, among other themes, Zindika examines the issue of "stereotyping of black people in certain jobs, careers, art forms while others remain European-preserved" (Zindika 76). Although Leonora is "a trained ballerina and teacher" (1.1.78), she cannot work in this field as it is a white elitist art. When she tells Melisa that she was not able to get into the Royal Ballet, the latter's response illustrates the stereotyping that occurs in many people's minds, not just the white: "Well perhaps you would have been more suited to modern dance. African. Jazz. Calypso" (1.3.84). While other forms of dance, such as calypso and modern dance, are open to black people, to see black ballet dancers on the stage is a rarity and is often met with a cool reception by predominantly white ballet-goers. The visibility of the black dancer in the ballet line is not welcome, so being non-white and non-middle-class, Leonora cannot build herself a career as a ballerina. Her misconception about her identity once again fails her: "I thought I was white enough" (1.3.84). Like Melisa suggests, she could have opened a dance academy and continued her life as a ballet teacher or a choreographer but apparently it was her ill-health that put an end to all her dreams pertaining to this art form.

Although there were black or mixed-race contemporary companies that had

performed classical pieces, even in 2004, it is noted that “[n]ot only do we have no full-time professional black ballet companies in this country, but at the last count, the Royal Ballet had no *full-time* black dancers [...] English National Ballet currently has no black dancers either. Some might put this down to ingrained racism: the belief that black bodies are not suited to a classical line, or that black dancers are too jarring a note in the supposed uniformity of the corps de ballet” (Bishop) (emphasis mine). Nevertheless, Arthur Mitchell, the founder of the Dance Theatre of Harlem, counter argues this point by stating that the reason for the under-representation of blacks in ballet is because their number is very few to start with” (in Bishop). “Dancer and choreographer Cassa Pancho, whose father was Trinidadian and mother English, started Ballet Black,” in 2001; she states: “[t]en or 15 years ago you’d hear that black women didn’t have the physique for ballet. You’d hear ‘they have big bums and flat feet’”. Moreover, this would be corresponding to the times when Leonora was seeking a career as a ballerina in England. In 2008, Pancho claims that while “black male principals are few [...], black ballerinas [are] almost non-existent” (*Why are there no black ballerinas...*). The reason for this lack is explained as follows: “[p]art of the problem lies in the way ballet is perceived among non-whites, especially those from poorer backgrounds. The art form evolved as a rarefied, European tradition [...] ‘It’s still seen as a very elitist, white pastime, like horse-riding,’ says Pancho” (*Why are there no black ballerinas...*). Thus, the issue is a cultural one, if not racial. In addition, of course there is the problem of expensive training and equipment which adds on an economic dimension, making this art form available mainly to upper and middle-classes. Therefore, although Leonora passionately asserts that “dancing was [her] life” (1.3.84), the rejection she faces naturally has a traumatic impact on her psyche. Unsurprisingly, she is disappointed, bitter and most of all enraged.

In their book *Female Rage: Unlocking Its Secrets, Claiming Its Power* (1994), Mary Valentis and Anne Devane note that “[w]hen we asked women what female rage looks like to them, it was always Medusa, the snaky-haired monster of myth, who came to mind ... In one interview after another we were told that Medusa is ‘the most horrific woman in the world’ ... [though] none of the women we interviewed could remember the details of the myth” (5). Medusa, one of the three Gorgons, is a significant figure of Greek mythology. As the story goes, Athena is furious when she discovers that the young and lovely Medusa and a young boy engage in a sexual act in her temple, thus disrespecting the sanctity of the grounds, so Athena punishes Medusa by making her dreadfully ugly with hair of live, venomous snakes, and a horrifying gaze that turns onlookers into stone. In her embarrassment, Medusa hides from other people and starts living with her two sisters who are also frightfully ugly. In *Leonora’s Dance* the two sisters are Daphne and Melisa, and the reason that brings these three women together is not ugliness but the misfortunes of diasporic life. In modern times the Medusa figure is especially used by women artists as “a symbol of female rage” (Wilk 217, 224). Zindika is one of these woman artists who uses the Medusa figure in *Leonora’s Dance* for the same purpose. In addition, through Medusa, who can be considered as Leonora’s subconscious, we see past the vain façade of the protagonist while the former reveals her suppressed thoughts and feelings. Hence, Medusa poses “a threat to Leonora’s sanity” (1.1.77) as the protagonist often displays the need to talk to her other self.

Leonora’s Dance is set in London in 1992 and since the outside is only referred to as a dangerous and hostile place as perceived by Leonora, only an internal setting is employed:

All scenes take place in the house. There is no clear indication of day or night. Each character will occupy a different space on stage. There is a communal space where they always meet. The communal space is dominated and controlled by Leonora. The other two lodgers must go through the communal space to get to their own space. Each character controls their own space; they never invade each other's space uninvited. Whenever they do, something dramatic happens. (1.1.77)

Thus, the house is a metaphor for multiracial and multicultural England, a diasporic space where all subjects have to respect each other's personal ground; otherwise conflicts arise. As Medusa shows the readers/audience around at the opening of the play, she comments on the sterility of the inhabitants' lives: "There are no children or apple trees in sight [...] just chiselled faces, sparse lives. A house built on cracks, fissures I mean [...] stains of insanity leak through the cracks" (1.1.78). Medusa also underlines the unhealthy influence the house might have on the persons that stay there for a while: "This is the house. They say if you stay here too long you take on the idiosyncrasies of the occupants. Senile dementia. Psychosis. Persecution complex" (2.4.105), referring to Leonora, Daphne and Melisa, respectively. The metaphor continues as Medusa states that it is "a house built on unstable ground...distorted dreams, stagnant lives" (2.4.105). Hence, England as a diasporic space will not be able to provide a healthy place for its citizens to pursue their dreams if firm and reliable political and socio-economic changes are not made.

Furthermore, the house is full of plants, so many that Daphne complains they are "sucking all the oxygen out of the house" (1.2.82). Leonora identifies herself with these plants and always draws the curtains so that it would be dark inside, ironically claiming that the plants are very sensitive and will die if exposed to daylight (2.2.97). Actually, as an agoraphobic she believes that she herself cannot survive the cruelty of the external world. It is also interesting that Leonora's second name is "Lavender", a plant name. Lavender may have been chosen deliberately as this plant is known for its medicinal use for calming the nerves; its tranquil properties make it an excellent mild sedative and "[i]t is helpful for all disorders that trouble the head and spirit, for its scent is calming" (*Lavender*). Exactly what Leonora needs herself.

The play has an open-ending; before Leonora was hospitalised, her plans for the future in her own vain way was "to sell the house and use the money to invest in a dance school" for the "daughters of celebrities, the rich and famous" (2.5.107). However, after a successful period of treatment in the hospital, whether Leonora will continue to remain in England or whether she will return to the Caribbean is left unanswered. Or, will she even be able to ever leave the hospital?

One of the lodgers Leonora shares her house with is Daphne, an 18-19 year old woman of Caribbean origin. Her mother, who is Frieda's cousin's daughter, came to England in the sixties. Leonora dislikes her rebelliousness and refers to Daphne as "Jezebel" (1.2.80), signifying a shameless, sexually immoral woman, as Daphne does not hesitate to have casual sexual relationships: "I've had six boyfriends in three months" (1.2.82). At fifteen, one of her one-night stands resulted in pregnancy which left her with a daughter; it is her mother in Liverpool who takes care of this little illegitimate girl whom Daphne has not seen in two years. As Modood states, the highest number of separation and divorce, among immigrants, were among the

Caribbeans (18); hence, they constitute mainly single-parent families, and Daphine seems to be no exception.

Daphine is happy that Melisa has moved in as she felt “trapped in this house with [Leonora] and her plants” (1.2.82). She shares the same feeling of imprisonment with other Caribbeans as one Caribbean says: “‘The majority of us are trapped’” (in James 245). Daphine has experienced a miserable life as a diasporic subject. She is unemployed, with an illegitimate daughter, and no proper education to rely on to build a proper future for herself. Her parents, too, have suffered first as postcolonial immigrants, later as diasporic subjects: “Take my dad, the day he lost his job he lost his mind ...and my mum. She lost three fingers you know under that bloody steam machine she works with. She can’t get compensation, she’s tired of fighting and shit scared of losing her job” (1.5.90). Although Daphine has a miserable life like her mother, there is an intergenerational conflict between the second generation British-born Daphine and her first generation migrant mother.

“There is rather too much crammed into this play-half-explored issues, such as one character’s illiteracy” (Hemming). Indeed, one of the themes brought up by Zindika through Daphine is the discriminatory practices of the British education system against the offspring of mainly black immigrants as Daphine complains about the racist attitude of some of her teachers and how they ignored her, to the point that she is almost illiterate now and is ashamed of herself. When Leonora pressures her to find a job, she draws our attention to the unfavourable economic state of England in the 1990s: “Look there are loads of white people out there with degrees and they can’t even find jobs, so what chance I got?” (1.6.91). Upon Melisa’s encouragement, however, she decides to attend literacy classes.

Caribbean children and youth were not so successful at school compared to the offspring of other immigrants. In the 1950s and 1960s schools were accused of being racist in categorising Caribbean migrant children as “educationally subnormal” (Phillips). Correspondingly, Green argues that they were made fun of and harassed by peers (304). Similar discrimination continued in the later decades as the research of the Centre for African American Studies at the University of California in Los Angeles reveals: “Detractors in the 1960’s and 1970’s would later maintain that the system institutionalized religious and class differences and, from its inception, automatically shuttled most Afro- Caribbean children into programs for being ‘under-achievers’” (*General Timeline of Blacks in Britain*).

The discrimination against Caribbean students continued into the 1980s as a research committee led by Lord Swann established in 1985 that “while South Asians were achieving similar academic examination results to their white peers, West Indians were performing less well” (in Modood 12). On the whole, as Winston James claims: “The educational system [. . .] has been indicted and found guilty time and time again of racism and the undermining of self-confidence of black children and the maligning of the culture of their parents” (264).

Although they were born and/or brought up in the host country, second and third generation immigrants were still exposed to discrimination (Modood 10). Being a diasporic subjectivity in England, Daphine sadly voices her being rejected: “I’ve been in this country all me life and I still feel like an alien” (1.6.91). Through this young and half literate woman, Zindika underlines the significance of the problems with regard to the diasporic situation and warns about the necessity of making modifications in the system: “Something has to change soon. Something has to change” (1.3.86). When

Melisa asks Daphine what she would have liked to have most in the world, she thoughtfully responds: "A job...a flat...a car...new shoes. A life" (1.3.83). Thus, Frieda's giving Daphine the deed to the house, signals a new beginning for the latter. Moreover, Daphine is handed down the Obeah secrets as Frieda places her robe on her and starts teaching her the names and secrets of the plants. Thus, the significant role women play in the preservation of cultural heritage is underlined with Frieda's passing down her robe to Daphine. As the play is open-ended with regard to Leonora's future, it is also open-ended with regard to Daphine's. For, it is not known whether she will benefit at all from being an Obeah woman in England, or will it estrange her in the eyes of white people even more?

As for the other lodger, Melisa Chung was born in Britain to Chinese immigrant parents. "The largest wave of Chinese immigration took place during the 1950s and 1960s and constituted predominantly of male agricultural labourers from Hong Kong, particularly from the rural villages of the New Territories". The largest British-Chinese community is in London, and most British-Chinese people are socially and economically better-off than other minorities. They are also known to have better academic achievements ("British-Chinese"). These characteristics pertaining to the British-Chinese apply to Melisa's family as well.

Melisa has never been to Hong Kong and is from Haywards Heath. At the age of four, her father, a man more concerned with money than his daughter's happiness, promised her in marriage after an old Chinese tradition. She is now running away from her family and hiding from them. (Incomprehensibly, however, she states that she still receives an allowance from her father.) She is a quiet girl compared to the more rebellious Daphine. Yet, there is always something eerie about her conduct. Daphine: "Gosh, you're sly, Melisa-underneath that shy, innocent exterior lurks a demon" (1.2.83).

Melisa confesses to Daphine that she never wanted to be a doctor herself, but that it was her father's idea "for she should be an educated little wife, who could make polite conversation with rich men" (1.5.90). Moreover, Melisa does not have any say with regard to her future husband. In addition to issues related to the diaspora, Zindika touches upon patriarchal oppression and the stifling nature of traditions through Melisa and her mother: "Marriage is a punishment Daphine. I'll end up like my mother. First I'll lose my body than my mind. Don't tell anyone, but she drank you know. She had to. That was how she stayed married to my father for thirty years." (2.3.101-102). Melisa seeks relief from her suffering in spiritualism, in the character of Mioshan.

Mioshan is "based on the tale of a princess Mioshan who is banished from the royal palace because she refuses to marry as her father had mandated. Because she disobeys his orders, he tries to kill her three times [...] As fate would have it, Princess Mioshan is spared each time. She eventually goes into hiding [...] to protect herself from her father's intent to kill her for disobeying his will" (Manlowe 88). She confesses to Daphine that Mioshan is her "mentor" who "guides and protects" (2.3.99, 100), and tells her about Mioshan's story: "Her name is Mioshan. She's a Taoist princess. A woman of great insight and powers [...] She just refused to get married that was all. One day her father tried to cajole her into marrying the local tax collector and she stabbed [her father] to death [...] She was found guilty and sentenced to face the firing squad" (2.1.95). However, just as they fired at her, she disappeared in a mysterious way "only leaving behind her shoes with a handful of ashes in them [...] it is believed that she roams the earth constantly as a peasant woman, a herbalist" (2.1.95).

Melisa is threatened by Leonora's mother who believes her to be the source of evil causing Leonora to suffer psychologically. As Frieda holds Melisa responsible for Leonora's lack of inner peace, she asks her to leave. Yet, later when Melisa saves Leonora's life, Frieda changes her mind and tells Daphne that her friend can stay in the house with her. Melisa's story is significant in that it illustrates how traditions from the old country can haunt a young woman living in diaspora. However, like Leonora's and Daphne's stories, it is open-ended. It is not clear whether Melisa will be staying or leaving. However, in either case, it is clear that her problems will not be solved and her life will not change for the better unless she confronts her father/patriarchy/traditions.

Leonora's mother, Frieda is the only woman in the play who does not inhabit a diasporic space; she has only come to Britain because she was worried about her daughter's well-being. She decides to visit Leonora, her eldest daughter from whom she has not heard in over a year. Her aim is to take her daughter back with her to the island where she will be respected. She wants to make Leonora feel guilty for staying in England where she encountered nothing but disrespect and mocks her as she looks around the dismal room: "So it look like you done well in England. A dream come true" (2.2.96). She is angry with her daughter for lying to her in her letters all these years and accuses her of "[l]iving on dreams": "Is this all you got to show for your years in England? [...] Where's your husband? Where's your children? Where is your ever so fabulous dancing career?" (2.2.97).

Frieda was a slave woman who had an illegitimate daughter, Leonora, from the white master, who was married and had other children. When Leonora inquires why her father did not marry her, she responds: "Marry me? Him with his big white house...his grand piano and huge ballroom, crystal chandelier-the Colonel, lord and mighty-marry me, a field hand-who cut cane under the burning sun? (*She laughs louder*) His money may have sent you to school, but it was only because he didn't want to face the shame of your conception" (2.2.97).

Hence, with Frieda, we get a glimpse of the black colonised woman being exploited by the white male coloniser, Marshall Croft with his "black Wellington boots" (2.5.108) which is the appropriate accessory for his oppressive role, visually underlining his power. Along with the French and the Dutch, the English began to establish their own colonies in the Caribbean in the early seventeenth century. Although slavery was abolished in Britain in 1833, colonial hierarchies continued for much longer as the Jamaican economy based on tobacco, sugar and cotton plantations allegedly thrived on such a structure. The white Europeans were still the ruling-class as masters, and the indigenous Jamaicans their slaves. Black women worked in the fields and in domestic service. Black women slaves were at the service of the white plantation owner not just economically, but sexually as well, as they were often raped and had mulatto children.

One of the reasons for Leonora's unstable psychological condition may also be the great trauma she suffered as a child, causing her to experience flashes of scenes. Frieda explains her father's death to Leonora as follows: "He was angry that day because I'd told him I wanted more money for your school fees and your extra dancing lessons. He said he was proud you wanted to be a dancer but he couldn't give me any more money. I tried to blackmail him and he said he would stop supporting us altogether. I knew he was bluffing, after all he didn't want everyone to know you was his black daughter. Next thing I knew he was down on his knees begging me to keep his secret" (2.5.108). So, when Frieda laughs at his words, he tries to strangle her. She is saved when Leonora walks into the room and somehow hands her a knife. Whether it

was really Frieda who killed the man remains ambiguous. For, Frieda, on the one hand, tries to convince Leonora that she was not strong enough as a child to force the knife in, but on the other hand blames Leonora: "I spent fifteen years in penitentiary for you" (2.5.108), implying that she took upon herself the punishment of the crime Leonora committed.

Furthermore, class is likewise a significant issue. Frieda's words reveal the stark contrast between the wealthy life of a coloniser/plantation owner and the life of the slave working on a sugar plantation: "All these years he been lying with his head on laced pillow-mine on straw. I manicured his finger nails. He wore three gold rings and drank wine from silver goblets. How they lived like kings and we like flies" (2.5.108).

Although European missionaries enforced Christianity, many Caribbean people continued to practise Obeah which was a part of their folk culture. Frieda, who holds on to traditional practices and values, is an Obeah woman who practises this Caribbean religion of African origin which "is associated with both benign and malignant magic" ("Obeah"). Obeah women were not only herbal healers, but also exorcised evil spirits from the body and the house as seen in *Leonora's Dance* while Frieda practises her art on Melisa and the house. Obeah "[r]itual acts serve to forcefully restore faith, calm, and health" (Du Toit 24). Thus, Frieda believes that she can heal Leonora: "It is a powerful gift I'm telling you. I haven't studied any books or science-but send me anyone with any ailment and mother Frieda will cure it. I am the servant of the spirit guided by water and light." (2.3.100). Frieda also wishes to pass the secrets of Obeah to her eldest daughter Leonora after the custom: "There is only one successor Leonora. You-eldest daughter-you don't know how lucky you are" (2.3.100). Frieda wants her daughter to go back with her to a respectful life on the island: "I built a big house on the plot of land your father left me in his will, we got goats, cows, pigs-plenty of plants [...] Back home you is their heroine" (2.5.107). But when Leonora turns down her offer and is later hospitalised, Frieda has no other choice but to leave with Daphne the precious secrets of Obeah: "It seems my journey to England was twofold. I thought I was coming to initiate my daughter. But, what I found was not as simple as I thought. England needs Mother Frieda" (2.6.110). Hence, in her simplistic way Frieda is suggesting that the socio-economic and political chaos in England can be overcome with magic.

Finally, it is once again ambiguous whether Zindika is being optimistic or pessimistic with regard to the future of diasporic subjectivities. Will harmony reign hereafter in Leonora's soul and in the house? And by the same token in England, among the English and the black diaspora there?

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Özet

Diasporada Yaşama Sorunsalı:

Zindika’nın *Leonora’s Dance* Adlı Oyununda Parçalanmış Kimlikler

Bu makalede siyah İngiliz kadın oyun yazarı Zindika’nın *Leonora’s Dance* (1992) adlı oyununda İngiltere’de yaşamakta olan Karayipli ve Çinli kadın karakterler üzerinden diasporada yaşamının maddi ve manevi güçlükleri ortaya konmaktadır. Bu güçlükler, oyunda yer alan parçalanmış kimlikler, ırkçılık, eğitimde ayrımcılık, sınıf çatışması, sanatta tektipleştirme olgusu, geleneklerin kısıtlayıcılıkları, ana-kız çatışması, kadının cinsel ve ekonomik olarak sömürülmesi ve ruhlardan medet ummak gibi pek çok izlek çerçevesinde incelenir. Zindika’nın bu oyununda kökeni sömürgeci olan İngiliz toplumu ve İngiltere’deki siyah diaspora ekseninde ırkçılığın, ayrımcılığın ve ötekileştirmenin insan ruhu üzerindeki olumsuz etkisi agorafobi ve kimlik parçalanması bağlamında ele alınır. Beyaz İngiliz’in zihniyeti değişmedikçe orada yaşayan siyah diasporanın sağlıklı ve mutlu bir yaşam umudu olmadığı tartışılmaktadır.

Anahtar sözcükler: Zindika, *Leonora’s Dance*, siyah İngiliz kadın oyun yazarları, diaspora, parçalanmış kimlik, göç, ırkçılık, sanatta ayrımcılık

**(Re)Mapping London:
Gender and Racial Relations in Andrea Levy's *Small Island***

Irene Pérez Fernández

Abstract: Andrea Levy's *Small Island* engages with the impact that the war, together with the immigration and settlement of members coming from the West Indies had on the spatial and social configuration of the city of London during the years following the Second World War. Unlike other literary works dealing with the same topic, Levy presents a wider view of the social problems affecting that period of time by acknowledging that the coming of immigrants to Britain was a two-way process that had an effect on both the newcomers and the white British population. Moreover, Levy gives voice to a part of the immigrants that had been frequently silenced in previous literary works: the female population. In this article I shall examine the way in which the characters, with special focus on the female ones, negotiate readjustments in the body-identity-space relation and find a space of their own in the newly emerging spatial and social order of the city of London. It is my contention to examine how space is depicted, drawing on the notion that space is a social construct that is in a continuous process of formation and modification to pinpoint the ways in which gender and racial relations have operated in Britain during the historical period of the post-war years. By so doing, I shall bring into light the role of women in the processes of re/constructing new senses of identity and new cartographies of the city of London after the Second World War.

Keywords: *Small Island*, migration, post-war London, spatial configurations, racial relations, gender relations, British identity.

“For many people the greatest challenge to Britishness since the late 1940s has been black immigration”

(Ward 113)

“I did not dare to dream that it would one day be I who would go to England. It would one day be I who would sail on a ship [the SS Empire Windrush] as big as a world and feel the sun's heat on my face gradually change from roasting to caressing. But there was I! Standing at the door of a house in London and ringing the bell. ... Could you see me there in London? Hortense Roberts married with a gold ring and a wedding dress in a trunk. Mrs Joseph. Mrs Gilbert Joseph. ... There was I in England ringing the doorbell of one of the tallest houses I had ever seen”.

(*Small Island* 11-12)

After the Second World War, Britain faced the onset of large-scale Black immigration in which the docking of the SS Empire Windrush at Tilbury on 22 June 1948 with almost five hundred people from the Caribbean is considered to be a

landmark event¹. Boundaries collapsed with the decline of the British Empire and the coming of immigrants to the Mother Country has to be understood, in this light, as a direct consequence of previous colonial rule. Relations between British citizens and newcomers since the Second World War had to be negotiated in the same temporal and spatial context, and this brought about, among many other things, the need to acknowledge the presence of the up until that point 'Other' on British territory and the right of this 'Other' to be a re/defining constituent of the concept of Britishness. Andrea Levy's fourth novel, *Small Island*, published in 2004, engages with these issues as it concentrates on the impact that the war, together with the immigration and settlement of members coming from the West Indies, as the second passage chosen to open this essay narrates, had on the spatial and social configuration of the city of London during the years following the Second World War.

There has been an undoubtedly strong tradition of literary works that attempted to account for the first experiences of migration and for the drudgeries immigrants had to face at the onset of multiethnic and multicultural Britain. George Lamming's novel *The Emigrants* (1954) and Sam Selvon's novel *The Lonely Londoners* (1956) are perhaps the most widely known instances of this trend. In the early novels of these male authors that were settled in Britain the topics of exile, migration and discrimination have a central role. As Chris Weedon argues: "The novels are set in a Britain disfigured by racism and ethnocentrism that had claimed to be the 'Mother of Empire' and had invited her former colonial subjects in the 1950s and 1960s to come and work" (18). These narratives focused on making the presence of other ethnicities visible at a representational level and on denouncing racial discrimination rather than questioning identity problems since "it was not their identity that was under threat ... rather it was their rights that were under threat" (Donnell 12). Levy's narrative resembles in some aspects these first literary works that concentrated on life in post-war London. Yet, I argue that Levy presents a wider view of the social problems affecting that period of time by acknowledging that the coming of immigrants to Britain was a two-way process that had an effect on both the newcomers and the white British population. In this respect, London is portrayed in Levy's novel as a "diaspora space" that is "inhabited" not only by those who have migrated and their descendants but equally by those who are constructed and represented as 'indigenous'" (Brah 181). Moreover, unlike in Selvon's novel *The Lonely Londoners*, Levy also gives voice to a part of the immigrants that had been frequently silenced in previous literary works: the female population. Levy concentrates her narrative on two men, Gilbert Roberts and Bernard Blight, and two women, Queenie Blight and Hortense Roberts, migrant and native, respectively, who assert their right to inhabit, appropriate and re-inscribe with new meanings the social spaces that constitute their cityscape in London.

¹ It should be born in mind, though, that the presence of Asians and blacks in Britain has a long history. There are records that evidence the existence of a black population in London in the twelfth century. There is documented evidence of the selling of African men and women as slaves in London during the eighteenth century, as well as the presence of some black mendicants in the streets of London. Some of the most famous mendicants in this respect are Billy Waters or Joseph Johnson. Apart from beggars and slaves, there were also successful figures such as the former librarian and later publisher William Sancho, the writer Olaudah Equiano or the performer Pablo Fanque, to name but a few (Sandhu 12). For further reading on the topic see also Peter Fryer's *Staying Power: The History of Black People in Britain* (1984).

In this essay I shall examine the way in which these characters, with special focus on the female ones, negotiate readjustments in the body-identity-space relation and find a space of their own in the newly emerging spatial and social order of the city of London. It is my contention to examine how space is depicted, drawing on the notion that space is a social construct that is in a continuous process of formation and modification (Lefebvre; Valentine; Massey; McDowell) and to pinpoint the ways in which gender and racial relations have operated in Britain during the historical period of the post-war years for Levy's narrative, undoubtedly, brings into light the role of women in the processes of re/constructing new senses of identity and new cartographies of the city of London after the Second World War.

Re/writing History: Voicing the Margins

One of the topics that seems to be recurrent and also shared by second-generation writers is "the imperative to remember and voice a marginalized history" (Weedon 8) as a way of challenging epistemic violence. Levy, like other contemporary Black British women writers such as Bernardine Evaristo, "[is] writing British literature even as they tell the story of the black[s] who are British" (Dawes 20); a history that Levy attempts to inscribe through her writing as she herself expressed in some interviews (Allardice; Greer)². *Small Island* forms part of the latest best-sellers in British contemporary writing; it obtained critical recognition by winning two of the United Kingdom's most prestigious literary awards: the Orange Prize for Fiction in June 2004 and the Whitbread Award in January 2005 (since 2006 called the Costa Book Awards) in both the categories of "novel award" and "book of the year" and being the first author "to carry off the double in the same 12 months" (Ezard and Ward n.p.). Together with these two important literary prizes, *Small Island* also received The Commonwealth Writers' Prize in 2005.³ The interest that Levy's novel arises is such that *Small Island* was the text chosen to be read on 25 March 2007 to commemorate the bicentenary of the abolition of slavery in the British Empire and a TV adaptation of the novel in two episodes was broadcasted by BBC One on the 6 and 13 December 2009.

Before *Small Island* Levy wrote *Every Light in the House Burning* (1994), *Never Far from Nowhere* (1996) and *Fruit of the Lemon* (1999) novels in which she had already explored the significance of having a hybrid-Black-British-identity in the United Kingdom. As a writer Levy positions herself in this hybrid location and her dual cultural heritage becomes the mediating lens by which she understands and negotiates her writing. A position that is further enriched by her being a women writer:

I call myself a black woman writer because "black" and "woman" are the two lenses through which I explore myself and the rest of my fellow human beings. But sometimes if you use that term, other, often younger, black writers consider it to be a kind of ghettoisation. For me, it is just the opposite—it gives me a pathway into the great stream of human history... Black women and our lives is the story that I mime over and over again, in different media

² Levy's latest novel, *The Long Song* (2010), revisits history again, this time the history of slavery through the narrative voice of July, a woman born in a Jamaican sugar plantation.

³ This prize is organised and founded by the Commonwealth Foundation and its aim is to encourage new Commonwealth fiction and ensure that works of merit reach a wider audience outside their country of origin. It covers the Commonwealth regions of Europe, Africa, South and South East Asia, the Caribbean, Canada and the South Pacific.

and in different ways. To me, every good writer is really only telling one story. (Greer n.p.)

In this process Levy takes as the starting point her own experience of being the daughter of first-generation immigrants who came to England in the SS Empire Windrush in 1948 and acknowledges that the act of writing is both political and personal; a way of paying homage to those who, like her parents had been made invisible in British society: "My dad dying was the impetus. He died in 1987, and I think I just wanted to make him visible, record something of his life, and also the experience that we'd gone through with it" (Fischer 362). Levy's purpose is to re/inscribe the history of Black-British people, thus inscribing the experiences of those whose present-day hybrid identity was the direct result of British imperialism.

Autobiographical details pertain each one of Levy's novels, yet in *Small Island* they are even more explicit since the characters of Hortense and Gilbert Joseph are inspired by her parents: "My dad was on that ship [The SS Empire Windrush], one of the 'pioneers'. That's what first inspired me to write *Small Island*. I wanted to explore my parents' experiences when they first came to this country from Jamaica, and what it meant to the people they came to live amongst" ("a Q & A with Andrea Levy" n.p.) (emphasis mine).⁴ In this sense, the novel sets itself apart from her previous narratives and from the work of other young black writers who were publishing in the 1990s, such as Courtia Newland, Diran Adebayo or Alex Wheatle, whose novels, according to John Clement Ball, "neglect to examine the contexts - historical, geographical, political, psychological - behind the racial and cultural themes they raise" (226). *Small Island* is, thus, not only the most autobiographical, but also the most political of all Levy's novels as it goes back in time to explore critically a crucial moment in the history of present-day ethnically diverse Britain.

Re-defining Gender and Racial Spaces in a "New" Island

In the years of the Second World War a new British society emerged that called for a new sense of identity. During the Second World War regional, class, gender and, in many cases, racial divisions were suspended due to the need to collaborate as a nation in the war effort. A need which, in turn, contributed to create a myth of Britain as a homogenous national community. As Paul Ward argues, these years are characterised by an ambivalent attitude for the war "encouraged migration at the same time as it created a new sense of a socially cohesive British identity" (124). Over the first two decades of the twentieth century western societies experienced a rapid transformation in relation to the economic and social infrastructure that has to be analysed in connection to political and economic post-war changes (Solomos 8). In the case of the United Kingdom, society had been broken by the war and was beginning to face massive social changes. The previous organisation of society and its division in terms of class and gender were subverted during the war by the need to mobilise the whole population to work in the war effort. The traditional dual division of space into spheres of production

⁴ It should, though, be also born in mind that the same autobiographical data is to be found in Levy's first novel, *Every Light in the House Burning* (1994) when the following is explained in reference to the parents of the family, Mr and Mrs Jacob: "My dad was from Jamaica-born and bred. He came to this country in 1948 on the *Empire Windrush* ship. My mum joined him six months later in his one room in Earl's Court" (Levy, *Every Light* 3) (emphasis original), features that are shared with Hortense and Gilbert and, by extension, with Levy's parents.

(public) and reproduction⁵ (private) and its association with men and women respectively was confronted by the fact that women had to take over the job vacancies left behind by men who enrolled as soldiers in order to keep the economy going. The war affected the racial organisation of society as well with the coming of immigrants from the colonies as workers or to incorporate themselves as soldiers in the British army, thus their presence in Britain becoming part of everyday life.

Therefore, the years immediately after the war saw the emergence of a multiethnic British society where the previously blurred racial and gender differences were marked again, though it soon became clear that the former colonial social order would not operate in the (M)otherland. Non-surprisingly, race began to be established as a field of analysis in sociological studies in the late 1940s and early 1950s. These early studies such as Ruth Benedict's *Race and Racism* (1943) or John Rex's *Race Relations in Sociological Theory* (1970) concentrated on the patterns of immigration and the relation between Black immigrants and the British white population whilst drawing on prevailing colonial stereotypes to elucidate the new social situation. Levy focuses her novel on two important historical events related to the colonial history of Britain that mark a difference in the general approach that is to be found within a single generation in society towards colonialism and its consequences. There is a movement from a colonial Britain in which the boundaries between the 'I' and the 'Other' were clearly demarcated to a society that has to negotiate the coexistence of different British identities within its national boundaries. One of the ways in which the characters in the novel are forced to re-adjust themselves to the new situation is the emergence of a racial consciousness within Britain: the 'Other' has to be now part of the national imagery. Though discourses of estrangement were soon enforced: "When black and Asian migration began in greater numbers in the 1940s, 1950s and 1960s, many of the British had already constructed a sense of their identity against which the 'other' could be compared" (Ward 124).

This social reality affects both the immigrant and the native population. On the former dawns the shocking fact that they are excluded from the notion of British identity and the latter faces the encounter with ex-colonial subjects in their own national physical and imaginary space. Since the 1970s it has been theorised that space cannot be conceived as a fixed and stable category but has to be seen as a social construct (Lefebvre; Foucault; Soja; Harvey); as the product of power relations that are codified in and through space and, therefore, radiate from its representations: "We should have to study not only the history of space, but also the history of representations, along with that of their relationships-with each other, with practice, and with ideology" (Lefebvre 42). To draw this distinction in the way social space and its representation develops and changes throughout history in British society, Levy opens her novel with a depiction of colonial socio-spatial relations (in the year 1924) and their counterpart in an emerging decolonisation stage (the year 1948). Levy starts the novel with an epilogue which describes the encounter of the "native" white female protagonist, Queenie, with the "- 'Other'", Black people, in a well-defined, controlled and bounded space, i.e.: the Empire Exhibition. The Exhibition held at Wembley in London in 1924 and 1925 reproduced the entire Empire in a small place: "The Empire in little. The palace of

⁵ This distinction is sensitive to class differences, being more evident in middle- and upper-class households, and overlapping in the lower classes where the need to earn a living forced women to work outside the house as well.

engineering, the palace of industry, and building after building that housed every country we British owned... Practically the whole world to be looked at" (3).

The Empire Exhibition can be analysed as an exercise in mapping space; the Exhibition becomes a map of the colonies for the British population to consume; a constructed representation of a space that conceals the exercise of an implicit power: "the map does not simply itemise the world: it fixes it within a discursive and visual practice of power and meaning, and, because it naturalises power and meaning against an impassive and neutral space, it serves to legitimate not simply the exercise of that power but also the meaningfulness of that meaning" (Pile & Thrift 48). The colonised territories of the British Empire are displayed as "objects" for the British population to look at and the different populations that are members of the Empire are viewed with ambivalence: Queenie's reaction at the Exhibition as one of both admiration and fear perpetuates and sustains the duality "I/Other" that is central to the construction of the colonised identity as a mirror image of what is alien to the coloniser, as Edward Said already pointed out in his seminal *Orientalism* (1978). Therefore, Queenie's description of the first Black man she encounters draws upon the negative construction of the Black body:

A monkey man sweating a smell of mothballs. Blacker than when you smudge your face with a sooty cork. The droplets of sweat on his forehead glistened and shone like jewels. His lips were brown, not pink like they should be, and they bulged with air like bicycle tyres. His hair was woolly as a black shorn sheep. His nose, squashed flat, had two nostrils big as train tunnels. And he was looking down at me. (6)

Such a description is loaded with childish negative comparisons that dehumanise and reify the Black man's body by equating him with that of animals—a monkey and black sheep—and dull inanimate objects—a sooty cork, bicycle tyres, and a train tunnel. The description of the Wembley Exhibition is, thus, narrated using situational irony since it is told from the perspective of a child who is therefore allowed to be naïve and ignorant of other cultures and other countries that were part of the Empire: "I thought I'd been to Africa. Told all my class I had ... It was then that Early Bird informed me that Africa was a country. 'You're not usually a silly girl, Queenie Buxton', she went on, 'but you did not go to Africa, you merely went to the British Empire Exhibition'" (1).

This apparently "humorous" beginning conceals deeper connotations if the implications of the history of colonisation-domination, power, the existence of racial hierarchies in society and the notion of "us" versus "others" are taken into consideration. Queenie's account reminds the reader of the idea of the "savage native" who is unable to speak, does not wear clothes and is portrayed as evil. The beginning of the novel is indicative of the ignorance about other peoples and cultures on a great part of the British population, an issue that is further emphasised in the narrative with the reaction that Queenie's mother has towards the Hindi women who "had red dots in the middle of their forehead. No one could tell me what the dots were for. 'Go and ask one of them', Emily said to me. But Mother said I shouldn't in case the dots meant they were ill—in case they were contagious'" (4-5).

The chapter following this epilogue shows, however, a drastic change in social space since the focus is displaced now from a white self (Queenie) that contemplates a Black Other in a bound-up space to a Black woman (Hortense) who encounters the Mother Country and whose objects of her gaze are the white population she beholds as she gets off the SS Empire Windrush that has brought her from Jamaica; thus a reversal

of the scenario depicted before. Interaction between the British and Black population is not longer spatially framed in a specific environment yet, I argue, is still imperially mediated by the socio-political needs of the time-that demanded labour to reconstruct a country devastated by the war. Levy clearly states this fact when she mentions that “the cost of the passage on this retired troop-ship was only twenty-eight pounds and ten shillings” (99). By making an explicit reference to the exact price people from the Caribbean had to pay in order to leave behind their ‘small island’ and travel to the apparently large land of the Mother Country and by pointing out that the means of transport was a “retired troop-ship”, Levy implicitly shows how immigration to Britain was relatively easy, if not stately sanctioned, in the years immediately following the end of the Second World War.

Such a narrative focal swift is poignant. The novel deals with a turning point in the development of British social identity in which both white and Black British citizens had to find their place in a new social environment; a fact that is further emphasised through the novel’s structure. The plot of the novel is not linear since the events narrated fluctuate between flashbacks and flash-forwards of War and post-War years and there is a duality of couples that suggests that immigration is a two-way process which affects the lives of those who emigrate as much as the lives of the native population. In this respect, the novel offers a plural view of immigration by dealing with the point of view of both couples: “Gilbert and Hortense must come to terms with their place in London that is a long way from their expectations; and Queenie and Bernard, too, must make painful adjustments to the new society that is being created” (Page, n.p.). Moreover, *Small Island* is segmented using characters’ names and dates emphasising the fact that space is not fixed or dead but is performative and interactive. Individuals create a sense of space according to the set of relations they are able to conform to and this is stressed by the fact that the novel uses the characters’ daily lives as a way of accounting for experiences of the war and post-war historical events taking place in London. The narratives of all the characters need to be put together by the reader as a sort of jigsaw in order to create a vision of the situation as a whole. This use of the gamut of individual perspectives and feelings in order to narrate the story can be related to the view of space, in this case the social space of the city of London, as “the sphere in which distinct trajectories coexist; as the sphere therefore of coexisting heterogeneity... as a simultaneity of stories-so-far” (Massey, 9). In this way, Levy is able to depict the tension and social conflicts that occur at that particular historical moment and by means of this complex, non-linear structure the sense of disruption and change and the multiplicity of events and stories remapping the city of London is also transferred to the narrative structure.

Re-defining space: Hortense Roberts and Queenie Blight

The rest of this essay explores some of the ways in which the female characters in *Small Island* negotiate their identity in relation to the spaces where they are located and/or dislocated in this new cityscape of London and how they appropriate and (re)inscribe those spaces with alternative meanings. The novel establishes a clear dualism between the two female characters, Queenie and Hortense. However, when analysed in detail the lives of both women prove to have had no great differences. They are both taken from a rural environment where their lives have little or no prospect of betterment at all-a pig farm in the case of Queenie and a poor and uneducated Black mother in the case of Hortense-to be brought up or educated at the expense of relations

in environments that might provide them with different future possibilities. Yet, those options are reduced in the novel to marriage. It is not surprising then that both women use it as a business deal and a means of escape (100). Queenie has high self-esteem and great expectations for her life: "I should have been a lady. But I was stuck on a stinking farm" (246). She moves to live with her aunt in London where her manners are refined through education as a way of finding her a suitable husband. She meets Bernard and even though she does not love him, she dates him initially as a way of going up in the social scale for she believes Bernard is a gentleman: "'No, that one's a gentleman. No spivs or ne'er-do-wells ever read *The Times*'" (251) and marries him to avoid going back to the farm after her aunt passes away. Hortense, on her part, is an illegitimate child born to an illiterate woman in a space of misery and poverty, yet her "light" colour determines her possibilities by allowing her to be educated in a more prosperous environment by her father's well-off side of the family.

Small Island presents Jamaica as a place where, unlike Britain and due to the colonial administration, class and racial differences are inscribed in space and entail an asymmetrical relation to it and to socio-spatial mobility: "complexion was as light as [her father's]; the colour of warm honey. It was not the bitter chocolate hue of Alberta and her mother. *With such a countenance there was a chance of a golden life for [her]*" (38). Hortense's golden future is soon proved to be feeble and unstable and as she leaves the security of home in a little village to immerse into the open space of a big city such as Kingston she is *déclassée* because of her illegitimate social origin when applying for a job at the Church of England school in Kingston (86). Levy narrates a similar incident occurring to Hortense, this time in London, when attending an interview for a job position she finds that her qualifications are invalid in the "Motherland". As she leaves the place, Hortense walks into a cleaning cupboard (455), a symbolic space that denotes the working possibilities of Black people in London at the time. This humiliating incident marks a turning point in Hortense's perception of social circumstances in London. Hortense's previous blindness towards the social meanings attached to her black body disappears as she acknowledges that England is not the promised land Gilbert described her to be: "'He told me opportunity ripened in England as abundant as fruit on Jamaican trees'" (98). Yet, Hortense is deflated when she finds herself in England and witnesses the conditions in which she has to live: a city that has to recover from the effects of the war.

The city of London becomes for Queenie, paradoxically with War, a fluid and liberating space. In fact, the war, with its disruption of the social order, brought about changes in the life of women that were positive as the war created opportunities for them to work outside the domestic realm. Queenie welcomes the war at the beginning as an event that dismantles her predictable and boring life: "That raid was the most exciting thing that had ever happened in this house. Tingling with life, that was how I felt. I took two steps and leapt up on to the bed. There was no doubt about it, I was looking forward to this war" (266). To collaborate in the war effort and despite Bernard's disapproval, Queenie starts working in a rest centre where she spends most of her time (277) and involves herself in this job as she has never involved herself in anything before: "Twelve-hour shifts, fourteen sometimes, I had to do at Campden School rest centre. And when I got home Bernard would complain that there was nothing on the table except dust" (279). The war leaves Queenie in charge of the family household while Bernard fights overseas and at the end of the war, when Bernard does not return, and with the death of her father-in-law, Queenie finds herself further

liberated. When the war finishes, Queenie feels free to subvert social conventions and make decisions that defy the social order. Queenie takes lodgers into her house as an act of both rebellion and empowerment. It is true that taking lodgers provides Queenie with a means of survival and that she acknowledges that Bernard will disapprove of her actions:

I was still young and I had a life to get on with. But I wasn't ready for that. So when Gilbert turned up at my door I thought, I've got the room and I need the money. I took him in because I knew Bernard would never have let me. And if Bernard had something to say about it he'd have to come back to say it to my face. (116)

Yet, Queenie also gains control over her own life and, though this might not be the initial intention behind the act, asserts her right to participate actively in the process of social re-definition. In fact, Levy depicts in her novel the evolution of Queenie's character from being fairly naïve to becoming a very emotionally strong person. In my opinion, Levy uses this portrayal of emotionally strong female characters -in the case of Hortense, as well- in order to account for one of the main tasks that were assigned to women after the war: to rebuild the family household and, by extension, society.

The post-war period was characterised by a moving back towards the importance of the family and domesticity. Women were addressed as the basic pillars of family life: "Mending lives and homes broken by war was a major task assigned to women. ... they were given healing tasks, restoring the lives of husbands and children. ... they were given the main responsibility for coping with the psychological and emotional aftermath" (Webster 7).

Levy focuses on this central role given to women after the war, yet *Small Island* portrays a subversion of this role by presenting a household commanded by Queenie, a woman who is deconstructing the traditional British family household by focusing her social role of "mending lives" on providing lodging to Caribbean immigrants, thus, promoting racial interaction in a neighbourhood scandalised by her actions: "Darkies! I'd taken in darkies next door to him. ... His concern, [Mr Todd] said, was that they would turn the area into a jungle" (113).

The character of Mr Todd, Queenie's neighbour, is particularly noticeable in this respect. Mr Todd exemplifies the mainstream attitude that the indigenous population had towards the settlement of Caribbean immigrants in Britain after the war; they were seen as a menace towards the British country and identity. In fact, racist views towards immigration are well described in the novel as a post-war rather than a war phenomenon⁶. Mr Todd blames government policy towards immigration and sees Black immigrants as a menace that is "swamping" the country (436), an idea that became an important part of the public debate on immigration in Britain. Daily life in London in the post Second World War years shows how the polycultural character of the city is characterised by the fact that Caribbean people are within but not part of the city of London. Their rights of citizenship and tenure are continuously put into question (McLeod 2) and negative stereotypes permeate social discourse and construct Black people as primitive and dirty: "a question that was posed to many black people in this

⁶ It is important to bear in mind that even if Gilbert faces discrimination during his period as a member of the Royal Air Force, the racist attitudes come mainly from the American soldiers who see the cohabitation of Black and white British soldiers as a threat to the American segregationist system.

period was whether they had lived in trees in Africa, and whether they had tails, a question addressed to migrants from the Caribbean as well as Africa" (Webster 103). Levy shows many instances of this outlook throughout the novel (2, 138, 165), an attitude enhanced, as well, by the great deal of ignorance on an important part of the native population.

In my opinion, the fact that social attitudes towards newcomers are shifting and in the process of being negotiated underline Hortense and Queenie's behaviour and their positioning in space. The first encounter between Hortense and Queenie in the house could be described as a sort of battle for the right of ownership of space. At her arrival in England, Hortense is resolved to make the little room they are renting in Queenie's house a space of her own: "I determined then to make this place somewhere I could live ... For England was my destiny. I started with that sink. Cracked as a map and yellowing I scrubbed it with soap until my hand had to brush perspiration from my forehead" (226). Yet, Queenie enters the room at the same moment that Hortense is appropriating its space: "'Oh, you're tidying up a bit. Men, eh—they've got no idea'. She perused the place as if this was her home. Pushing her nose into corners, she walked the room as if inspecting some task she had asked of me" (227). Both women feel that the room is part of their belongings and Hortense is deeply concerned about Queenie's violation of her space: "And then she sat down on a chair and invited me to come and sit with her. But this was my home, it was for me to tell her when to sit, when to come in, when to warm her hands" (229).

Hortense is delimiting her social space and is asserting her rights of control over it. Queenie on her part acquires a fairly paternalistic and condescending attitude towards Hortense since she treats her almost as a child who needs to be shown where to shop, how to cook and where to go. Hortense continuously reasserts her space and her identity and she considers herself to be in a superior position to that of Queenie since she is a teacher. In contrast, Queenie believes that her "racial superiority" empowers her relative to Hortense: "Now, why should this woman worry to be seen in the street with me? After all, I was a teacher and she was only a woman whose living was obtained from letting rooms. If anyone should be shy it should be I" (231). Two value regimes clash in the encounter of the two women. One is that of professional status and the other one is racial status. Hortense is unfamiliar with racism since in her life, class status has mostly been at issue. Therefore, she does not recognise the race agenda that is behind Queenie's paternalistic discourse. It is not only until later on in the novel, after experiencing instances of racial discrimination, that she becomes aware of her racial status within British society. A significant episode in this respect takes place when she tries to apply for a position as a teacher, as I have previously commented on.

Levy presents in her narrative, a shifting social space. London is portrayed as the centre of the old imperial metropolis and the stronghold for white national British identity, a local space, in, for example, Mr Todd's imaginary. Nonetheless, at the same time London is "a much more complex and conflicted location than that implied by the totalizing and abstract concept of the undifferentiated colonial 'centre'" (McLeod 6). London is being transformed into a transnational location where there cohabitate people with wider interracial and spatial conceptions. Queenie and Hortense or Gilbert appropriate the space of the city to inscribe their own individual experiences of interrelation and spatial negotiation and, in that, they establish, in Gilroy's terms, everyday instances of "spontaneous conviviality" (xi) that question official discourses on

national identity and racial policies and becomes a literary representation that should make readers re/think official views on multiculturalism and cultural relations.

Levy's narrative highlights some examples of this "spontaneous conviviality". One of the most important ones for the positive consequences that it has on Gilbert is the passage in the novel when he receives a gesture of tenderness and love from a woman at night in the street at a moment when he is totally devastated after having faced social rejection at work and having had a quarrel with Hortense. The tenderness of the white woman gives him strength to go on and makes him believe that there is still hope in British society:

How long did I stare at that sweet in my hand? Fool that I am, I took a handkerchief from my pocket to wrap it. I had no intention of eating that precious candy. For it was a salvation to me—not for the sugar but for the act of kindness. The human tenderness with which it was given to me. I had become hungry for the good in people. Beholden to any tender heart. All we boys were in this thankless place. When we find it, we keep it. A simple gesture, a friendly word, a touch, a sticky sweet rescued me as sure as if that Englishwoman had pulled me from drowning in the sea. (328)

The fact that this white woman approaches Gilbert directly in the street is not only an act of tenderness but an act of rebellion. The view of a white woman establishing any type of relationship with a Black man was constructed by the racial social discourse of the time as an abomination. Social racial discourse operated at the level of sexuality fuelled by the fear of miscegenation; the fear that intercourse between a Black man and a white woman would result in kids who would inherit the worst of both races (Webster). The fear of miscegenation went hand in hand with the construction of Black masculinity as an element to control.

Queenie defies social norms not only by allowing Caribbean men to lodge in the house, but also by falling in love with one of them, Michael Roberts. Levy addresses both the issues of Black sexuality and miscegenation in her novel. The novel depicts two instances of sexual intercourse between a Black man and a white woman. The first takes place in Jamaica between Michael Roberts and Mrs Ryder (56-57) and the second one occurs in London between Michael Roberts and Queenie (301). In both cases white men's masculinity is placed in a position of inferiority compared to Michael's Black one. In the first case, after narrating the sexual intercourse between Michael and Mrs Ryder—that is symbolically represented as particularly passionate and wild since it takes place during a thunder storm—Mrs Ryder's husband is found dead in a fairly dehumanised way: "He was naked, his clothes torn apart from him by the storm ... And around him his butchered insides leaked like a posy of crimson flowers into a daylight they should never have seen" (56). In the second, Bernard Bligh's sexuality and manliness is put into question by the fact that he and Queenie are unable to conceive a child. Moreover, their marital relations lack desire and pleasure and are described as a chore. They are a bore for Queenie who is unable to enjoy sexual pleasure in her marital relations and the description of them contrasts with that of her sexual intercourse with Michael. The descriptions of the former portray a clearly inexperienced and clumsy man who "would sigh as if lowering himself into a hot bath, his hand creeping up my nightie to lie awkward on my left breast. ... [T]hen a grunt that slathered spittle all down my neck, and it was all over" (260). By contrast with this, the sexual relations with Michael were really satisfactory for Queenie and the outcome of them was pregnancy: "I knew I was pregnant. If that miserable doctor

I'd seen before the war was right, then I had to be. They might not strictly have been conjugal relations but, by God, I blinking enjoyed them" (495).

Queenie's pregnancy brings about the issue of miscegenation and the social problems associated with racial discrimination towards mixed couples and Black babies at that time. There was a social discourse that ostracised white mothers with Black children. This prompted some of them to get rid of their babies by means of abortion, as Queenie attempts to do in the novel (496) or by giving them away in adoption. This task was not an easy one because there were few people in society willing to adopt a Black baby⁷. Webster argues that:

[a]s the recommendations of the Curtis Committee embodied in the 1948 Children Act were developed and reinforced in subsequent legislation, through to the 1963 Children and Young Persons Act, the view that attempts should be made to find foster adoptive parents for those in institutions was increasingly emphasised, but this approach did not extend to black children. (123)

Up to this moment in the narrative, *Small Island* accounts for a struggle over power and status between the two women that, in my opinion, is finally resolved at the end of the novel when Hortense agrees to take care of Queenie's baby. At this moment racial discourse marks the social and spatial differences between the two women in relation to their possibilities of motherhood. Queenie is socially pressured into not keeping a Black baby and therefore, the racial difference that the two women were overlooking or attempting to deny—consciously in the case of Queenie with her sympathy towards people and out of ignorance in the case of Hortense—is the one that allows the handing over of the baby.

Conclusion

Small Island deals with an important historical period in Britain. The old social values prove to be inadequate to accommodate for the changes that society is facing. The previous fixed and homogenous 'British' identity is put into question by the presence of "'new ethnicities' [that] would lead to a newly inflected sense of 'Britishness', one which was both more complex and more ambivalent" (Welsh 44). The post-war period is one of chaos and disruption but it also gives the opportunity to previously relegated social groups to break through and assert a space of their own. In this chaotic space both the native and the immigrant population have to negotiate new senses of identity and belonging. Old social configurations of space are suffocating for the characters who, after having experienced the consequences of migration and/or war have been greatly changed and are not able to go back to the state in which their lives were before the war. The novel portrays radically displaced characters inhabiting a disrupted social space who are forced to redefine their relation with the spaces they moved in; spaces that are presented in the novel as in a process of adjustment.

⁷ The tendency to give up for adoption children of mixed race continued during the 1960s. An example of a literary account of the situation for the adoption of black babies can be seen in Jackie Kay's autobiographical work of poetry *The Adoption Papers* (1991). In this collection Kay writes about the experience of being adopted and brought up by white parents. Jackie Kay was born to a white Scottish mother and black Nigerian father in 1961 and was given in adoption to a white couple in Scotland.

Moreover, *Small Island* depicts strong female characters who subvert traditional gender conceptions and actively search for alternative spaces. These spaces emerge as a result of interconnections and offer new possibilities of signification and interaction in a new cityscape where traditional stable cultural conceptions of gender, racial and national identity begin to be destabilised.

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Özet

Londra’yı (Yeniden) Haritalandırma: Andrea Levy’nin *Small Island* Adlı Eserinde Cinsiyet ve Irk İlişkileri

Andrea Levy’nin *Small Island* adlı eseri İkinci Dünya Savaşı’ndan sonraki yıllar boyunca Antiller’den gelen göç edenlerin Londra şehrindeki uzamsal ve sosyal yapılandırılması üzerinde yarattığı etki ile birlikte savaşın yarattığı tesir ilişkisini kurmaktadır. Aynı konuyu ele alan diğer edebi çalışmalardan farklı olarak, Levy Britanya’ya göçmenlerin gelişini hem yeni gelenler hem de beyaz Britanya nüfusu üzerinde etkisi olan iki yönlü bir süreç olduğunu vurgulayarak o dönemi etkileyen sosyal sorunlara geniş bir bakış açısı sağlamaktadır. Ayrıca Levy bir önceki edebi çalışmalarda sıklıkla susturulan göçmenlerin bir kısmını teşkil eden kadın nüfusunu dile getirmektedir. Bu makalede özellikle de kadın olanlara odaklanarak karakterlerin; vücut-kimlik-mekân ilişkilerinde yeni şartlara alışmalarını aşma biçimleri ile onların Londra şehrinde yeni ortaya çıkan uzamsal ve sosyal düzende kendi mekânlarını bulma biçimlerini inceleyeceğim. Bu makalede öne sürülen mekânın, savaş sonrası yılların tarihsel dönemi boyunca Britanya’da yer alan cinsiyet ilişkileri ve ırksal ilişkilerin biçimlerini saptamak için daimi bir biçimlenme ve değişme sürecinde olan bir inşa olması olgusu yaratmasıdır. Bu bağlamda İkinci Dünya Savaşı sonrasındaki Londra şehrinin yeni kimlik algıları ve yeni haritalarını tekrar/inşa etme süreçlerindeki kadının rolüne ışık tutacağım.

Anahtar Sözcükler: *Small Island*, göç, savaş sonrası Londra, uzamsal yapılandırmalar, ırksal ilişkiler, cinsiyet ilişkileri, Britanyalı kimliği.

**Where is Home? Where are Roots?:
The Politics of Multiculturalism in *Anita and Me* and *White Teeth***

Burcu Kayışçı

Abstract: This paper examines the two works by Meera Syal and Zadie Smith in order to demonstrate how these authors problematize “Englishness” and the idea of any other stable national identity embodied in origins and a fixed homeland where one can always return. Their novels, *Anita and Me* and *White Teeth* respectively, aim to break the closure of limiting conceptions and stereotypical representations by favoring flux over fixity and multiplicity over unitary interpretations of identity. Thus, the idiosyncratic visions of the authors concerning home and roots which they create within the context of migration reconstruct British identity and transform rigid boundaries into more permeable and encompassing points of reference. The two novels contribute to a formulation of a more productive discourse that goes beyond both the total denunciation of the host culture and the mere imitation of it by bringing diversity and movement to the foreground.

Keywords: multiculturalism, migration, hybridity, home-making, diversity, ethnicity

Maps are for demarcating, delineating and pinpointing places. They represent the limits and the boundaries between inside and outside. Furthermore, they pertain not only to a specific piece of land, but also to a specific people who adopt a common identity under the safe haven of a nation despite the fact that some of these people are *originally* from other places and their roots seem to lie elsewhere. Does this imply that one should always feel at home where she lives? How is “home” to be pinpointed in the first place within the continuous movement of people? How does the notion of belonging and identity find its expression within the framework of migration? There are various responses to these questions in literature, especially in the particular subgenre that treats migration and diaspora as its subject matter. The scope of this paper is limited to the fictional maps of contemporary Britain and the authors whose works are to be examined are two women writers with multicultural backgrounds. These writers, namely Meera Syal and Zadie Smith, problematize “Englishness” and the idea of any other stable national identity embodied in origins and a fixed homeland where one can always return. Their novels, *Anita and Me* and *White Teeth* respectively, aim to break the closure of limiting conceptions and stereotypical representations by favoring flux over fixity and multiplicity over unilateral interpretations of identity. Thus, their idiosyncratic visions concerning home and roots, which they especially reflect unto the second-generation children of migrant families in their novels, contribute to a new formulation of British identity and transform rigid boundaries into more permeable and encompassing points of reference.

Meera Syal’s semi-autobiographical first novel *Anita and Me* revolves around a girl of Punjabi descent who has grown up in Tollington, a fictional village in the Midlands, after her parents’ migration to the United Kingdom in the Seventies. The book represents and problematizes the issues of belonging and displacement by taking

the notion of *home* as its focal point. The main character and narrator is Meena Kumar who is nine years old when the novel opens. This is an apt choice made by Syal in the sense that the process of her growth can be conveniently paralleled not only with the change in her perception of herself and the others, but also with the changing dynamics of the society during the time the novel is set. As Meena grows older, she learns more about her own family and starts to pay attention to the seemingly innocent details concerning the approaches of the people in her community towards herself and her family. Consequently, she loses the firm ground beneath her feet only to gain better places to stand and move on. It is necessary to trace the trajectory of this shift in order to view Syal's portrayal of the English identity which is based on the idea that it is no longer possible to talk about a fixed *home* where one can return, since the repercussions of the colonial past and new disguises of colonialism oblige the individuals to move in when there is demand and move out when the system is threatened. Yet, Syal also demonstrates that it is equally possible to subvert this mechanism and come to terms with the absence of fixity by converting it into a presence through a different, more inclusive mindset. At this point, what is more valuable and consoling can be regarded as the process of home-making compared to the fruitless and often hurtful search for a fixed locale.

Since *home* composes the most significant axis of both Syal's and Smith's novels, the connotations of the word and the relevance of them to the specific context of migration should be investigated first. It is too vast a concept to be pinpointed by a single definition and its nominal value varies according to the sociopolitical conjuncture of race, class and gender as in the case of the phrase "home-country". Still, it can be claimed that the immediate connotations would be shelter, security and a sense of belonging. However, as pointed out by critics such as Rosemary George and Avtar Brah, even this basic definition is complicated. The first complication, as stated above, is the idea that home is almost always fixed and stable; in other words, a rooted place to which a migrant may return. Brah is critical of this stance and distinguishes between "a homing desire" and "the desire for a homeland" on the grounds that "not all diasporas sustain an ideology of 'return'" (16). The ideology of return necessitates the existence of origins. Yet, when the utopian and the mythic associations of home are taken into consideration, the concept can easily be reformulated not as an actual place, but as a site of desire. "In this sense it is a place of no return, even if it is possible to visit the geographical territory that is seen as the place of 'origin'" (Brah 192). In a similar line of thinking, George suggests that home can also be delineated as "the imagined location that can be more readily fixed in a mental landscape than in actual geography" (11). As for the second complication concerning the conceptual scope of home, the strong sense of difference established by the inclusion/exclusion paradigm manifests itself since the term inherently implies a division between the ones who belong and the others who do not. Home demarcates the two parties and thus "the basic organizing principle around which the notion of 'home' is built is a pattern of select inclusions and exclusions" (George 2). This pattern is utilized and consolidated by discriminatory politics and the sense of belonging through which a coherent image of the self is constructed can easily be dismantled due to the tension between home and "the unhomely" in Homi Bhabha's terms (1997, 445). It is at this point that resistance to stereotypes, categorizations and limitations is developed by re-conceptualizing the former positions, re-evaluating one's own stance and most significantly by "inscribing a homing desire while simultaneously critiquing discourses of fixed origins" (Brah 193).

Going back to *Anita and Me*, the novel opens with the migration of Meena's family from India to Britain, as Meena narrates how they live together with an immigrant Polish family in a shabby boarding house room during early years of struggle and disillusion. In this way, she points the reader toward the rest of the novel. This would probably be a novel about the typical hardships of immigration represented via typical characters. However, a few lines later, she says:

Of course, this is the alternative history I trot out in job interview situations or, once or twice, to impress middle-class white boys who come sniffing round, excited by the thought of wearing a colonial maiden as a trinket on their arm [...] I'm not really a liar, I just learned very early on that those of us deprived of history sometimes need to turn to mythology to feel complete, to belong. (9-10)

The lines above are significant in the sense that they not only subvert the stereotypical representation of the "other", the "non-Westerner" by indicating that each experience is subjective and unique, but also point out the mythic connotations of home. Meena's birthplace is not India and at first, she is ignorant about the background of her parents. She has never been there, either, and there are moments in the story when she fabricates stories to fill in this gap. However, as a little girl, she does not seem to have any problems with belonging. She is growing up in Tollington, Wolverhampton, and it is her home with her family and friends the dearest one being purely *white* Anita. She is even bothered by the Indian look of their gardens when she compares it to the English gardens of their neighbors. The meetings that are held in their Indian gardens with the participation of others who are not *originally* English do not mean much to Meena as she internalizes her English identity and asks for fishfingers instead of "sabzi" for dinner (54). At the beginning, she seems to totally embrace her Englishness in a similar manner to Irie in Smith's *White Teeth*. As for Meena's parents, there is naturally a different level of existence and perception of identity. On the one hand, they also seem to be integrated into the English way of life having good jobs and being respected by people around them. Her mother Daljit constantly endeavors to harmonize the characteristics of her Indian identity with the requirements of an English one: "It was her duty to show them that we could wear discreet gold jewelry, dress in tasteful silks and speak English without an accent" (26). It is understandable that she acts in accordance with the society she belongs while simultaneously trying to preserve her difference in a positive manner without being exclusive. After all, "home is also the lived experience of a locality" (Brah 192). However, her consideration of this harmonization process as a duty appears to be problematic. It looks as if she feels the necessity to prove something to white people. At one instance in which Meena does something wrong towards their white neighbors, Daljit says "don't give a chance to say we're worse than they already think we are. You prove you are better. Always" (45). This statement is significant for it points out the existence of stereotypes, which consolidates the discourse that expels the others due to their difference and relegates them to the inferior position of an outsider. In such a challenging environment, the ones that are made to feel ostracized hold on to the relics of their initial culture. "Homing, then, depends on the reclaiming and reprocessing of habits, objects, names, and histories that have been uprooted-in migration, displacement or colonization. Inherent to the project of home building *here and now*, is the gathering of 'intimations' of home"

(Ahmed et al. 9). At this point, as Meena also observes, “intimations of home” such as food, songs and language gain a special significance. Thus, “[Indian] food was not just something to fill a hole, it was soul food, it was the food their far-away mothers made and came seasoned with memory and longing, this was the nearest they would get for many years, to home” (61). Similarly, when Meena hears songs in Punjabi from her parents and relatives, the language is “evocative of a country I had never visited but which sounded like the only home I had ever known. The songs made me realize that there was a corner of me that would be forever not England” (112). The Kumar family, their Indian relatives and acquaintances who speak the most intimate details or sing the saddest stories in Punjabi manifest that they are engaged in home building processes *here and now*, as home does not and cannot refer to a fixed place to return for them. While they are continuously changing in their local homes, the imagined past home which is supposed to promise a happy return also changes far away from them. Instead, their lives are characterized by a constant move since they want to receive better education and find better jobs. This is what makes Daljit say “It’s home, it really is, but we can’t stay here forever, Meena” (295) at the end of the novel. For this reason, bulky suitcases sit on top of her bedroom wardrobes similarly to the wardrobes of Uncles and Aunties. When Meena hears her father and the Uncles getting very angry about “that Powell bastard” and their conversation saying “If he wants to send us back, let him come and damn well try!”, she runs to her mother to ask whether the suitcases are ready in case they have to escape back to India at short notice (267). Daljit feels sorry to hear such a question from her daughter since she has already understood that there is no turning back to the same India they have left and there is no English home they can take for granted, either.

Meena needs time in order to acknowledge this point and see the picture from a wider perspective. Her growth and the change in her standpoint are unraveled in line with Syal’s representation of racism in British society. In fact, it is only a matter of increase in *dose* on the grounds that manifestations of implicit racism have always been there. Through the end of the novel, they turn into overt verbal and physical attacks on non-white people with Asian descent. From the very beginning, except for the embracing neighbors Mrs. And Mr. Worrall, people in the neighborhood adopt either a condescending or an indifferent approach towards others who are not *originally* English. They do not even make an effort to learn their names. Meena narrates one instance: “‘How you doing, Topsy?’ Mr. Topsy had christened me thus as he claimed he could not pronounce my name, and I returned the favour by refusing to ever learn his” (16). The colonial mentality that disregards the subjectivity of the other or strives to convert it into its own terms is represented by Mr. Ormerod who is involved in missionary activities for the Wesleyan Methodist church. After he invites Meena’s father to a speech and asks for donation, Meena thinks: “You could see it in his face, he’d make the connection, Africa was abroad, we were from abroad, how could we refuse to come along and embrace Jesus for the sake of our cousins?” (21) The colonial mentality reveals itself in the tendency to generalize and categorize all the others in the same way without paying attention to their distinct histories. Furthermore, the familiar cliché of the colonial discourse is also present in Mr. Ormerod’s approach: “I mean Mrs. Lacey”, he explains one of the neighbors, “it’s not just about giving them stuff, is it? It’s about giving them culture as well, civilization. A good way of living, like what we have” (172). When Meena’s father relates Mr. Olmerod’s words to his wife, she feels a similar disturbance to the one she has upon hearing that Anita’s mother calls her dog “Nigger”

—simply due to the color as she explains—. She is extremely disturbed by the undertones of racism and oppression in the dialogue. Her husband is less concerned than she is on the grounds that he thinks they are accepted and embraced by the society and nobody has harmed them. At this point, he shares a common ground with Meena. Nevertheless, as Daljit states: “Just because it doesn’t happen to us, does not mean it is not happening! They leave us alone because they don’t think we are really Indian. ‘Oh, you are so English, Mrs. K!’ Like it is a buggering compliment!” (172). Their being “so” English insinuates that although they are *almost* English, they cannot be English per se; if that label still refers to an origin. This is highly reminiscent of Homi Bhabha’s notion of colonial mimicry which he formulates as “the desire for a reformed, recognizable Other, as a *subject of difference that is almost the same, but not quite*. Which is to say, that the discourse of mimicry is constructed around an *ambivalence*; in order to be effective, mimicry must continually produce its slippage, its excess, its difference” (1984, 126). While this difference is underlined by a seemingly opposite “you’re just like us!” emphasis at times, it can also appear as the stereotypical configurations or exotic representations of the other. As Meena strikingly observes, “according to the newspapers and television, we simply did not exist. If a brown or black face ever did appear on TV, it stopped us all in our tracks. [...] But these occasional minor celebrities never struck me as real; they were someone else’s version of Indian, far too exaggerated and exotic to be believable” (165).

At this point, it is necessary to take a closer look at Meena’s friendship with Anita due to the meaning she attributes to her. “I wanted to belong”, Meena says, “My life was outside the home, with Anita, my passport to acceptance” (148). She wants to break through the paradigm of home which is, as stated before, based on inclusions and exclusions. However, hers is not a conscious and constructive gesture yet, since she simply strives to be stripped of her Indian heritage so as to define herself as English. This can be construed not as a transgressive act which aims to go beyond predetermined categories and discriminating labels but as an operation of the very same mechanism that excludes one mode of existence for the sake of other. She refuses to wear saris and does not want to spend time with the daughters of the Indian Uncles and Aunts. She steals her mother’s powder compact and “begged Anita to make me up like Babs, the blonde pouty one, from Pan’s People” (144). At the beginning, there seems to be no indication of race in their friendship as what brings them together is the silly mischief of childhood. Yet, Meena is almost the same, but not quite; the inevitable excess and difference Bhabha mentions manifests itself bitterly in one occasion which can be regarded as the turning point or the epiphanic moment in the story. At that point, she perceives the significance of that occasion and its sense of the uncanny:

Mama seemed to imply that there was some link between Mr. Ormerod’s earnest ramblings and the activities of those unnamed boys, that was merely the consequence of the other. I could not understand this then, I simply divided the world into strangers and friends and reckoned if I stayed amongst those I knew, I would be safe. But since joining Anita’s gang, I had become more suspicious of how the familiar could turn into the unknown, and what happened at the Fete revealed how many strangers live amongst us. (173)

During the Fete, Sam who is an acquaintance of Meena and the head of the bullies severely criticizes the former activities of the charity organized by Mr. Olmerod

and bursts out: "Yow don't do anything but talk 'Uncle'. And give everything away to some darkies we've never met. We don't give a toss for anybody else. This is our patch. Not some wogs' handout" (193). This is the most direct and explicit remark that divulges the extreme point that racism has reached in the neighborhood. As for Meena, Sam's words have started a new phase in her life by shaking the firm ground beneath her feet. Sam clearly draws the line between the ones at home and the "wogs" that should be expelled from home. Meena can now see that she is no longer at home being thrust to the realm of the "unhomely" in Bhabha's words. It is even more shocking for her that it is done by Sam with whom she has decent communication.

In his lecture entitled "The World and the Home", Bhabha postulates "the paradigmatic postcolonial experience" which he encapsulates in the notion of the "unhomely" (1997, 445). He starts by stating that today's fiction is marked by the unhomely and elaborates on the notion:

To be unhomed is not to be homeless, nor can the unhomely be easily accommodated in that familiar division of the social life into private and public spheres. The unhomely moment creeps up on you as stealthily as your own shadow, and suddenly you find yourself, with Henry James's Isabel Archer, taking the measure of your dwelling in a state of 'incredulous terror'. And it is at this point that the world first shrinks for Isabel and then expands enormously. (445)

It is possible to claim that Meena finds herself in a situation similar to that of Isabel Archer, albeit in a different subject position. She says "Nothing was safe anymore; even my own mama had talked in an unknown poet's voice which made me think that at any moment, the walls of my home could buckle and shake, and crumble slowly downwards into the earth" (196). However, it should also be noted that the epiphanic moment which reveals the fragility of Meena's home paves the way for the expansion of home "enormously" as Bhabha suggests. Both the literal and the metaphorical expansion of home take place when Meena's grandmother Nanima comes for a visit. Meena defines the experience as a collision of her two worlds. In this phase of her life, Nanima opens for her a new world about which she has only a faint idea but whose depths she has heretofore refused to explore. After a while, she starts to feel that she has discovered a secret about herself as she learns the painful details about the histories of her grandmother and mother which were damaged first by the colonial rule, then by the Partition. For the first time she desperately wants to visit India and "claim some of its magic" as hers. "It was all falling into place now", she states, "why I felt this continual desire to be someone else in some other place far from Tollington" (211). This statement appears to embody a position which is at odds with her initial standpoint on the grounds that it signifies taking refuge in a distant homeland as opposed to embracing English culture. Under the influence of this mythical and magical image of home, she wants to ask her parents "why, after so many years of hating the 'goras' [white people], had they packed up their cases and followed them back here" (212). Meena's resentment against the racial discourse represented by some like Mr. Ormerod and Sam blurs her vision and prevents her from evaluating the situation realistically.

Roger Bromley defines *Anita and Me* as "an initiation narrative, a rite of passage and transition from the rural idyll of an eternal summer perspective to the dark and conflicted experience of a racialised and sexualised world" (144). This is a pertinent definition in the sense that Meena is deeply affected by what has happened at the Fete

and all the images that take part in her formation of a unified home and identity have been turned upside down by the words of Sam. Her immediate reaction to this initiation is represented as her desire to go *back* home with Nanima. Furthermore, the relations between the white English and the others are exacerbated by the cases of physical attacks against the non-white. Even Anita whose connection with Meena appears not to be marked with racial bias sees no problem in telling her that they have gone “Paki bashing” with Sam. In this atmosphere, especially after seeing that her so-called best friend internalizes the very same racism from which she might personally suffer, Meena arrives at a point that leads her to choose a different path from Anita’s rather than insisting on walking with her. As for her final confrontation with Sam, she adopts a similar detached attitude. When Sam tells her that the words he has uttered at the Fete are not directed towards her per se, she replies him with a crystal clear consciousness: “I am *the* others, Sam. You did mean me” (314). Along with the Fete episode, this composes the most emblematic moment which depicts the break in Meena’s totality of home. She is now “unhomely”, “not being home” which is “a matter of realizing that home was an illusion of coherence and safety based on the exclusion of specific histories of oppression and resistance, the repression of differences even within oneself” (Martin and Mohanty 296).

What is to be done next under the pressure of such an uncanny feeling? Meena wants to go to India as her safe haven. Yet, Meera Syal prevents her character from going to India by including a delay caused by her prolonged hospitalization in the story. Thus, Meena reaches her final point, a denunciation of home in its all too-problematic manifestations and burdensome definitions, and an endeavor to go beyond them. Meena who is “too mouthy, clumsy and scabby to be a real Indian girl, too Indian to be a real Tollington wench” defies all stereotypes and categorizations since “living in the grey area between all categories felt increasingly like home” (150). At the beginning, she might not be aware of the advantages of her ambivalent position; however, throughout the end she realizes that losing the former-fixed ground of home makes her gain new planes and move forward unlike Anita and Sam who are stuck and always doomed to be stuck in their restricted and tainted modes of existence: “The place in which I belonged was wherever I stood and there was nothing stopping me simply moving forward and claiming each resting place as home” (303). She transforms her difference, which had been ingrained in her as an indicator of inferiority and otherness, into a positive asset and strives to create an identity which can be “the living proof that the exotic and the different can add to and enrich even the sleepest backwater” (319).

According to Stuart Hall, we are all “*ethnically* located and our ethnic identities are crucial to our subjective sense of who we are. But this is also a recognition that this is not an ethnicity which is doomed to survive, as Englishness *was*, only by marginalizing, dispossessing, displacing and forgetting other ethnicities. This precisely is the politics of ethnicity predicated on difference and diversity” (Hall 1996, 163). With *Anita and Me*, Meera Syal aims to champion a similar understanding of ethnicity by formulating a more productive discourse in which home should be considered not as a final destination but as a process. Zadie Smith adopts a similar perspective in *White Teeth* by portraying characters that are trapped in the maze of both their origins and their newly constructed English identities. Having a Jamaican mother and an English father, she herself is the embodiment of the interaction between two different cultures and her work presents various aspects and the consequences of cultural exchange. The England she depicts, like that of Syal, is again a site of interactions among simultaneous

histories and simultaneous yearning for roots and rootlessness. This yearning is what will be scrutinized in the remaining part of the paper. The emphasis on the development of the character of Irie Jones in *White Teeth* will parallel the focus on Meena's change in perspective in *Anita and Me*. It is possible to trace the similarities between these characters and see how they come to terms with the problematic aspects of their identities by embracing diversity, fluidity and movement.

Zadie Smith opens her novel with the famous words of Shakespeare: "What is past is prologue"¹. If past is only a prologue, the real story must begin in the present and *White Teeth* focuses on the present while at the same time containing accounts of the past of the characters. The story which extends from the Seventies to the Nineties is based on the friendship of Archibald Jones and Samad Iqbal who have been together since World War II. Their friendship is presented as a paradigm of cultural variety and multi-ethnicity in England. Archie, of English stock, is married to a half-Jamaican, half-English Clara Bowden. Samad and his wife are both Bengali Muslim, but she emphasizes her descent from another tribe, the Begums. Samad and Archie spend most of their time in a pub called O'Connell's Poolroom. This pub is an apt symbol of plurality and hybridity: an Irish poolroom with no pool tables run by Arabs. The reproductions of "George Stubbs's racehorse paintings" and "the framed fragments of some foreign, Eastern script" are situated on the walls next to each other (153). Likewise, an Irish flag and a map of the Arab Emirates are knotted together and hung from wall to wall. In such an environment, Archie, who is not confused by multiculturalism at all resembles those paintings and fragments of the Eastern scripts. Roots, race and color do not make any difference to him. The one who is really uncomfortable with the way he lives is Samad Iqbal. He works as a waiter in his cousin's restaurant and he cannot cope with the fact that he is a waiter despite having a major in biology. He does not have the chance to work in a laboratory, he thinks, due to his dysfunctional hand which was shot by a Sikh in wartime and he eventually turns towards his roots, tradition and religion for shelter. However, these notions which are his only connection with his past do not have the same connotations for the other characters in the novel, especially the later generation that includes the children of the Jones and the Iqbal family.

Throughout the novel, Samad Iqbal considers Western society to be totally corrupt. Refusing to reconcile his own identity with English culture, he has made up his mind to protect his twins, Magid and Millat from this corruption and decides to send them back home to Bangladesh for a decent education. However, owing to financial problems, he can afford to send only one of them; Magid who has always been the apple of his father's eye with his intelligence and manners. Nevertheless, that is not what Magid has in mind for his own future. He makes a great effort to adopt the Western ways even to the extent of changing his name among English friends before he returns to Bangladesh. Magid Mahfooz Murshed Mubtasim Iqbal becomes Mark Smith and "abba" turns into "mum" when his friends are around. He embraces Western education, but Samad sends him back despite all his objections. At this point, his mother Alsana's attitude is important for she represents the ambivalent nature of the East-West interaction. On the one hand, she wants her children to stay within the boundaries of their Bengali culture; disapproving of rebellious Millat's affairs with white girls. On the other hand, she does not consent to send Magid back to Bangladesh because she does

¹ *The Tempest*, Act II, scene i

not want to think about what might happen to him each and every day. While people in England “live on solid ground” and “underneath safe skies; people of Bangladesh, formerly East Pakistan, formerly Bengal, live under the invisible finger of random disaster, of flood and cyclone, hurricane and mudslide” (176). In this respect, she is more sensible than Samad worrying about the present and the future whereas he is stuck in his past on the grounds that “tradition was culture, and culture led to roots, and these were good, these were untainted principles” (161) according to him. Alsana asks her husband pertinently when he is giving one of his pep talks about the importance of tradition: “What is a Bengali, husband, please?” and then moves on to another myth like the pure Bengal identity “[...] you go back and back and it’s still easier to find the correct Hoover bag than to find one pure person, one pure faith, on the globe. Do you think anybody is English? Really English? It’s a fairy tale!” (196). What Alberto Melucci says in his article on identity and difference is parallel to Alsana’s opinions: He states that “[i]n the age of speed, we no longer have a home. We constantly have to build one, like the three little pigs in the fairy tale, or we have to carry it in our backs like snails” (62). His comments also resonate with those of George and Brah: if there is no such place called home, the only alternative seems to be to acknowledge the necessity of adaptation to and reconciliation with several destinations we arrive at in life. The other twin son of the Iqbal family, Millat attempts to do that but in a way which is entirely unacceptable for both his mother and his father. He stays in England unlike his brother Magid and is regarded as a “good for nothing” child by his father. He spends most of his time loitering around with “white” girls and smoking marijuana. He does not seem to have any objective in life, and that is why Samad is utterly worried about him. Being the leader of teenage gangs for years, he later finds himself in the fundamentalist organization called Keepers of Eternal and Victorious Islamic Nation (KEVIN). He considers himself as a “social chameleon” and “underneath it all, there remained an ever-present anger and hurt, the feeling of belonging nowhere that comes to people who belong everywhere” (225). He tries to cope with how he feels by voicing this anger and taking refuge in KEVIN. Thus, it is possible to claim that Millat fails to subvert the mechanism he feels entrapped in and to convert it into something positive. He turns towards fundamentalism like Sam Lowbridge in *Anita and Me* albeit his different subject position.

The most successful character of the novel in this respect seems to be Irie Jones. The childhood friends of Magid and Millat -and in love with the latter- Irie Jones is the daughter of Archie and Clara Jones. In her way of interpreting Western culture, what she initially understands from being a Westerner is simply looking like them, a mistake made by Meena as well. She is obsessed with straightening her hair because she is bothered by its Afro style and she thinks that it is the reason why Millat chooses white girls over her. She desperately wants “straight hair. Straight straight long black sleek flickable tossable shakable touchable finger-through-able wind-blowable hair. With bangs” (228). She wants to learn how it feels to be English and starts with changing her hair. The perfect opportunity to penetrate into this fascinating realm of Englishness comes with the time she spends with the Chalfen family after Irie, Millat and Joshua, the son of the Chalfens, are caught red-handed smoking marijuana at school. As a punishment, Joshua is required to help Irie and Millat with the courses they are weak in for two months in his house. Thus, Irie and Millat are introduced to “Chalfenism”; a term that the Chalfens coin to explain their family tradition which is based on science, rationality and “good genes”. Joyce Chalfen, the mother of the family, is a

horticulturalist who publishes articles about the importance of cross-pollination. It is obvious that Smith uses the idea of cross-pollination as a symbol to represent cultural variety. In an article Joyce has written for *The New Flower Power* she says: "The fact is, cross-pollination produces more varied offspring, which are better able to cope with a changed environment. It is said cross-pollinating plants also tend to produce more and better-quality seeds" (258). At the beginning, Irie is too overwhelmed to see the artificiality that resides in the family. For the first time, she sees people who live in the present, just like the way she wants to live. "So there existed fathers who dealt in the present, who didn't drag ancient history around like a ball and chain. So there were men who were not neck-deep and sinking in the quagmire of the past" (271). She wants to merge with them. She wants their "Englishness. Their Chalfenishness. The *purity* of it" (273). However, ironic enough, The Chalfens are not *purely* English, being third generation immigrants, by way of Germany and Poland.

Still, Irie seems to be aware of the fact that there is no escape from roots as there is no going back to roots, either. The best thing one can do is to imagine, to construct a past and a homeland for one's self. Samad deals with this by holding on to traditions and old stories of heroism and Irie, by collecting bits and pieces from her grandmother's house such as birth certificates, army reports and news articles. She has never been to Jamaica; she just "laid claim to the past- her version of the past" (331). At this point, she is very similar to Meena in her search for a homeland via her grandmother. Both Syal and Smith utilize the image of the grandmother as a point of connection with the past. However, as noted before, "the homeland is not waiting there for the new ethnicities to rediscover it" (Hall 1997, 186). It does not remain the same, fixed in the past, as envisioned by the immigrants. The whole process is a tiresome and a fruitless one for Irie. She knows that she needs to find another way to get out of this maze and her solution is to focus on the present. If she regards the past only as a prologue, she can start writing her story in the present. Samad Iqbal fails to cope with the English way of life and modern times only because he fails to adopt such a viewpoint. Refusing any compromise, he disregards the fact that there can be "no simple 'return' to or 'recovery' of the ancestral past which is not re-experienced through the categories of the present" (Hall 1996, 163). Irie is the only character who endeavors to steer a middle course by protecting herself from both the pressure of ambivalence and the obsession for roots which can easily lead one to fundamentalism. Rather, she attempts to forge herself a new identity that is based on the productive aspects of *rootlessness* in a similar manner to Meena. She stops trying to look like a Westerner. It doesn't make any sense since she realizes that, as Bhabha says, "mimicry repeats rather than represents" (1984, 128). Thus, the colors of the Chalfen world start to fade away for Irie. Her biggest motivation to be there has been her love for Millat but now he is Joyce's object of desire. Furthermore, her impression that the family lives in the present rather than dragging their past memories has proven wrong. She could not realize this at first, but later it becomes apparent that they have also constructed their roots in Chalfenism. Joyce is an ardent supporter of cross-pollination, but at the same time she asks Irie and Millat where they *originally* come from. As she explains why she is so attracted to Millat, she reveals her stereotyping way of thinking. "But you know", she says to Marcus, "just from the little I've seen, he doesn't seem at all like most Muslim children [...] They are usually so silent you know, terribly meek, but he's so full of ...spunk" (266). Her so-called liberalism is only a disguise of her ignorance and narrow-mindedness. In this respect,

she is not much different from the explicitly narrow-minded and violent characters in *Anita and Me*.

Throughout the novel, we witness the characters' idiosyncratic ways of dealing with their lives and problems. Archibald Jones chooses to be race and color-blind whereas his wife Clara remains silent. Samad Iqbal hopes to find his origins in Mangal Pande, and Alsana tries to act with the utmost practicality. Magid believes in science and the existence of truth just like the Chalfens while Millat and Joshua simply try to *be* under the protection of their groups despite their questionable motives. Of all the characters, Irie follows the most interesting way to put an end to the past-present conflict which she feels imprisoned in. Towards the end of the story, she makes love to both of the twin brothers twenty minutes apart and gets pregnant. First she goes to Millat and finally finds the opportunity to satisfy her sexual frustration with him. Then, almost without making any explanation, she leaves to find Magid. Smith creates the scene to solidify her character's state of mind. Irie does not want to learn who the father of her child is, and she does not care to know. "[Her] child can never be mapped exactly nor spoken with any certainty. Some secrets are permanent. In a vision, Irie has seen a time, a time not far from now, when roots won't matter anymore because they can't because they mustn't because they're too long and they're too tortuous and they're just buried too damn deep. She looks forward to it" (437). Having a child whose father is unknown would realize her dreams of living in the present without any fuss over an ambiguous past. According to her, the past does nothing but make people's lives more complicated. With this symbolic gesture, Smith carries her to the same state of mind with Meena in the sense that Irie also arrives at a point where she simply wants to enjoy "living in the grey area between all categories" (Syal 150) and this grey area becomes her new home.

The politics of ethnicity based on difference and diversity as suggested by Stuart Hall is advocated by both Syal and Smith as opposed to attitudes and representations which have an inclination towards marginalizing, dispossessing and displacing. Their imaginary landscapes denounce a rigid conception of English identity and make boundaries more permeable in order to include the simultaneous histories of migrant families. Although the authors focus on different aspects and time periods, there is a thematic continuum between the two novels in the sense that they aim to redraw the fictional map of Britain by blurring the line between one entity and the other and to transform it into a more embracing place. While Syal leaves aside the detrimental approaches that revolve around inclusions and exclusions in favor of the active process of home-making, Smith questions the validity of roots in a multicultural world. Their novels contribute to the formulation of a more inclusive discourse that challenges stereotypes and unilateral representations of identity. This discourse goes beyond both the total denunciation of the host culture and the mere imitation of it by bringing to the foreground fluidity and movement.

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Özet

Yuva Neresi? Kökler Nerede?: *Anita ve Ben* ile *İnci Gibi Dişler* Adlı Romanlarda Çokkültürlülük Politikaları

Bu çalışma, Meera Syal ve Zadie Smith'in iki romanından hareketle yazarların İngiliz kimliğini ve her zaman geri dönülebilecek, değişmez bir yuva/anavatan kavramı ile kökenleri barındıran diğer ulusal kimlikleri nasıl sorunsallaştırdıklarını inceler. Yazarların eserleri, sırasıyla *Anita ve Ben* ile *İnci Gibi Dişler*, sabitlikten ziyade değişimi, kimliğin ise üniterden ziyade çoğulcu yorumlamalarını ön plana çıkararak kısıtlayıcı algıların ve basmakalıp tasvir/temsillerin kapalılığını aşmayı amaçlamaktadır. Bu sebeple, yazarların göç çerçevesinde yarattığı, yuva/vatan ve köklere dair kendilerine has imgelemleri İngiliz kimliğini yeniden inşa eder ve katı sınırları daha geçirgen ve kapsayıcı referans noktalarına dönüştürür. Eserler, devinim ve çeşitliliği ön plana çıkararak, hem "evsahibi" kültürün tamamıyla reddinin hem de onun bütünüyle taklit edilmesinin ötesine geçen daha yapıcı bir söylemin oluşturulmasına katkıda bulunurlar.

Anahtar Sözcükler: çokkültürlülük, göç, melezlik (hybridite), yuva inşası, çeşitlilik, etnisite.

**Revisiting the Black Atlantic:
Bernardine Evaristo's *Blonde Roots***

Sofía Muñoz-Valdivieso

Abstract: The paper analyses the recreation of slavery and the Black Atlantic in Bernardine Evaristo's *Blonde Roots* (2008) in the context of her previous work as a woman writer of mixed heritage in Britain, in particular *Lara* (1997) and *The Emperor's Babe* (2001). The paper discusses the spatial, temporal and factual disruptions of readers' expectations in *Blonde Roots* and analyses its polyphonic structure. It also considers the novel in relation to the renewed visibility of slavery and the slave trade in Britain in recent years, as seen in the 2007 commemorations of the bicentenary of the Abolition of the slave trade in the British Empire and in other fictions about slavery and its legacy recently published in Britain.

Keywords: Bernardine Evaristo, Black Atlantic, black British fiction, polyphony, slavery novel.

Blonde Roots (2008) is Bernardine Evaristo's fourth novel and the first one devoted entirely to the topics of slavery and the Black Atlantic. Her fiction has been mainly concerned with the reverberations of the past in the present, from the African, Brazilian and Irish stories of the protagonist's ancestors in her debut novel-in-verse *Lara* (1997) to the voices of the African ghosts that have been silenced in our conventional accounts of European history in her third novel *Soul Tourists* (2005). The epigraph she chose for *The Emperor's Babe* (2001), Oscar Wilde's aphorism "The only duty we owe to history is to rewrite it", epitomizes the motivation of her first three novels: *Lara* retraces the transnational roots/routes that have configured the identity of a young mixed-race young woman in late twentieth-century Britain; *The Emperor's Babe* explores the roots of British history as it takes us back to a time when Britain was a remote province of the Roman Empire, ruled then by an African man, the emperor Septimius Severus; *Soul Tourists* (2005) presents a British couple on a road trip through the European continent, which is haunted by the ghosts of black people whose existence has been forgotten or erased in history books. What John McLeod has stated in reference to her early writing focused on Britain can be applied to her later work which expands her perspective to Europe: Evaristo attempts to show "that the fortunes of black people in history are not marginal or of interest only to black readers, but play a central part in the wider historical narrative ... and make a mockery of notions of cultural and racial purity" (McLeod 177).

The issue of slavery was present in Evaristo's writing before *Blonde Roots*, in particular in *Lara*, a partly autobiographical narrative that celebrates the intercultural personal history of the main character. Bernardine Evaristo was born in London in 1959 to a Nigerian father and an English mother and her protagonist Lara is a young London woman of mixed English-Nigerian origins who undertakes a physical and imaginative journey to find her paternal origins in Africa and in the Brazilian cane fields where her ancestors lived as slaves. The novel shows Lara's recovery of the lost strands of her past

for the weaving of her personal identity. Family history is articulated around two sets of images: on the one hand, images of trees and roots suggest the ability to become attached and nourished in a location; on the other hand, images of water suggest the fluidity of the diasporic condition. The struggles of Lara's ancestors to find a home in different continents is presented through the traditional images of trees, seeds and roots, as in the case of Lara's Nigerian father's desire to fit in Britain: "When the roots of a tree die, the seeds are re-born./My children are my seed, this is home now" (57), or her grandfather's settlement in Nigeria after his return from Brazil as a free man: "[L]ike an uprooted seed, in time my roots took hold" (130). Images of water in streams, rivers and oceans also serve as metaphors for the fluidity and resilience that are required to endure the African diaspora. Evaristo chooses a significant Yoruba proverb to preface the narrative: "However far the stream flows/it never forgets its source", and the name of the protagonist is short for Omilara, which in Yoruba, the native language of her father, means "the family are like water" (43). Her surname "Da Costa" captures the transoceanic nature of her ancestors, enslaved Africans in Brazil, who in later generations were able to return as free men to Nigeria. In the course of the novel we follow Lara in her discovery that her paternal ancestors were slaves, but the narrative tries to envision the Atlantic ocean not only as the path of the Middle Passage but also as the conduit of enrichment and hybridity, as it celebrates the cross-fertilization of cultures that results from diasporic movements.¹ The novel can be seen as a fictional embodiment of the new ways of thinking about cultures and identities discussed by Paul Gilroy in *The Black Atlantic* (1993), that is, as an attempt to embrace the idea of routes across countries and continents as the basis for identities that lack the conventional grounding in roots.

Hybridity marks the form of the text, which crosses the generic boundaries between poetry and fiction, and is paramount in the protagonist, who learns to integrate the cultures of her past history into her personal identity as a late twentieth-century British woman that is able to braid into her identity the different strands of her family past. The crucial epiphany takes place in Cachoera do Taruma in Brazil, when "revitalised by icy cascades" (140) she resolves to accept all the elements of her past. After that moment,

Lara frees herself from subscribing to one origin, to one memory, to one history. Instead, she claims a multitude. The text finally defies purity, the notion of an uncorrupted source to which a return might be possible. Histories, human beings, ways of life are inextricably bound up with each other. (Stein 91-2)

Only after learning about her ancestors in Africa and across the Atlantic and travelling to Nigeria and Brazil does Lara come to understand that she must create her own sense of identity with Africa as "an embryo" (140) within her. The opening of *Lara* establishes the importance of slavery in the heritage of the protagonist, but its closing

¹ This cross-fertilization of cultures appears for instance in the mixing of Yoruba gods and Christian faith in Brazilian *candomblé* and in the population of cities like Salvador: "Ah! Salvador took us all—Africanos livres and escravos,/the broncos who battered the cobbles in rattling carriages,/the sararas, morenos, mulattos" (126), or Lagos, "a sizzling, buzzing island" (111), with all shades of skin colour: "burnt almond,/Caramel, umber, ivory, rust" (111).

points towards the resilience and energy of the descendants of the African diaspora. The novel begins with a prologue narrating how Lara's great-grandmother was raped and murdered by the plantation owner in 1844; a scene that encapsulates the atrocities of slavery. The epilogue focuses on the future as Lara prepares "to paint slavery out of me /the Daddy People onto canvas with color-rich strokes" (140) by acknowledging the creation and agency of her enslaved ancestors. She finally learns to integrate into her identity the voices of the past, so that at the end of her journey she can return to the place she can call home, her island—with "the 'Great' tipped out of it" (140).

Slavery is present in *The Emperor's Babe* in more subtle ways, since it appears in the background, as a common element of life in the Roman Empire as presented through the first-person narrative of Zuleika, a girl of Nubian origins living in Londinium in the third century AD. In fact, Zuleika is an African young woman who has two Caledonian slaves, Valeria and Aemilia. They are white girls from the northern frontier of Britannia, "Two ginger girls ... captured/up north, the freckled sort (typical /of Caledonians)" (55), so that the novel reverses the usual conception of slavery as the exploitation of black slaves by white masters (this reversal is, as we shall see, the basis of *Blonde Roots*). In *The Emperor's Babe* Evaristo toys around with the idea that Africans may have lived in Britannia, and behind the playfulness of the language and the outrageousness of some of the characters there is a real concern to re-think history to include the African presence in Britain. Zuleika and her family are a fabrication of the author, who hopes to seduce the readers into believing that such characters might have lived in London. This novel is a playful fleshing out of Peter Fryer's contention in *Staying Power* (1984), "There were Africans in Britain before the English came here" (1), by which he means African soldiers of the Roman army stationed on the island to defend Hadrian's Wall.² *The Emperor's Babe* provides an entertaining recreation of Roman London, but it can also be read as a corrective to traditional visions of British imperial glory. Evaristo portrays London as a conglomerate of cultures, accents and peoples that very much resembles the multicultural metropolis of today, so that some critics have seen the novel as "a comment on multicultural Britain, certainly multicultural London" (Niven 19) that celebrates the "mongrel" nature of the city. As Evaristo herself suggests, "in one sense, *The Emperor's Babe* is a dig at those Brits who still harbour ridiculous notions of 'racial' purity and the glory days of Britain as an all-white nation" (McCarthy).

In both *Lara* and *The Emperor's Babe* the vision of Britain's past and present that Evaristo presents emphasizes the mongrel nature of the country. In *Lara*, the protagonist herself is just like many other Britons of today the result of population movements across the globe. *The Emperor's Babe* questions the belief that it is possible to return to a pure white Britain prior to post-war immigration: Zuleika's Roman

² Africans came to the country in significant numbers as a result of the Atlantic slave trade in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries, although there is historical evidence of their presence in early modern England. We know, for instance, that some Africans were brought to be trained as interpreters in 1555 and that in 1596 Queen Elizabeth decreed that all *blackamoors* should be expelled from the land. Before the sixteenth century, however, their presence remains a matter of speculation, since there are only faint historical traces, such as the reference to the northern African soldiers (*numerous Maurorum Aurelianorum*) that Peter Fryer mentions in the opening of *Staying Power* (1984), the troops stationed near Carlisle to defend Hadrian's wall in the third century AD (1).

London is very close to the crucible of languages, cultures and peoples found in other recent fictions by so-called black British writers such as Zadie Smith's *White Teeth* (2000). Evaristo grew up in London in the sixties and seventies feeling unaccepted as the daughter of a Nigerian father who had immigrated in the late forties, and she felt she was an unwanted outsider in a country where the African presence was a recent phenomenon that was new and alien to the British people. That conception changed when she came across a copy of Peter Fryer's *Staying Power*, a work that transformed her understanding of British history. The transformation of her perception of the past of the country provided her with a richer sense of her own past as a black Briton and allowed her to feel that she could claim ownership of Britain too.

Blonde Roots is a novel about slavery and the Black Atlantic written mainly in the voice of a woman in her thirties who tells the story of her life, including her childhood prior to enslavement and her experiences under different masters. She is a white woman called Omerenomwara, who had been born Doris Scagglethorpe in Europa. When her tale begins she is the house slave of Chief Kaga Konata Katamba in the imaginary Londolo, the capital city of an island called the United Kingdom of Great Ambossa, which is to the west of Aphrika—a tropical location on the Equator where “[t]he sun struck us with typically nasty tropical ferocity, with no regard for those of us born without enough protective melanin” (71). Her narrative is presented in books one and three of the novel. Book One describes her life in Londolo and her previous years as a slave on the island of New Ambossa, with flashbacks to her kidnapping by a Border Lander, her experience of the Middle Passage and her previous childhood years in Europa as the daughter of a humble farmer, with three sisters that after so many years in slavery she comes to remember only as ghostly presences from her past. Significantly, Evaristo uses an echo of Toni Morrison's novel *Beloved* when Doris remembers her sister at one point and describes them as “Beloved. Beloved. Beloved” (46). The third book narrates her second transportation to a west island after a failed attempt at escape and her time on a plantation there until she makes a successful bid for freedom and joins the maroon community on the island.

Blonde Roots combines the first-person story of Doris, which takes up most of the novel, with a pamphlet written by her owner to justify the institution of slavery with discussions of the inferiority of *whytes* and the civilising effect of removing them from their brutal ways of life. Books one and three are in the voice of Doris, while book two is the narrative of her *blak* owner Chief Kaga Konata Katamba. *Blonde Roots* offers thus the complementary perspectives on slavery and the Black Atlantic of the enslaver and the enslaved, in this case Chief Katamba and Doris/Omerenomwara. Polyphony seems to be a central feature of other fictions of slavery published in Britain in recent years, such as Caryl Phillips's *Cambridge* (1991) and *Crossing the River* (1993) or David Dabydeen's *A Harlot's Progress* (1999). Like *Blonde Roots*, these fictional explorations of slavery are profoundly polyphonic because in them the first-person narratives of slaves are combined with the voices of other white and black characters, so that the story in each novel is presented through different centres of enunciation. By offering the perspectives of different characters involved in slavery, these novels “subvert the grand, master narrative of History ... not through a mere reversal of the centre and the margin, but by ... replacing the original exclusiveness by a new inclusive approach” (Ledent 2005, 291).

The novel presents spatial, temporal and factual disruptions of the common assumptions of readers. Firstly, the protagonist moves through an alien geography in

which north is south, with the Grey Continent of Europa south of the continent of Aphrika, next to which we find the UK (of Great Ambossa). Secondly, the story takes place in an unspecified age that disorderly mingles, among others, the Middle Ages and Renaissance period, the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, and contemporary times. Thirdly, in *Blonde Roots* the basic known facts about transatlantic slave trade are turned on their head, since in the novel it is the black “Aphrikans” who move “Whyte” human cargo west from Europa to Amarika. *Blonde Roots* produces thus a dislocation of the readers’ categorizations of space, but also a disconcerting collusion of temporal frames and a constant disruption of the facts of history as established by official historiography in the West. Evaristo wishes to jolt readers into a reconsideration of history so as to prompt new perceptions of racial and cultural identities:

[T]he slave trade is a subject that elicits strong responses including anger, defensiveness, resentment, self-righteousness, guilt, sadness. So I decided to ask the question What if? What if the history as we know it is turned on its head and Africans enslave Europeans for four centuries? What if Africans assume the moral and intellectual high ground and notions of savagery and civilisation are inverted? (“Orange Prize”)

Evaristo includes a map of her re-imagined geography of the Atlantic world, since visualising this new cartography of slavery is crucial for readers to make sense of her narrative. On the Equator lies the continent of Aphrika, with the United Kingdom of Ambossa an island immediately to its west; south of the equator we find the cold lands of Europa which include England, and across the Atlantic Ocean to the west we find the continent of Amarika and the West Japanese Islands, where the plantations employ the slaves captured in Europa. The actions thus unfold in imaginary Atlantic locations south of the Equator and readers are forced to keep their minds always attentive to the reversed north-south bearings of the novel. Ships sail south from the Aphrikan UK of Great Ambossa with *blak* crew and masters, and they buy slaves from the *whyte* continent of Europa to transport them west across the Atlantic to the plantations of the Amarika continent and the West Japanese Islands. The map created by Evaristo places the UK of Great Ambossa as an island west of Aphrika; its shape is that of the UK and its capital, Londolo, is located exactly where London is. England, on the other hand, is a land on the northwest coast (the so-called Borderlands) of Europa, a continent that retains the shape of our present-day Europe, with a strip of land significantly called “The Cabbage Coast” in a reversal of the Gold Coast of Africa.

The temporal frame in the novel is an unspecified age that disorderly mingles the Middle Ages and Renaissance period, the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, and contemporary times. We seem to be immersed in the late Middle Ages and early Renaissance when chief Kaga Konata Katamba describes in his narrative the clothing habits and customs of the tribes he encounters in his voyage to Europane, with the warriors “covered head to toe in cumbersome iron” (133), and the heads of those who commit crimes against the king publicly displayed on poles. Chief Katamba sounds overall as an eighteenth-century slaver, and in the early chapters of his pamphlet there is some effort to create a pastiche of eighteenth-century English, with old-fashioned expressions like “oftentimes” (114) or “it woe betides me” (116) mixed into the contemporary language of the novel. Chief Katamba describes the triangular trade and his life as a slaver captain, a career that started when a rich merchant offered him the command of “a 200-ton slaver called *Hope&Glory* which was to sail to the Grey

Continent twice yearly to increase his already considerable fortune through the almost limitless bounty available through the trade in slaves" (116).

There are echoes of the nineteenth century in Chief Katanga's Victorian-sounding classification of humanity into three groups with different characteristics and abilities according to the "exact science of Craniofaecia Anthropometry" (118): the Negroid, indigenous to the Aphrikan continent, the Mongoloid, indigenous to the Asian territories, and the Caucasoid, who is indigenous to "the hell-hole known as Europa" (118) and is "a few steps up from the animal kingdom" (120). He has studied this science for some time and knows well that the Negroid type has developed a capacious skull to accommodate the growth of a large brain which has produced the defining features of this type: "ambition, self-motivation, resourcefulness, self-discipline, courage, moral integrity, spiritual enlightenment and community responsibility" (119). The same scientific explanation accounts for the inferior intellectual and emotional capacity of the so-called Caucasoid, who has a smaller brain within a smaller skull which has produced "infantilism, aimlessness, laziness, cowardice, poor coordination, moral degradation, and a nonsensical language or languages" (120). This science has amply demonstrated that "the Negro is biologically superior to the other two types" (119) and it has done so by using systematic and precise empirical research that has led to the overall conclusion that "the Caucasoid breed is *not of our kind*" (120).

The nineteenth century is also present in other details, such as the inclusion of "crinolines with expensive whalebones" (11), or the references to the underground railroad—the American network of secret routes and safe locations used by slaves to escape north becomes thus materialised in the disused Londolo tube system, which provides a way into freedom to enslaved Europeans in the city. From the very opening of the novel the collusion of time frames is made evident as the first-person narrator describes the compound where she lives with her masters, who are celebrating a festivity. The men wear "flamboyant kaftans" (3) and the women "peacock-print headscarves" (3) and the narrator's master and his family "are out clinking rum-and-coke glasses" (3). Contemporary times are present throughout the novel in the form of constant references to contemporary popular culture—with an occasional sense that we are in a science-fiction future time, as in the opening description of the tube in Londolo as a thing of the past: "The city of Londolo's Tube trains had officially stopped burrowing many years ago when the tunnels started collapsing under the weight of the buildings above them" (6). Overall, *Blonde Roots* is a conversational novel in which despite the seriousness of the topic the voice of the female narrator is relaxed, casual and informal; its language is predominantly contemporary English, with frequent examples of British colloquialisms, like "'Oooh, don't be so soppy' I'd say" (11), "He'd return after dark, when he'd be mardy until he'd eaten" (12), or "a 'wee session' with the lads" (12).

Readers' expectations regarding the facts of the slave trade are subverted, since the entire novel is based on a premise that reverses the history of Atlantic slavery: in *Blonde Roots* it is the Aphrikans who enslave, transport, sell and exploit the Europeans. As the *whyte* slave Doris explains in her narrative, the slavers sail south from the continent of Aphrika "to the coast of Europa where they [barter] for my people with beads, knives, hats, gourds, bowls, spears, muskets, bolts of cotton, brandy, rum, kettles" (72) and the lands of Europa where they buy the slaves are "the Coal Coast, the Cabbage Coast, The Tin Coast, the Corn Coast, the Olive Coast, the Tulip Coast, the Wheat Coast, the Grape Coast, the Influenza Coast and the Cape of Bad Luck" (72).

Indeed, throughout the text readers must keep making adjustments to realign what they are witnessing against their knowledge of the past, turning around their racial expectations, so that for instance they visualise white victims when Doris/Omerenonwara voices the pain of generations of slaves: “the rage of all those people whose bones lay at the bottom of the ocean; all those people torn from their families and sentenced to labour for life without payment; all those people suffering unbelievable horrors at the hands of their masters” (104).

The title of the novel echoes the American classic *Roots* (1976), Alex Haley’s story of an African American family from its origins in the African continent in the eighteenth century to its present life in contemporary American society. The use of the adjective “blonde” in the title recalls the significance of hair to racialized conceptions of beauty. The word “roots” in the title is thus related both to hair issues as representing body perceptions and to issues of origins and history. In its reversal of expectations (dark roots are the more common problem of coloured hair) the title announces the reversal of realities in its story of white slaves and black masters. In her earlier novel *Lara*, Evaristo had already explored through hair issues the damaged self-image of black women in a society in which whiteness controls beauty. Now in the fictional world of *Blonde Roots*, as a *whyte* woman Doris has to deal with body image issues that bring to mind the stereotyped conceptions dictated by white standards of beauty in real life. Every morning she repeats “an uplifting mantra” (31) to herself while looking in the mirror:

‘I may be *fair* and *flaxen*. I may have *slim* nostrils and *slender* lips. I may have *oil-rich* hair and a *non-rotund* bottom. I may blush easily, go *rubicund* in the sun and have *covert yet mentally alert* blue eyes. Yes, I may be *whyte*. But I am *whyte* and I am beautiful’. (32) (emphasis original)

In predominantly white Western societies, white bodies are perceived as the norm and whiteness is “a marker of the quintessentially human” (Weedon 15). In the imaginary world of *Blonde Roots* *blak* standards determine what constitutes physical perfection, and the beauty values that have become naturalised in predominantly white societies are turned around. Since African body images rule conceptions of beauty, white women long for the flat noses, the round bottoms and the style of African hair: “They wore the perms, twists and braids of Ambossan women, although Aphros were most in demand ... It took up to ten hours and when the blonde, red, brown, or straight roots came through it looked just plain tacky, apparently” (29-30). Evaristo is aware of the symbolic value of an apparently trivial matter, an issue that is present in a variety of black women’s writing from Una Marson’s “Kinky Hair Blues” (1937) to Zadie Smith’s *White Teeth* (2000).³

As mentioned earlier, *Blonde Roots* is a polyphonic novel which gives voice both to enslaver and slave: books one and three which open and close the novel are Doris’s narrative, while the middle book presents a pamphlet, *The Flame*, written by the slave

³ In her poem Una Marson asserts the beauty of black hair: “I like me black face/And me kinky hair./I like me black face/And me kinky hair./But nobody loves dem,/I jes don’ tink it’s fair” (Donnell and Welsch 112). In *White Teeth* Irie Jones hates her kinky Caribbean mane and longs after “[s]traight hair. Straight straight long black sleek flickable tossable shakeable touchable finger-though-able wind-blowable hair. With a fringe” (Smith 273).

owner Chief Kaga Konata Katamba. He articulates fears and prejudices about the pale inhabitants of the Grey Continent that sound very much like those that in past centuries Europeans have expressed regarding Africans. The title of two chapters in his pamphlet allude to the novels of George Orwell and Joseph Conrad: Orwell's phrase "Some are More Human than Others" is used as the title for a chapter justifying the difference between groups of humans and Conrad's novel is echoed in the chapter "Heart of Greyness", which focuses on the violent customs of the savage Europeans. He describes the inhabitants of Europa as natives who are "just now emerging from the abominable depths of savagery that we civilised nations left behind in prehistoric times" (118). In this text Chief Katamba presents his thoughts and reflections on the true nature of the slave trade, and offers some remarks on the character and customs of the Europeans, who seem to him close to "their four-legged compatriots in the animal kingdom" (125). He defends slavery on the grounds that slaves are better off in the enlightened care of their masters, an argument frequently used by Europeans in their justifications of the institution of slavery: "the trade is a chance for those poor souls to escape the barbarism prevalent on the Grey Continent where unspeakable horrors take place as a normal way of life" (121).

Chief Katamba begins his career as a slaver captain on a ship patriotically named *Hope&Glory*, which sails to the Grey Continent twice a year to buy slaves and carry them to the island of New Ambossa in West Japan, where they are sold in exchange for sugar, rum and tobacco. His first voyage to the Cabbage Coast in Europa echoes Conrad's *Heart of Darkness*, as his contact person is an Aphrikan who has been able to endure life there longer than most and has "apparently gone native" (124), like Conrad's Kurtz, who joins the natives in their customs and ways of life. The young Katamba feels that he has "penetrated deeper into the dark heart of Europa" (131) as he moves into the interior for his trade. Upon hearing European languages, he finds them nonsensical and comical "without the clicks, clucks, clacks and !tsks of normal speech", so that they sound "dreary beyond belief, more akin to the low monotonous moan of cattle than the exuberant sounds of human communication" (124). He is unable to tell the natives apart, since "their ghost-like pallor rendered all looking, quite frankly, the same" (125), although their alien eyes "were of the colours which should never be seen on a human face" (126). This first encounter with the natives of Europa offers an occasion for Evaristo's turning upon itself the European gaze on the other, with some poking fun at British culture.⁴

While the first book in the novel is devoted to Doris's narrative of her life in Londolo and her earlier experiences, both in Europa and in New Ambossa, the third book presents her re-enslavement and second transportation to New Ambossa, where she lives and works on a plantation. Evaristo recreates this section as a mirror-image of life on a Caribbean island, maintaining the pattern of racial inversions that she has provided throughout the novel.⁵ Doris's narrative ends when she leads her lover and two

⁴ Evaristo is so intent on showing European savagery that she has Katamba witnessing, one after another, three executions: one by hanging, one by chopping off the head, one by burning at the stake, to which the Aphrikan's response echoes Marlowe's in *Heart of Darkness*: "What can I say, Dear Reader, but the horror, the horror..." (136).

⁵ For instance, the slaves pretend every Sunday to be celebrating Voodoo mass, only to be able to hide the Christian ritual that they are really performing. When Doris finds her long-lost sister Sharon on the plantation, they drink tea in "dainty clay cups, hand-painted with

of her nephews into freedom, and the novel closes with a final chapter entitled “Postscript” which in three pages summarizes the future of the main characters and links the stories in the novel to the present of the readers: “In the twenty-first century, Bwana’s descendants still own the sugar estate and are among the grandest and wealthiest families in the United Kingdom of Great Ambossa, where they all reside” (260).

As epigraph for her novel, Evaristo uses a quotation from Friedrich Nietzsche that speaks about the role of power in shaping reality: “All things are subject to interpretation: whichever interpretation prevails at a given time is a function of power and not truth” (n.p.) In *Blonde Roots* the constructed nature of values is brought to the fore in its comic inversion of common assumptions about beauty, history and reality, from the body image issues represented by hair styles to the generally accepted fact that certain groups of humans are inherently superior to others. The epigraph summarizes the main idea behind the fictional text, just as her exploration of the roots of British history as a corrective to traditional visions of British imperial glory in *Emperor’s Babe* (2001) was summed up in her epigraph from Oscar Wilde. In a light tone that recalls her story of an African family in Roman London in *The Emperor’s Babe* (2001), *Blonde Roots* shows the absurdity of absolutist conceptions of truth. It offers a comic recreation of an ugly reality of our collective past and subverts of the cartographies and realities of slavery to challenge preconceived notions of race and history.

Blonde Roots is one of several novels published in Britain in recent years that deal with slavery and the slave trade, a topic rarely presented in British fiction before the nineties. Mostly written by Caribbean-British and Afro-British authors, these novels typically emphasize the interconnected pasts of Europe, Africa and the Americas and show how transatlantic slavery was “a transnational phenomenon, linked in to global patterns of exchange and exploitation” (Cubitt 259). With *Blonde Roots* Evaristo joins other Caribbean-British and Afro-British authors like Fred D’Aguiar, David Dabydeen and Caryl Phillips whose writings have in recent years granted visibility to the involvement of Britain in the slave trade and slavery. These are fictions that usually try to retrieve the silenced voices of the African slaves themselves and respond to what Bénédicte Ledent called in the mid-nineties the long amnesia regarding the practice of slavery in critical and fictional writings in Britain (1996, 273).

Narratives of the British nation have historically managed to shift the focus away from the participation of Britain in the institution of slavery to highlight its role as a European leader in the movement to do away with the slave trade, so that for a long time “Britons—and Britain’s colonial subjects—were taught to view transatlantic slavery through the moral triumph of abolition, therefore substituting for the horrors of slavery and the slave trade a ‘culture of abolitionism’” (Oldfield 2). In present-day Britain, a society that braids the cultural formations of different groups, including those of African and Afro-Caribbean origin, this view is no longer possible. When the bicentenary of the Abolition of the Slave Trade was commemorated in 2007, many of the anniversary activities qualified celebration and emphasized what the Victoria and Albert Museum exhibition at the time called the “uncomfortable truths” of this part of the British past, the insidious penetration of the benefits of the slave trade in British society. When

the roses of our home by Sharon” (237) and they taste traditional delicacies from the distant homeland, “old-kuntree desserts she’d made—hedgehog pudding, molasses role pole, gingabred man, banbree kake” (237).

compared with previous memorialisation of slavery and the slave trade, the 2007 commemorations reflected “not only a very different political and intellectual climate but also a very different sense of who and what constitutes the British nation” (Oldfield 81).

Like many of the 2007 events, the novels about slavery published in Britain in recent years have brought the evil institution to the mirror of public representations. The slavery novel remains a typically African American genre, but several significant examples have been published in Britain since the nineties, among them the novels by Caryl Phillips and David Dabydeen mentioned above, as well as Fred D’Aguiar’s *Feeding the Ghosts* (1997) and *The Longest Memory* (1994), Laura Fish’s *Strange Music* (2008), and Andrea Levy’s *The Long Song* (2010). They highlight traditionally hidden narratives of slavery and the role it played in the creation of wealth in the British Empire, as well as the reverberations of the heritage of slavery in contemporary society. The tendency in British fiction to deal with the experience of slavery started several years before the 2007 commemorations, and “[this] emergence of a body of writing on slavery attests to its perceived relevance to Caribbean-British people coming of age in the 1970s and early 1980s” (Thieme 2). Slavery novels in Britain cannot claim the kind of cultural centrality they have in US society, but they can play a role in the recent re-configurations of British identities, as part of a more general endeavour among historians, fiction writers and other social forces to make British involvement in the slave trade and slavery relevant to present racial and cultural formations. Like many of the 2007 commemorations, novels about slavery can be considered part of the effort to develop a more complex view of the nation that includes the concerns of the Afro-British and Caribbean-British communities in the twenty-first century. Evaristo’s *Blonde Roots* is very different from the fiction of slavery published in Britain before, typically novels of great seriousness and gravity. She makes an effort to search for “[a] combination of levity and gravitas” that can work as “a powerful tool to convey the utter atrociousness of the trade and its awful impact on human lives” (Collins 1201-2). Her work is in line with the comic tradition of African American novels of slavery as represented by Ishmael Reed’s *Flight to Canada* (1976) and Charles Johnson’s *Oxherding Tale* (1982) and it shares the apparent lightness in the treatment of a serious topic of Andrea Levy’s recent novel of Caribbean slavery, *The Long Song* (2010). The dystopian picture of *Blonde Roots* captures a timeless world in which Africans are enslaving Europeans and embodying the evils of the slave trade and slavery in a reversal of roles that shakes expectations and forces readers to look at their own past in a new light.

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Özet

Siyah Atlantik'e Yeniden Ziyaret: Bernardine Evaristo'nun *Blonde Roots* Adlı Eseri

Bu çalışma Bernardine Evaristo'nun, Britanya'da melez mirasa sahip bir kadın yazar olarak bir önceki çalışmaları-özellikle de *Lara* (1997) ve *The Emperor's Babe* (2001)-bağlamında *Blonde Roots* (2008) eserindeki köleliğin ve Siyah Atlantik'in tekrar oluşmasını incelemektedir. Bu makale *Blonde Roots*'daki okuyucunun beklentilerine ait uzamsal, geçici ve olgusal karmaşaları tartışmakta ve bunun çok sesli yapısını incelemektedir. Ayrıca iki yüz senelik Britanya İmparatorluğundaki köle ticaretinin kaldırılmasının 2007'deki anma merasimleri ve kölelik ile ilgili diğer kurgular ile Britanya'da yakın zamanda yayınlanan mirasında görüldüğü üzere, romanı Britanya'da

son yıllardaki kölelik ve köle ticaretinin yenilenen görünülürlüğü bağlamında ele almaktadır.

Anahtar Sözcükler: Bernardine Evaristo; Siyah Atlantik, siyah Britanya kurgusu, çok seslilik, kölelik romanı.

Perpetuating Our Secrets: Ageing and Memory in Doris Lessing's *The Grandmothers*

Maricel Oró Piqueras

Abstract: Appearance and secrecy have been recurrent elements in both families and nations. Hidden love affairs, unsaid personal preferences, even illegitimate children have led to important decisions, either for the good or for the bad. In the four short stories that constitute *The Grandmothers*, Doris Lessing explores the perpetuating secrets that have marked families and nations at different points in history. In the collection, forbidden passion and unofficial love invade the lives of grandmothers who must keep them to themselves in order to be accepted within their communities. In *The Grandmothers*, trauma is counterbalanced by the memory of the moments in which feeling outlanded social norms and restrictions. At the same time, those memories enlighten the process of ageing that scandalously makes the older person invisible within society. This paper aims to explore the complicated interconnection between emotion and norm, memory and trauma, ageing and society within *The Grandmothers*; topics which have long inhabited the fictional world of Doris Lessing.

Keywords: grandmotherhood, ageing process, old age, transmission of memory, secrecy, contemporary British literature, Doris Lessing.

The line separating personal and social memory merges continually so that, as Michael G. Kenny explains, the nature of memory becomes a “key to personal, social, and cultural identity” (420). Thus, memories contribute to the shaping of the individual and also of the community, as individual memories are passed on to members of the community, usually the younger ones. It is precisely at this point that memory and ageing become almost complementary. The ageing process implies an accumulation of life experiences and knowledge most of which are shared with selected members of the community. Those life experiences which have been traumatic in some way and which form part of one’s personal story compose those perpetuating secrets which mark both, the individual and society.

In Doris Lessing’s *The Grandmothers*, published in 2003, ageing and memory merge together with the personal and the social while they prove that cultural beliefs and prejudices are constantly being outlanded in some cases, or reshaped in others, by passion and emotion. The choices each of the protagonists makes in relation to their personal experience are depicted as influencing the course of events in the community they belong to. The secrecy of those situations is disclosed through storytelling, either understood as the passing of information to younger members of the community or as the written stories that have reached us.

The lives of the protagonists of the four stories that form the volume have been marked by the uncontrollable passion which invaded them in the moment in which they actually most needed it. Their ageing process envelops and uncovers those moments by bringing wisdom and understanding to them. As Kathleen Woodward explains, “Erik Erikson has postulated that the wisdom of old age lies in the achievement of ‘integrity’”

which he imagines as “the acceptance of one’s one and only life cycle and of the people who have become significant to it as something that had to be and that, by necessity, permitted of no substitutions” (5). It is in this sense that the ageing process is presented as positive, although their communities fail to see through it, due to the negative aura that has traditionally surrounded old age since the Industrial Revolution.

The title of the volume, *The Grandmothers*, which coincides with the title of the first short story, already informs of the close relationship existing between memory and ageing, the personal and the community. The grandmother has been defined as the acceptable image of old age. In “Wrinkles of Vice, Wrinkles of Virtue: The Moral Interpretation of the Ageing Body” Mike Hepworth points to the moralising aim of images of ageing in Western culture, specifically focusing on the figure of the grandmother rooted in Victorian England and developed throughout the following decades. In a world that was advancing rapidly and in which high value was placed “upon youthful energy”, Hepworth argues that “old age became perceived as a threat to the values of a competitive, youthfully-oriented, commercialised society where there is also a strong allegiance to the promotion of scientific solutions to human problems” (56). In this context, the sweet, placid grandmother figure is spread so that it becomes “a socially acceptable symbol of a positive attitude towards old age” (55). By analysing the figure of the granny as portrayed in Victorian painting, Hepworth not only reaches the conclusion that this innocent figure became prominent in Victorian times, but also that it represented an acceptable side of old age in the English society of the end of the nineteenth century.

In fact, nowadays images of positive ageing are not far away from that of the Victorian grandmother. When analysing contemporary images of positive ageing, Mike Hepworth introduces the pervasive influence of consumer culture as suggesting and constantly reminding those in their 50s and 60s that, by acquiring a number of products and services, the path leading to old age cannot be stopped but, at least, it can be soothed. Thus, Mike Featherstone and Mike Hepworth refer to the cover of the Spring 1993 issue of *050* (Association of Retired Persons) as a contemporary example of positive ageing, where “an exuberant middle-aged couple are displayed clinging lovingly together in a wild country garden” (32). Indeed, this idyllic image is superimposed by “signposts to this month’s selection from the stock-in-trade ingredients of the commercialized version of positive ageing: ‘healthy living’ for the over 50s; ‘cosmetic surgery—would you dare?’; ‘seven ways to improve your memory’” (32). Featherstone and Hepworth conclude that “following a lingering tradition dating at least back to images of later life in Victorian painting, positive aging is intimately associated with the countryside” so that “[r]ustic imagery” becomes “a pervasive characteristic of successful retirement” (32). It is in this sense that the Victorian image of the placid and quiet grandmother is still present in nowadays’ conception of positive ageing. However, an important difference is that British contemporary grandmothers have certain economic status and, thus, the intrinsic fear of biological ageing and senility present in any human being is lured by constant consumerism.

In the four short stories, the figure of the grandmother is presented as far away from this nurturing, quiet and almost elusive Victorian grandmother. Each of the stories depicts a grandmother within a very different cultural context and, thus, community. In each of them, no matter the age of the old person or her cultural background, a secret is kept in order to protect younger generations. Indeed, this imbues the grandmother with wisdom; however, it also places a cultural or familiar weight onto those younger

generations who will have to make sense of those secrets. In this sense, Doris Lessing's personal circumstances come to the surface in this volume. As a woman in old age who lived in South-Africa until her early twenties and who emigrated to a post-world war London quite transformed from the contemporary one; as an ever acute observer of the society around her as well as analyser of her personal and historical circumstances, she seems to picture the ruined bridge that exists between older and younger generations, from both parts and in a reciprocal way. From older to younger generations, because the grandparents overprotect their descendants with their secrets; that is, keeping valuable information about their personal and public lives to themselves. From younger to older generations, because in a globalised world in which consumerism is increasingly becoming a religion, old age is synonymous with old fashion and sterility. In an interview with Billy Gray, published in 2007, Lessing explains "I read something the other day that was quite interesting... a little phrase that said: "Lucky the culture where the old can talk to the young and the young can talk to the old, and it's true, the young can't talk to the old" (Gray 94). In this sense, Lessing manages to question the place and significance of recurrent boundaries still existing at the beginning of the twenty-first century: between generations, between races and cultures and, even, between genders. Furthermore, as mentioned above, passion—as intrinsic to the human condition—is the continuing line present in all the stories.

In the first short story, "The Grandmothers" Roz and Lil are two women reaching their sixties who had been friends since their childhood. As young women, they were attractive and assertive and, thus, they soon got married and had a son each, Tom and Ian respectively. However, the strong friendship which united them had made their husbands feel they were left apart. After one of the husbands leaves and the other dies, the mothers and the sons are left on their own. The ties between mothers and sons become so strong that the caring Roz and Lil had for their sons push them into having love affairs. Roz and Lil contribute to the sexual initiation of Ian and Tom and, that initiation results in passionate relationships that last for a few years throughout which the boys became adults and the women enter old age. It is then, when Roz and Lil feel their bodies ageing, that they urge their sons and lovers to get married and have a family. As Roz shouts to Ian one occasion, "What did you think? We'd all just go on, indefinitely, then you and Tom, two middle-aged men, bachelors, and Roz and me, old and then you two, old, without families, and Roz and I, old, old, old ... we're getting on for old now, can't you see?" (50).

Therefore, Tom and Ian marry younger women. However, it is in this new life, in which the secrets that the future grandmothers have allowed to perpetuate, interfere with the happiness of all of them. Tom and Ian never fall in love with their young and beautiful wives, despite the fact that they have a daughter each. Instead, the young women always feel there is something from which they are left out until Mary, Tom's wife, finds out about the secret. The secret is always present in the lives of the protagonists in "The Grandmothers", a secret which is unseemly and which cannot be disclosed, but which contributes to create a lack in the emotional part of present and coming generations; that is, the two little girls who have Roz and Lil as their grandmothers, since the two girls will never understand the origin of their mothers' unhappiness and of their fathers' unloving attitude towards their mothers. As Mary concludes at the end of the story, "[w]hen she stood on the path with Hannah, below Baxter's Gardens, and heard Roz's laughter, she knew it was a mocking laughter. It mocked her, Mary, and she understood everything at last. It was all clear to her" (56). In

this short story, the limited role of a grandmother is clearly trespassed. Far from the nurturing figure, quiet and sterile, “the grandmothers” could be considered the “matriarchs” of this small clan in which everything is under their spell. Despite their own expectations, the ageing of their bodies have not deprived them of the power they still have over their sons and, by extension, over their families. In her article “Aging and the Scandal of Anachronism”, Mary Russo acknowledges the fact that the advances on technology and medicine have allowed women to face old age, not only as a time of loss and decrepitude, but as a time of empowerment in which “the developmental model of a woman’s life” is disrupted by “an untimeliness in relations between women.” (24) Thus, in the contemporary texts Russo analyses, she focuses on the fact that “the mother-daughter dyad is not erased so much as it is transformed by the anachronism of thinking backwards towards a future through a cross-generation bonding which outlives the norms of reproduction” (25). In Lessing’s short story “The Grandmothers”, it could be argued that “Roz’s mocking laughter” was actually making fun of the restrictive image of positive ageing as passive grandmothers as well as of the limited role ageing and old women are granted in contemporary society when, at least in case of the short story’s protagonists’, their accumulated experience has empowered them rather than weakened their status as ageing women.

In “Victoria and the Staveney”, the grandmother, Jessy Staveney, is presented as a character who becomes the apparently passive agent of the facts that will follow. Victoria meets the Staveney when she was nine years old. The Staveney were an unusual family in the sense that they were open to help and take home any child who needed it. It is after Victoria’s mother’s death, when her only family, her aunt, is taken to hospital that Victoria spends a night in the Staveney and meets Edward, a young boy who becomes her only close acquaintance for that night. Over the years, Victoria remembers Edward as a charmed cavalier, attentive and caring, the kind of person who could fill in the emptiness the loss of her mother and aunt had left in her life. Over the years, she also remembers the first impression Jessy caused in her: “Her eyes were large and green and Victoria thought they were witches’ eyes. Her mother talked often about witches, and while her aunt never did, it was her mother’s sing-song incantory voice that stayed in the child’s mind, explaining the bad things that happened. And they so often did” (68).

As if having been cursed by Jessy Staveney and enchanted by Edward Staveney, Victoria’s life suffers a turn when she meets Edward’s younger brother, Thomas, a few years later and they start a love affair over the summer. Whereas Victoria is looking for that young man who would save her from her harsh life, as he had done when she was nine years old, Thomas is lured by Victoria’s black skin. However, after the summer, Victoria finds out she is pregnant so that the link with the Staveney becomes stronger, even though Victoria will not become aware of it until her daughter is six years old. After having her daughter, Victoria marries another man and has another baby but her husband dies and, once again, almost without being aware of it, she finds herself strolling near the Staveney’s home and decides to call Thomas to tell him about his daughter. As Victoria reflects about those past years, she realises her life had been driven by some external force she could not control even if she had tried to:

Good luck and bad luck. What could you call it, that day, when they had forgotten her and her aunt was sick, and Edward had taken her home? Good luck—was it? She had lived for years in a dream, she knew that now, thinking

about that house, all rosy golden lights and warmth and kindness. Edward. And Edward had led to Thomas. What sort of luck had that been? Well, she had got Mary from it, a solemn little girl with beautiful eyes—like her own. [...]

Victoria seemed to herself like a little helpless thing that had been buffeted about, by strokes of luck, not knowing what was happening, or why. But now she was not helpless, at last she had her wits about her. What did she want? Simply that Mary should be acknowledged by the Staveney's, and after that—well, they would all have to see. (104)

Despite the fact that Victoria's secret, her daughter Mary, is disclosed, the difference between social classes and, even, races is perpetuated. As the Staveney's get to know Mary, they literally fall in love with the child and gradually drag her towards their world and, thus, Victoria becomes fully aware of the actual secret that will be perpetuated, that is, a barrier between these two worlds:

Mary would go to that good school where most girls were white. She would have many battles to fight, of a different sort from the roughhousing of Beowulf. The Staveney's would be Mary's best support. Probably, when the girl was about thirteen, the Staveney's would ask if she, Victoria, could consider Mary going to boarding school. Neither they nor Mary would have to spell out the reasons why Mary must find things easier, for she would no longer have to fit herself into two different worlds, every day. Victoria would say yes, and that would be that. (128)

In fact, over Victoria's relationship with the Staveney's, it is Mary's grandmother, Jessy Staveney, who insists on nursing Victoria the night her mother died, when she was a child, and it is also her who convinces her family to take care of Mary. In a way, she is the one who bewitches Victoria the first time they meet, with her nice manners and her comfortable house, and the one who makes Mary fall in love with her family. However, as Victoria's words uncover in the previous quote, Jessy Staveney's generosity towards Victoria and her daughter can be translated as perpetuating the unbridgeable gap that still exists between their two communities. In her critical review of *Spiritual Exploration in the Works of Doris Lessing* by Phyllis Sternberg, Kyle Friedow defines Doris Lessing's short stories as "superb" and characterises them as communicating "truths concerning humanity by presenting clear, well-written images of human interactions" (1). According to Friedow, "[t]hese interactions' major effect on individuals and society are recognized immediately by a reader. The reader has been led to the plot's climax, and while appreciating the ending, the reader often continues to ponder how things might continue" (1). Thus, in "Victoria and the Staveney's", the reader becomes witness of the unequal relationship between Victoria and Jessy Staveney, as the matriarch of the Staveney's, and is almost imbued to question the future of Victoria and Mary within the Staveney's community and, thus, to consider why those differences exist and how they are perpetuated.

In the third text, "The Reason for It", Doris Lessing presents the story of a community quite different from our own, set in an undefined time and place. Similar to the previous story, the grandmother and ruler of the community, Destra, becomes the agent of a number of events that will lead that community from being a model of prosperity and peace to being laughed at by their neighbours. And, as in "Victoria and

the Staveney's", a number of questions related to the changing values in our present-day society come to the surface for the reader to consider.

The story starts when Destra, the wisest ruler the community has known until then, realises she is growing old and decides to take twelve children from families that were known "for their probity and their good sense" in order to become "The Guardians of the people" (139); in other words, Destra intends to prepare those twelve children to make sure that her reign of prosperity and peace is continued. Among the twelve chosen ones, there is also Destra's son, DeRod. When Destra's time to die arrives, she gathers her twelve apprentices and asks them to choose the next ruler. Despite the fact that they are aware that DeRod is not the best candidate for the throne, "the Twelve" are guided by their willingness to please Destra on her death bed, even though she had told them several times that they had to choose the best ruler for their country. In fact, the narrator of the story, himself a grandfather, considers they had also probably chosen DeRod because they "were all a bit in love with" him. As he explains,

[t]here was nothing much about him to dislike ever. Perhaps he was too eager to please, always, to fall in, to agree. He was such a beautiful child, and then as beautiful a youth. He was tall and slight, with dark eyes that compelled, and brooded, and with a gleam in them that we joked was because of his inheritance: Destra had those eyes too. (143)

However, DeRod turns to be a deeply unwise ruler not only because he was incapable of taking decisions considering what would make their country advance, but also because he seemed to be devoid of emotion and intelligence. However, it is not until his old age, nearing his hundredth birthday, that the narrator of the story, called Twelve, becomes aware of the reason behind their wrong choice. The twelve youngsters whom Destra had instructed acted out of deep admiration that had turned into passion both for Destra and her son. They had been outshone by Destra's beauty and common sense; the deep love they felt for Destra, who had acted as their surrogate grandmother, had eclipsed their realisation that DeRod was actually an idiot. As Twelve explains,

This was the fearsome, feared DeRod; he was a giggling old man, an old buffer, naughty, like a child.[...] And that was the moment I understood. Oh, all kinds of enlightenment came flooding, rather late, but there it was, right in front of me. It was not that he had forgotten. Not that he had deliberately destroyed what was good. He had never known it was good. (178, 179)

This palpitating secret comes up to the protagonist almost all of a sudden when he meets DeRod again, after almost forty years, and they both are old men. In fact, it is suggested that old age had provided Twelve, the only wise man left in the community, a panoramic view of the last forty years through which he understood the decaying of his community was partly his mistake due to the wrong choice "the Twelve" had made in the past. Thus, he is determined to redeem that mistake before he dies.

One of the most outstanding activities in Destra's time was storytelling. She had actually created "The College of Storytellers and The College of Songmakers" in order to instruct and inform the community about their history, their good and bad deeds and learn from them. The role of the two colleges was also to educate children and teenagers on the prosperous values that had made their community advanced. When DeRod

became ruler, he had substituted both colleges for military instruction, so that all the economic resources in the community would be directed to the army. After having met DeRod and having realised their choice had been a mistake, Twelve decides to start educating his grandchildren himself, following Destra's teachings and, thus, plant the seed that may erase the ignorance and simplicity that DeRod's reign had promoted.

However, Twelve realises that this is a difficult task to do and to succeed in, because the young people in his community had been lured by the well-built bodies and militarised looks of the army as well as by the childlike messages enclosed in the military songs that had filled their city for the last forty years. In fact, with the disappearance of values such as study, effort and an eagerness to learn, his society had almost erased the word *wisdom* from their vocabulary and had accepted a set of values based on external appearance. Thus, as an old man, the protagonist was not respected among teenagers and young people, therefore, his task of trying to permeate his community with knowledge and a critical mind would become a real challenge. In fact, the few encounters he has with younger members of his community are never friendly. On one occasion in which Twelve was strolling in the woods,

[a] gang of seven young men appeared, running up though the trees towards me; they saw me, and then with the cries of excitement, as if they had glimpsed a running animal, came towards me. I stopped and faced them. They stopped, a few paces away. Each face was distorted into that sneer which is obligatory now.

'What have we got here?' said the leader. [...]

He snatched my stick away, so that I stumbled and nearly fell, and then used it to lift up the bottom of my robe far enough so they could admire my ancient sex (176)

In a way, this process is also present in our contemporary society in which, as pointed out in the introduction, the values of strength, power and youth are also enhanced and promised to be kept by consumer culture in detriment of the natural process which makes a human body become physically old, although not necessarily senile. As Hepworth and Featherstone argue in *Surviving Middle Age*, "[t]he media have played an important role in creating and maintaining this moral climate which challenges the view that the body naturally and inevitably runs down with age", a process that can be stopped with "the help of the ever-expanding range of slimming, health food, fitness and cosmetic aids and techniques" (6). Thus, Hepworth and Featherstone's study demonstrates that, in an increasing fashion, our worthiness as a person is more dependent on how successful we have been in keeping the signs of ageing at bay, than in the experience and wisdom acquired over a lifetime. In the society present in the short story, it is not the media and a culture based on consumerism, but a militarised state based on external appearance the one which turns the grandfather, understood as the old man who can offer his experience and wisdom to his community, into an insignificant member. However, Twelve will have to live with the fact that, supporting the wrong decision taken by "the Twelve", he had secretly contributed to the ignorance and superficiality in which his community was immersed. Ultimately, it was Destra's method of choice which had not ensured the continuation of a wise leader.

In "A Love Child", the fourth story in the collection, James is a university student who is called up to join the army in spring 1939. He is sent to a mission in India in a ship in which five thousand men were fit even though it was only designed for

seven hundred and eighty. After a voyage in which not only space, but also food and hygienic conditions were poor, the soldiers are allowed to spend four days in Cape Town in order to recover from the harsh conditions of their journey.

During that long trip, James could only think about his mother's sweetness which contrasted with his father's barren character and dreamt of finding a nice girl to love and care, to be loved and cared; something his parents had not managed to do with each other. It is during these four days in Cape Town that he comes quite close to one of the two hostesses that take care of the soldiers' well-being. Her name is Daphne, a delicate English girl who had moved to South Africa after having got married. An immediate attraction exists between Daphne and James, one that, once it is consummated, makes Daphne realise she has never really been in love with her husband and which makes James remember Daphne's gracefulness during the rest of his mission and his life. While in India, completing his mission, James finds out about Daphne's pregnancy quite by chance. As he reflects:

Pregnant. Nine months. It fitted. The baby was his. It had to be. Funny, he had not once thought of a baby, though now he felt ridiculous that he hadn't. Babies resulted from lovemaking. But that was a bit of an abstract preposition. His lovemaking, with Daphne, what did it have to do with progenitive? With baby-making? No, it had not crossed his mind. Now he could think of nothing else. Over there, across all that sea, beyond the appalling Indian Ocean, was that fair city on its hills, and there in that house was his only love with his baby. (277)

When the war finishes, James goes back to England, gets married and has a baby, but still feels quite incomplete. As soon as he is allowed to travel to Cape Town, he goes there and tries to find Daphne and his son. However, he only finds Daphne's friend who convinces him to go away not to destroy Daphne's life; and, so, James goes back to his home and his family with the sense of incompleteness that would accompany him all his life.

The story questions to what extent James and Daphne were exposed to the circumstances brought about by previous generations, their parents and grandparents. James was marked by the cold relationship between his parents and his experience in the war, whereas Daphne was trying to become the perfect wife and mother of a man she did not even love because this was what was expected of her. As James expresses, both of them were living a life which was not their own. Still, there was that secret which would unite them for ever; that is, their son. In a way, James and Daphne had somehow managed to deceive the social patterns and historical circumstances that had brought them together and apart at the same time. In fact, the paths their lives were following could be compared to James's conception of the war: "War is not a continuum, but long periods of inaction and boredom interrupted by fits of intense activity; that is to say, fighting, danger, death, and then boredom and quiescence again" (280). James and Daphne's lives had actually followed the pattern of a war. They had been led by boredom and quiescence interjected with their short love affair, a moment of action and danger that would remain in them.

In all four stories, passion is the conducting line which makes their protagonists counterbalance those social norms and expectations that would have made their lives devoid of it. As they grow older, they realise that deep admiration and love had been an uncontrollable force that had kept the outcomes of their passion as secrets they could

only display to a few. It is in that sense that their deep feelings contribute to maintain vivid memories of past events alive so that they can be taken as examples to follow or to reject. As Linda Belau explains, trauma “is the source of repression, which bars and distorts every possible memory of the past” (xviii). In all the stories, trauma is compensated by memories of those moments in which passionate love was present.

At the same time, the restricted image of the Victorian grandmother, as an acceptable image of old age, is questioned by presenting attractive, powerful and assertive grandmothers and grandparents, who not always take the right decision and whose mistakes have a direct consequence on the coming generations. Whereas Lil and Roz and Jessy Staveney, the grandmothers in the first two stories, are depicted as empowered elderly women whose power contributes to perpetuate their own standards within their respective families, the lack of perspective of the almost invisible grandmothers in the two last stories make their children live in an unfair world and, thus, wish for a better one. In “A Reason for It,” Destra’s and Twelve’s wrong decision results in a disastrous future for their country, a puzzle that only someone from her own generation, another grandfather, can understand and try to solve. Similarly, in the last story, “the love child,” will be a victim of the historical circumstances –a war– brought about by his grandparents, at the same time he will become a redeemer of such circumstances, since he is the natural result of love and passion.

The perpetuating secrets enclosed in this volume, in each of the families and communities depicted, bring to the surface the fact that bridges still have to be built between generations, between cultures and even between genders. The figure of the grandmother or a grandfather, is presented differently in each of the stories in the volume. However, the four perspectives previously analysed contribute to make the reader question the place left to the ageing process as well as to old citizens in a society which is not only rapidly changing, but also ageing. The fact that no human being can escape the ageing process places the question of ageing centre-stage as it not only informs of the kind of society which is being built, but mainly of the values that become the pillars of the culture intrinsic to that society, as it is clearly posed in the short story “The Reason for It”.

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Özet

Sırlarımızı Ebedileştirmek: Doris Lessing'in *The Grandmothers* Adlı Eserinde Yaşlanma ve Bellek

Dış görünüş ve gizlilik hem aileler hem de uluslarda yinelenen öğeler olmuştur. Gizli aşklar, söylenmeyen kişisel tercihler ve hatta gayri meşru çocuklar bile hem iyi hem kötü önemli kararlara sebep olmuştur. *The Grandmothers* eserine uyan dört kısa öyküde Doris Lessing tarihte farklı noktalarda aile ve uluslarda iz bırakmış ebedileşen sırları keşfetmektedir. Bu derlemede, yasak tutku ve gayri resmi aşk konusu toplumlarında kabul görmeleri için bunları sır olarak saklamalarını gerektiren büyük annelerin yaşamlarını işgal etmektedir. *The Grandmothers* eserinde travma olgusu duyguların sosyal norm ve kısıtlamaları aştığı anların belleği ile dengelenmektedir. Aynı zamanda bu anılar yaşlı kişiyi toplumda şaşırtıcı biçimde görünmez kılan yaşlanma sürecini aydınlatmaktadır. Bu çalışma, Doris Lessing'in kurgusal dünyasında uzun süredir yerleşmiş konular olan, *The Grandmothers* eserindeki duygu ve norm, bellek ve travma, yaşlanma ve toplum kavramları arasındaki karmaşık ara bağlantıları incelemektedir.

Anahtar Sözcükler: büyük annelik, yaşlanma süreci, yaşlılık, belleğin iletilmesi, gizlilik, çağdaş Britanya edebiyatı, Doris Lessing.

**No Leisurely Stroll Through Arab and Punjabi London:
Transnational Cityscapes in Hanan Al-Shaykh's *Only in London*
and Meera Syal's *Life Isn't All Ha Ha Hee Hee***

Christiane Schlote

Abstract: Today's metropolises are marked by a multicultural topography of people, cultures and spaces which have had a significant impact on the transformation of urban social relations and on reconceptualizations of what constitutes a city. The urban experience has not only been an essential factor in shaping artists' lives and works, but the process of reading a city through its literary representations has also gained new momentum in times of increased and globalised flows of people and capital. In the context of transnational and diasporic literatures, the question of "whose city" is of particular importance. Drawing on conceptual frameworks from transnationalism and diaspora studies, this paper examines the gendered and class-inflected portrayals of London in Hanan Al-Shaykh's *Only in London* (2001) and Meera Syal's *Life Isn't All Ha Ha Hee Hee* (1999) with a particular focus on intercultural encounters and the appropriation and consumption of cultural markers. In addition to the analysis of Al-Shaykh and Syal's exploration of London's physical and social spaces, the paper also traces Al-Shaykh and Syal's thematic and structural reconfigurations of the genre of the urban novel.

Keywords: Arab London, cosmopolitanism, diaspora space, ideology of hybridity, intersectionality, migration, multigenerationalism, transnationalism, urban novel

Popular images of a thriving, multicultural city –
the capital of a 'Cool Britannia' –
conceal a more complex social world
shaped by the traces of empire.
John Eade (1)

In her study *The Power of Place: Urban Landscapes as Public History* (1997), Dolores Hayden refers to a debate between the urban sociologist Herbert J. Gans and the architectural critic Ada Louise Huxtable about historic preservation in New York City, which was featured on the op-ed pages of the *New York Times* in January and February 1975, where Gans criticized New York's Landmarks Preservation Commission since "it tends to designate the stately mansions of the rich [...] the commission mainly preserves the elite portion of the architectural past. It allows popular architecture to disappear. [...] This landmark policy distorts the real past, exaggerates affluence and grandeur, and denigrates the present" (in Hayden 3). Notwithstanding the intriguing, yet seemingly indissoluble conflict between Gans's insistence on the importance of social history and Huxtable's emphasis on the preservation of the buildings' aesthetic qualities, it is Gans's understanding of such terms as 'vernacular' and "neighbourhood" which provides an important starting point for this essay's exploration of transnational, gendered and class-inflected cityscapes in Hanan Al-

Shaykh's *Only in London* (2001) and Meera Syal's *Life Isn't All Ha Ha Hee Hee* (1999).¹

According to Hayden, Gans's use of the word "vernacular" referred to the classification of buildings "by social use [...] definitions of social class and accessibility, and implying tenements, sweatshops, saloons, and public bathhouses". For Gans neighbourhood "meant a complex network of social as well as spatial ties, and implied a working-class population" (Hayden 4). Proceeding from the notion that personal "politics and personal identity are defined by place, at the same time as they are constitutive of place" (Dear 251) and that theorists mainly identify physical space and social space as "two types of space superimposed on or coexisting with each other" (Gilbert 103), this essay examines Al-Shaykh and Syal's portrayal of physical and social places in London with a particular focus on urban class and gender subjectivities, intercultural encounters and the appropriation and consumption of cultural markers as well as Al-Shaykh and Syal's thematic and structural reconfigurations of the genre of the urban novel.²

Analytically, this article draws on concepts from transnational and postcolonial theories and from urban studies. Scholars such as Shirley Geok-lin Lim and David Palumbo-Liu have identified transnational and postcolonial theories as the most promising "analytic frameworks to replace the focus on discrete ethnic communities in the field [...] because they reflect the complexities of [...] experiences on the ground and also allow connections with work on other immigrant communities" (Davé et al. 80). This multidimensional and inter-ethnic approach also reflects what Avtar Brah has described in her concept of "diaspora space", defined as a site of "intersectionality of diaspora, border, and dis/location", which is marked not only by the border crossings "across the dominant/dominated dichotomy", but by the "traffic within cultural formations of the subordinated groups [...] not *always* mediated through the dominant culture(s)" (209) (emphasis original).

Certainly, neither *Only in London* nor *Life Isn't All Ha Ha Hee Hee* can be read as representative of the experiences within either Arab/Arab-British or South-Asian/British-Asian communities as a whole. This kind of sociological reading not only denies these urban novels their literary value, but it also disregards the heterogeneity within these groups, precisely because, as Stuart Hall has stated, we "cannot speak for very long, with any exactness, about 'one experience and one identity' [...] Cultural identities come from somewhere, have histories [...] identities are the names we give to the different ways we are positioned by, and position ourselves within, the narratives of the past" (435). Al-Shaykh and Syal speak from specific historical and socio-cultural positions which are also influential in their work. Al-Shaykh was born in Beirut, grew

¹ Hanan Al-Shaykh, *Only in London* (London: Bloomsbury, 2001; first published in Arabic as *Innaha London ya 'azizi*, Beirut: Dar al-Adab, 2001) and Meera Syal, *Life Isn't All Ha Ha Hee Hee* (London: Anchor, 1999). All subsequent page references in the text are to these editions.

² Since Al-Shaykh also draws on Arabic literary traditions, it is important to note that the use of spatial metaphors in connection with identity is also evident in Egyptian fiction, for example: "Like all major features of Egyptian fiction, the deployment of space often resonates with reflections on, and of, identity. Specific configurations and mappings of carefully demarcated areas of the shared national space occasion different readings of the collective and communal identity residing therein." (Siddiq 34)

up in Lebanon in the 1940s and also lived in Egypt and Saudi Arabia, before eventually moving to London. Syal spent her childhood in a small West Midlands village during the 1960s, before moving to London and garnering awards as a popular actress, comedian, writer and screenwriter.

Yet, there are several characteristics which allow for a comparative analysis of their London novels. On a biographical level, both writers have experienced cultural alienation, whether through migration (as in Al-Shaykh's case) or through growing up in Britain as second-generation British Asian (as in Syal's case), and these experiences (including racial encounters, xenophobia and exoticisation) are reflected and addressed in their work. If we understand Al-Shaykh and Syal's remapping of London as a process which Graham Huggan, drawing on Gilles Deleuze and Félix Guattari's notion of the map as "a rhizomatic ('open') rather than as a falsely homogeneous ('closed') construct", describes as a shift of emphasis from "de- to reconstruction, from *mapbreaking* to *mapmaking*" (Huggan 29) (emphasis original), then we see that both, Al-Shaykh and Syal, rely on a similar cast of mainly female characters, whose racial, gender and class identities go beyond binary theories of absolute difference or absolute universality and who are marked by attempts to escape predetermined cultural, gender or social roles imposed on them.³ In this way, in their respective representation of London, Al-Shaykh and Syal also engage, both thematically and narratologically, in disturbing what Kaja Silverman has called "dominant fiction", that is "the ideological reality through which we 'ideally' live both the symbolic order and the mode of production" (in Bingaman, Sanders and Zorach 4), which, applied to space, makes a city's topographical features "to appear visible or invisible, bounded or porous", where spatial "boundaries become psychologically coded barriers: walls, gates [...] decaying buildings, parts of the city where 'you' [...] 'don't' go" (Bingaman, Sanders and Zorach 4).

Theoretical Reflections

The urban narratives in *Only in London* and *Life Isn't All Ha Ha Hee Hee* are embedded in and also engage in a critique of a number of discourses that have recently been dominant in the discussion of contemporary metropolitan life, among them diaspora studies, transnationalism and questions of cosmopolitan theory and practice. According to Revathi Krishnaswamy, the conflation of diaspora as a figurative concept with a particular community is highly problematic: "[t]he metaphorization of postcolonial migrancy is becoming so overblown, overdetermined, and amorphous as to

³ For Niran Abbas acts "of mapping are creative, sometimes anxious, moments in coming to knowledge of the world, and the map is both the spatial embodiment of knowledge and a stimulus to further cognitive engagements. [...] Mapping is neither secondary nor representational, but doubly operative: digging, finding, and exposing on the one hand, and relating, connecting, and structuring on the other" (1). In a similar vein, Christina Ljungberg explains writers' fascination with maps "in their own constant struggle with the limitations of writing. [...] Aritha van Herk, for instance, admits that she is often looking for an opportunity to introduce a mapmaker or surveyor in her fiction, in order to enhance the fact that writers and cartographers alike must 'grapple with the urgency to transform reality into a sign' [...] although both maps and texts are abstractions, the map's superior spatial representation makes it seem much closer to the geographical, 'real' world than a written text, in which there is no such direct resemblance between the words and the forms, relationships or processes that the writer tries to express" (Ljungberg 160). See also Howard (2010).

repudiate any meaningful specificity of historical location or interpretation". (94) Moreover, while, as Deepika Petraglia-Bahri explains, in the case of the South Asian diaspora, concepts of hybridity and liminal identity are applied most regularly, "populations in homeland locations remain under-theorised or seen as fundamentally sundered from their expatriate fellows in the diaspora" (125). In addition and, bearing in mind Brah's important reminder that "the question is not simply who travels but when, how, and under what circumstances?" (182), my understanding of diaspora also draws on recent anthropological reconceptualisations of diaspora, as exemplified in Martin Sökefeld's definition of diaspora: "Migrants do not necessarily form a diaspora but they may *become* a diaspora by developing a new imagination of community, even many years after the migration took place" (267) (emphasis original)

Recently, academic interest has partly shifted from diaspora discourses to transnationalism and discourses of cosmopolitanism. Transnationalism, which Sallie Westwood and Annie Phizacklea have defined as a process "by which immigrants forge and sustain multi-stranded social relations that link together their societies of origin and settlement" and which allows them "to lead political, economic and social 'dual lives' through the creation of 'dense' cross-border networks" (116), is by no means a new phenomenon.⁴ Nonetheless, as Avtar Brah et al. point out, although globalisation in the sense of a process of the mobility of people is "as old as humankind itself", after the trans-Atlantic slave trade migrations "have tended to acquire a dynamics of their own," as all subsequent movements include voluntary and involuntary migrations (5). For a more substantial analysis of transnational processes and transnational actors, particularly within an urban environment, it is crucial to follow Edward Said's still relevant differentiation between "exiles, refugees, expatriates, and émigrés", precisely because expatriates "voluntarily live in an alien country, usually for personal or social reasons" and while they "may share in the solitude and estrangement of exile [...] they do not suffer under its rigid proscriptions" (181).

According to Nadjie Al-Ali and Khalid Koser, a transnational perspective can illuminate international migration processes in three new ways: a) it shows that migration is not an anomaly, b) it allows a broader focus on the changes within the society of origin and the host society and c) it points towards a reconstruction of "home" and "locality" (3-4). It stands to reason whether transnationalism has contributed to the renaissance of conventional cosmopolitan discourses or has, in fact, partly engendered the so-called "new cosmopolitanisms", which are marked by their call for local contextualisations of global transformations, as formulated, for example, by Pheng Cheah and Bruce Robbins (1998). As Robbins observes: "The interest of the term *cosmopolitanism* is located, then, not [...] where it becomes a paranoid fantasy or ubiquity [...], but rather (paradoxically) in its local applications" (260) (emphasis original)⁵

⁴ Michael P. Smith uses the term "transnational urbanism" as a marker "of the criss-crossing transnational circuits of communication and cross-cutting local, translocal, and transnational social practices that 'come together' in particular places at particular times and enter into the contested politics of place-making [...] and the making of individual, group, national, and transnational identities" (5).

⁵ For a recent survey of cosmopolitan discourses see Carol A. Breckenridge, Sheldon Pollock, Homi K. Bhabha and Dipesh Chakrabarty, eds., *Cosmopolitanism* (Durham, NC: Duke UP, 2002).

This new kind of cosmopolitan perspective is seen as “located and embodied” (Cheah and Robbins 2) and differs significantly from an uncritical celebration of hybridity. The ambiguous nature of the “ideology of hybridity”, to use Jonathan Friedman’s words (83), as propagated by certain segments of the cultural elite, has been a highly contested subject, particularly among postcolonial cultural critics such as Brah and Epifanio San Juan, who claim that processes of hybrid identification have very little value for underclass neighbourhoods or the urban poor in Western and non-Western societies. Similarly, John McLeod has emphasised the need for a reading of postcolonial London that avoids “cheerleading ‘the pleasures of difference’” and “steers clear of the thoughtless romanticizing of migration and settlement” (15). In the following, I will sketch the significance of these concepts in regard to Al-Shaykh and Syal’s respective representation of the urban social experiences of their migrant and non-migrant characters, whose cosmopolitan encounters are also clearly marked by social disparities and gender inequality.

Locating and Narrating Arab and South Asian London

Long before their designation as global or world cities by urban theorists in the early 1990s, metropolises such as London and New York have been marked by their cultural, racial and ethnic diversity. Both cities have been traditional immigrant meccas, whether immigrants came to the city as refugees, labour migrants or cosmopolitan elites. As Peter Ackroyd states in his biography of London: “London has always been a city of immigrants” (701), ranging from immigrants from Gaul, Greece and North Africa during the time of the Roman settlement to Jewish and Russian refugees and Irish labour migrants in the nineteenth century to later migration from the Caribbean, Africa and South Asia (701ff.).⁶ The immigration histories and sites of Arab and South Asian migration to London are of particular importance for the analysis of cityscapes in *Only in London* and *Life Isn’t All Ha Ha Hee Hee*.

The spatial heart of London’s visible Arab community lies along Edgware Road between Maida Vale and Marble Arch with its bilingual Arab restaurants, shops and services. Although the area has been the home of a lively Arab community since the first labour migrants arrived from Egypt and Morocco in the 1960s, it was only in 2002 that a report was published by the *Voices for London Policy Commission* on the Arab community in London, which declared that despite the 500,000 Arabs in Britain (more than half of them living in London), they remain an “invisible minority ethnic community” within the British capital, mainly due to the absence of an Arab category in the census and the ensuing paucity of data (London Civic Forum 2002). This lack of information and literature in regard to Arab people in Britain is particularly striking, not only when compared to the relative wealth of U.S. research on Arab Americans since the late 1960s, but also in view of the fact that, “after the oil price rise of 1973”, prestigious London property now belongs to Arab buyers such as Crewe House in Curzon Street, London Bridge City, the Dorchester Hotel and Harrods (Sheppard 359), although this part of Arab London is less visible at first sight.

The two main locations of South Asian London are similar in that both are located outside Central London, with its hub, Southall, situated near Heathrow. Although also home to white and recently a Somali community, the majority population

⁶ See also Ron Ramdin, *Reimagining Britain. Five Hundred Years of Black and Asian History* (London: Pluto Press, 1990) and Visram (2002).

is South Asian (particularly Punjabi Sikhs), of which upwardly mobile segments also aim to move to the more middle-class suburbs of Wembley or Harrow (Sheppard 346). The second site, Brick Lane in Spitalfields, is located in London's traditional immigrant quarter of the East End. Its population is mainly comprised of Bangladeshi immigrants and has recently been targeted as one of the prime locations to be turned into a tourist attraction called "Banglatown" (Jacobs 99), not least as a strategy to counter the dire circumstances (high unemployment and welfare) of the Tower Hamlets borough to which it belongs. The British 2001 census lists "Black or Black British" and "Asian or Asian British" as the two major non-white groups in Britain, of which British Asians (mainly of Indian, Pakistani, Bangladeshi and other Asian origins) make up half of Britain's non-white population and four percent of its population as a whole.⁷ As Rozina Visram has shown in a rich historical study, *Asians in Britain: 400 Years of History* (2002), South Asian migration to Britain can be traced back to the colonial period.

The urban experience has always been an essential factor in shaping artists' lives and works and the different migration trajectories of London immigrants have been narrated and also rescued from historical obscurity by different writers. Classic literary and cinematic accounts of London have been complemented with the urban visions of Sam Selvon, Hanif Kureishi and Salman Rushdie, to name but a few, in addition to recent gendered metropolitan accounts by Monica Ali, Bernadine Evaristo, Zadie Smith and others. Importantly, as Joseph Pivato points out, in the past "ethnic minority writing was reduced to the oral history of immigrants or to the sociology of new settlement in ethnic neighbourhoods" and writers were often criticized for their use of literary realism. Pivato argues, however, that it "is precisely because of this attention to the realistic representation of the immigrant story" that writers "strike a responsive chord in readers because they are reconstructing a history [...] which has been lost and neglected. [...] this biographical dimension increases rather than diminishes the literary value of their work" (158).

However, whether we consider Monica Ali and Buchi Emecheta's use of more realist conventions or Selvon's innovative use of linguistic structures and Evaristo's experimental urban storytelling, all of these writers highlight London's irreversible multiethnic and multilingual character and its transnational cast of residents, ranging from impoverished labour migrants to the considerably smaller number of cosmopolitan elites, who are still often absent in other London fiction. While, inevitably, drawing on previous urban texts—by migrant and non-migrant writers—"each writer makes manifest a quite different London from his or her own contemporaries [...] with an effort to map London in a manner which unfolds [...] the contemporary networks of power, discourse, ideology [...] all of which flow through the sites and locations of London" (Wolfreys 11). As such the texts of these earlier city fictions and the "text" of the physical city" merge and turn "the city into a palimpsest" (Ferguson 38).

The urban novel remains the preferred genre for exploring socio-economic and cultural transformations on a larger scale. Given that we live in a millennium in which, for the first time, the majority of people will live in cities, the proliferation of urban fiction comes as no surprise. Before I proceed with an exploration of Al-Shaykh and Syal's generic adaptations and narrative strategies in representing diasporic and cosmopolitan life in London, I would like to briefly take up an important point John Clement Ball has argued in his study *Imagining London: Postcolonial Fiction and the*

⁷ See <http://www.statistics.gov.uk/cci/nugget.asp?id=455>.

Transnational Metropolis (2004), which is also particularly relevant for the comparative analysis of Al-Shaykh and Syal's London narratives, and that is the generational effect on urban and, particularly, on London writing. Ball differentiates between fast-paced London novels which provide its readers with a panorama of urban subcultures (such as Diran Adebayo's *Some Kind of Black*, 1996, and Atima Srivastava's *Transmission*, 1992), but which in their present-orientedness also completely neglect the migration trajectories of the parent generation, and those London narratives (and he counts Kureishi's *The Buddha of Suburbia* and Zadie Smith's *White Teeth* among them) which are multigenerational. Whereas, for Ball, due to the focus on family relations, the latter portray London as a transnational capital, the former do not narrate London as a "temporally and spatially relational space" (Ball 225-26). It remains to be seen whether multigenerationalism can be used as an indicator for urban transnationalism in *Only in London* and *Life Isn't All Ha Ha Hee Hee*, or whether Al-Shaykh and Syal resort to other markers in their representation of a transnational London.

In their essay, "Whatever Happened to the Urban Novel?" (2003), Bart Keunen and Bart Eeckhout trace the effects of post-industrial transformations on the genre of the urban novel and clearly show that due to the historical and socio-cultural transformations of the past decades, contemporary urban fiction needs to be analysed within a very different critical framework (such as transnationalism, for example) than its nineteenth- and early twentieth-century generic predecessors, as will be shown in the following analyses of urban class and gender subjectivities, intercultural encounters and consumerism in *Only in London* and *Life Isn't All Ha Ha Hee Hee*.

Subjectivities, Intercultural Encounters and Cultural Consumption

Hanan Al-Shaykh, who came to London in 1982, would not necessarily be included in a list of so-called London novelists. Yet "writing the city" is not a new concept for her, since with *Beirut Blues* (1992) she already inscribed her hometown Beirut into the urban literary landscape. It took her more than ten years, however, to be able to write about London, her adopted hometown: "I started tampering and playing with the question of place. How it is influencing people. [...] I have been thinking of the city and how it has received and is still receiving immigrants. [...] They are like a pot full of ingredients, full of reasons. [...] But, inevitably, they really change, no matter how they are holding on to their traditions" (Schlote 2003, n.p.). In *Only in London* Al-Shaykh's exploration of urban space and identity politics is centred around the migrant experiences of four characters who arrive in London, with London as an additional fifth one, as also evident in the novel's dedication to two individuals and "to London".⁸

Only in London opens with a prologue, which literally throws together the four protagonists as they are caught in heavy turbulences on their flight from Dubai to London. Amira, a Moroccan prostitute, the newly-divorced Lamis, who fled from Iraq as a child and married a rich Iraqi businessman who took her to London, the Lebanese Samir, who has fled from his wife and five children in Beirut and his mistaken identity as a heterosexual male and the white British art dealer Nicholas, who shuttles between Britain and Oman. This initial image already captures the novel's main narrative of migration, displacement and loss. The fact that all characters (except Samir) fly Business Class indicates their social status within the international migrant community, which Al-Shaykh presents as far more heterogeneous than usually portrayed in media

⁸ The analysis of *Only in London* includes revised parts from Schlote 2004.

accounts.⁹ According to Keunen and Eeckhout, postmodern writers have been less concerned with classic urban motifs such as the arrival in the metropolis and socio-cultural transformations and conflicts in the material city, but much more with the city's semiotics. Yet the opening scene shows that such motifs remain important in the context of diasporic writing. Approaching London by air, all protagonists have already crossed various borders on their journey from Dubai, hinting at further boundary transgressions, as soon as they will touch the ground, as London and its attractions literally lie at their feet.

Reminiscent of early twentieth-century Jewish American urban fiction, abundant in images of an immigrant's awe at first catching sight of the Statue of Liberty in New York Harbor, the contrast between the protagonists' point of departure (dry and arid Dubai) and that of their arrival (lush, green England) is portrayed just as awe-inspiring: "Everything was green. [...] The Arab passengers craned their necks and exclaimed in wonder [...]. The doctors in the Gulf had actually been known to prescribe a summer in England for their patients" (*OL* 4). This pastoral image of England as a place of healing and recovery is again intensified spatially in each character's personal story, as (apart from Nicholas, who is British) all three Arab protagonists have come from poorer countries (Morocco, Iraq, Lebanon) to a presumably promised land. The opening scene can further be read as a postcolonial reversal of the colonial accounts of British travellers who went to the Middle East for health reasons in the nineteenth and twentieth century, such as Lady Brassey, for instance, "who had decided to spend several months in Egypt during the winter of 1882-82 for health reasons, and indeed her journal indicates that she felt very much improved in the warm, dry climate" (Micklewright 70).

Syal's second novel, *Life Isn't All Ha Ha Hee Hee*, charts the city life of three British Asian women in their thirties: Chila, the "recent refugee from East Africa" who "was funnier, sweeter and kinder than anyone else" (20), the politically active Sunita, the one "Most Likely to Succeed" (19) but who has turned into a worn-out mother and Tania, the glamorous and successful urbanite who had "learned how to tread that fine line between tramp and tease" (40). In contrast to Al-Shaykh's already transnational opening, *Life Isn't All Ha Ha Hee Hee* is not only firmly located within the boundaries of Greater London but it puts the spotlight on a decidedly unglamorous part of the metropolis in the very first page of the novel¹⁰:

⁹ For an early account of Arab life in London see Tayeb Salih's *Season of Migration to the North* (written in Arabic in 1967) and for a recent account of the British Arab community in London see Robin Yassin-Kassab's *The Road from Damascus* (2008).

¹⁰ While Al-Shaykh's work, perhaps not surprisingly given that she writes exclusively in Arabic, has received relatively little critical attention in English Studies (see, for example, Vanessa Guignery, *(Re)Mapping London: Visions of the Metropolis in the Contemporary Novel in English*, Paris: Éditions Publibook, 2008; see El-Enany, 2006, for a perspective from Arab Studies), there have been new essays on Meera Syal's work, and particularly on her fiction, almost annually and analyses of *Life Isn't All Ha Ha Hee Hee* include Peter Childs, "Suburban Values and Ethni-Cities in Indo-Anglian Writing," *Expanding Suburbia. Reviewing Suburban Narratives*, ed. Roger Webster (London: Berghahn Books, 2000) 91-108; Monika Fludernik, "Imagined Communities as Imaginary Homelands: The South Asian Diaspora in Fiction", *Diaspora and Multiculturalism: Common Traditions and New Developments*, ed. Monika Fludernik (Amsterdam: Rodopi, 2003) 261-286; James Procter, *Dwelling Places: Postwar British Writing* (Manchester: Manchester UP, 2003), Bruce King, *The Internationalization of English Literature*, (Oxford: Oxford,

Not even snowfall could make Leyton look lovely. Sootfall was what it was [...] Pigeons shook their heads [...] on the unfamiliar roof which had once been the reassuring flat red tiles of the methodist church and was now a gleaming minaret. An old man picked up a frozen milk bottle from his front stop [...] And then he heard them. [...] felt the sound, like you always do when it brings the past with it. Clop-clop, there it was [...]. And then he was seven or ten again [...] racing his brother to open up the coal shute at the front of the house before the cart drew up and the man with the black face and bright smile groaned [...] ‘Come here!’ the old man shouted behind him. ‘Quickly! You hurry up and you’ll see a [...] bleedin’ hell!’ The horse turned the corner into his road [...] carrying what looked like a Christmas tree on its back. There was a man in the middle of the tinsel, pearls hanging down over his brown skin, suspended from a cartoon-size turban. [...] Swamped, thought the old man; [...] we’ll be swamped by them. But it isn’t like that, wet and soggy like Hackney Marshes. It’s silent and gentle, so gradual that you hardly notice it at all until you look up and see that everything’s different. (9-11)

It is worth quoting Syal’s opening at length, since, not unlike Al-Shaykh, this passage determines not only the themes but also the tone of the following urban narrative. On the one hand and in contrast to Ball’s argument regarding the lack of historical perspective in contemporary London fiction, Syal introduces the environment of the three female protagonists with a touching juxtaposition of East End life before and after the Second World War. Through the allegorical figure of a nameless old white man Syal subtly sketches a world that has changed forever and she situates South Asian migration within a broader historical framework of migration to London with the East End as one of its prime sites. Yet, she avoids indulging in the themes of memory and nostalgia by, simultaneously, reminding us of the darker side of immigrant life with a reference to Enoch Powell’s “Rivers of Blood” speech from 1968 and a time when the only “black face” the old man encountered as a young boy was that of the coalman.

Syal’s use of the wedding motif –so ubiquitous in (diasporic) South Asian cultural narratives, from *Monsoon Wedding* to *East Is East* and *Bend It Like Beckham*– does not only signify the cultural differences between British Asian/South Asian and white Britain, but it also heralds the start of intra-ethnic problems such as the dispersal of transnational families and community control, where Chila (who is the bride here) knows that her wedding video “is going all around the world to all the relatives who may never meet you, but will decide from the telly what sort of a wife and person you are.” (28) The spectacle-like nature of a Punjabi wedding also prepares the way for the staging of the three women’s individual performances on the stage called London.

2004); Gita Rajan, “Situated Identity: Chitra Divakaruni’s *The Vine of Desire* and Meera Syal’s *Life Isn’t All Ha Ha Hee Hee*”, *Sites of Ethnicity: Europe and the Americas*, ed. William Boelhower, Rocío G. Davis and Carmen Birkle (Heidelberg: Universitätsverlag Winter, 2004) 79-94; Ruvani Ranasinha, *South Asian Writers in Twentieth-Century Britain. Culture in Translation* (Oxford: Oxford UP, 2007); Dave Gunning, “Cultural Conservatism and the Sites of Transformation in Meera Syal’s *Life Isn’t All Ha Ha Hee Hee*”, *British Asian Fiction: Framing the Contemporary*, ed. Neil Murphy and Wai-Chew Sim (Amherst, NY: Cambria P, 2008) 119-140 and Devon Campbell-Hall, “Writing Second-Generation Migrant Identity in Meera Syal’s Fiction,” *Shared Waters: Soundings in Postcolonial Literatures*, ed. Stella Borg Barthet (Amsterdam: Rodopi, 2009) 289-306.

While the perception of the city as theatre/stage, labyrinth or place of conflict and/or possibility clearly depends on the socio-economic and political position of the city dweller, it partly also depends on their age. Like the characters in Kureishi's *The Buddha of Suburbia*, the protagonists in *Only in London* and *Life Isn't All Ha Ha Hee* often see London as an urban theatre which allows them to stage their evolving identities. In contrast to earlier London novels, which are often pervaded by an overall sense of urban despair and anguish, Al-Shaykh and Syal's Londoners are shown at playing the gamut of urban behavioural modes which Georg Simmel already identified 1903 in his essay "The Metropolis and Mental Life". According to Simmel, on the one hand, the metropolis offers the chance of achieving a higher degree of individual freedom. On the other hand, urbanites develop what Simmel calls a blasé attitude due to the psychic overstimulation in cities (Simmel in Whitworth 182).

This kind of urban freedom is particularly important in regard to women and migrant subjectivities. From a geographer's perspective, Doreen Massey has shown that "the home may be as much a place of conflict as of repose. [...] Many women have had to leave home precisely in order to forge their own version of their identities" (11, 164). Thus Tania, the brash embodiment of a progressive young British Asian woman with a job (documentary filmmaker) in the media and an acute awareness of its preposterous superficiality, like Karim, finds her economic and individual freedom through her move away from Leyton and into the City. Amira and Lamis literally work their way up from underprivileged circumstances: Amis moves from a small Moroccan town to London and can eventually afford a flat in a building off Edgware Road, significantly called the Birds' Nest and for her work she constantly transgresses into London's exclusive zones of distinguished landmarks (hotels such as the Dorchester and the Mayfair) and costly consumer attractions (Fortnum and Mason's, Bond Street, Harrod's). Lamis moves from a shelter for Iraqi refugees in the basement of a building in Beirut to an expensive flat, overlooking a square, in the centre of London.¹¹

At the same time, urban forms of spectacle, self-fashioning and the dramatization of identities in both novels are embedded in the demands of the material city, its patterns of socio-economic stratification and (women's) bodies as economic commodities: "Tania was svelte, sharp-featured [...] dismissive of the beauty that was her passport out of East London and into cosmopolitan circles where she was now termed merely exotic." (18) Despite her confidence and obvious success, ultimately, Tania is shown as missing her cultural mooring, since in contrast to her friends Chila and Sunita, who are married with children, Tania's relationships with her family and partners are marked by failure: "She was used to not belonging anywhere totally" (56). The intricate nexus of urban freedom and economic constraints is demonstrated most clearly in the case of Amira, the most domineering and imposing figure in *Only in London*.

After having worked as a maid in London and having been molested by each of her employers, she starts to think "seriously about her body and men and wealth" (*OL* 169) and turns herself into a high-class prostitute for London's Arab community. During the course of the novel we witness the success and failure of her various

¹¹ For a similar exploration of gendered experiences of exile and displacement and Iraq as an imaginary homeland see *Women on a Journey: Between Baghdad and London* (Austin, TX: U of Texas P, 2007) by the Kurdish-Iraqi novelist and artist Haifa Zangana who, like Al-Shaykh, lives in London.

‘business’ schemes, which mainly consist of her impersonation as a distraught Arabic princess. Al-Shaykh presents Amira as a modern-day Shahrazad and just as Shahrazad saved her life with endless storytelling, Amira makes a livelihood of inventing, often most ludicrous stories for her clients. Her act also involves the deconstruction of Orientalist and Occidental stereotypes and fantasies and exposes *The Thousand and One Nights* as one of the novel’s main intertexts which, in turn, not unlike the urban novel of the nineteenth century, can be viewed as a most extensive source of social history (here of the medieval Islamic period). Its characteristic blend of romance, mystery and wisdom is also partly mirrored in *Only in London*.

In both novels the opportunities offered by the urban environment are mitigated by the characters’ awareness that depending on an individual’s class, gender and migrant position, urbanity can also lead to a loss of self, signified, for example, in Lamis’s wandering through the London streets which less resembles the leisurely attitudes of the flâneuse than a disorientation caused by her precarious status as woman and migrant. Thus Al-Shaykh and Syal’s realist mode of narration suits their aim of also exposing the often harsh urban conditions including racism, prostitution, class and gender inequality. Formally, both novels are marked by constantly shifting tones from dynamic and comical to more somber notes, and multi-perspective narration, where chapters are arranged like snapshots, similar to catching glimpses of people passing by in the city, only to lose them again in the next second.

While the characters in *Only in London* and *Life Isn’t All Ha Ha Hee Hee* are clearly situated within the larger demographic fabric of multiethnic London, significantly, the glimpses provided of London’s hitherto neglected migrant communities also highlight the necessarily heterogeneous character of so-called British Arab or British Asian communities. As Lamis remarks when passing a group of Iraqi protesters in Trafalgar Square: “There are different classes of Iraqis [...] even of refugees” (121). Moreover, white characters hardly feature at all in either of the two novels, although in both novels instances of inter-ethnic encounters are dramatized in the cross-cultural relationships of Lamis and Nicholas and of Tania and Martin.¹² Nonetheless, Al-Shaykh and Syal’s urban visions can be read as fine illustrations of Brah’s diaspora space as a site of “intersectionality”, when, in *Only in London*, the restaurants along Edgware Road serve as sites for the encounter of Arab and other communities and Amira observes that *Ranoush Juice* on Edgware Road is “crammed with English customers, especially young men from the fashion world and the media” (OL 72). While Al-Shaykh employs spatial and culinary metaphors to refashion diasporic spaces, Syal uses musical markers to address shifting urban identities and the consumption of so-called ethnic cultures: “Riz’s Music Mart [...] had been her favourite place. [...] the latest Hindi film soundtrack [...] the bootleg tapes flooding in from Birmingham and Southall of the British bhangra bands [...] the three of them were almost knocked back by the wall of sound and fury that came at them from the speakers” (*Life Isn’t* 43).¹³

¹² In reference to Timothy Mo’s London novel, Lars Ole Sauerberg also observes that “Londoners of ‘native stock’ only appear as extras in *Sour Sweet*” and “the reader is forced to have a look at London and Britain through the eyes of the immigrant eager to become part of the adopted culture” (130).

¹³ This particular passage can also be read as a reference to Kureishi’s use of music in *The Buddha of Suburbia* where Karim experiences a similar “musical epiphany” at a punk

Both writers, Syal in particular, show that “Indo Chic” and “Arab Chic” function not just as “a polyvalent cultural sign but as a highly mobile capital good”, to use Graham Huggan’s words (67). Huggan has also argued that the overwhelming recognition of South Asian diasporic writers (and one may extend this to literature by Arab diasporic writers) in contrast to the Western neglect of their resident South Asian colleagues is not least linked to the “hegemony of the multinational publishing companies” and a desire “to rejuvenate a humdrum domestic culture,” as expressed in Orientalist reviews and cover blurbs (74). It can also be found in the case of Al-Shaykh and Syal’s two novels: on the back cover of *Life Isn’t All Ha Ha Hee Hee* the novel is described as a “magical mosaic of friendship [...]. By turns spicy, hilarious and sad”. The back cover of *Only in London* is graced with the *Evening Standard*’s description of it as a “deeply sensual novel” and *Newsweek*’s depiction of it as a “small masterpiece in the psychological confines of the modern harem”.

Many writers of South Asian descent have responded to this kind of commercial exoticism with piercing irony and often by turning the tables through a semi-fictionalisation of the publishing world and their own role in it. Atima Srivastava’s *Looking for Maya* (1999), for example, features a suspicious agent who pronounces “that Asian writing was in vogue these days” which is good news for Srivastava’s naïve twenty-plus heroine Mira who’d like “to write a novel. About where I was born and all the people there,” which her friend Amrit describes as “Mangoes and coconuts and grandmothers [...] The Great Immigrant Novel” (68, 28). Repeatedly, Tania makes fun of “ghetto groupies” and she considers her white British boyfriend Martin to be a prime example with his love of fusion CDs and Hindu festivals:

Although nowadays, fashion victim would have been a more accurate term, as brown was indeed the new black, in couture, in music, in design, on the high street, judging by the number of plump white girls prancing around wearing bindis on their heads and henna on their hands. [...] ‘Sweetie,’ she had told him one night [...] ‘I am the genuine article and therefore I don’t have to try. I just have to be. You, on the other hand, being middle class, white and male, have to try any passing bandwagon, because what else have you got?’ (*Life Isn’t* 109)

While highly ironic, passages like these also show Syal’s attempt to incorporate contemporary British Asian cultural discourses (as initiated by scholars and critics such as Stuart Hall and Yasmin Alibhai-Brown) into the text. Throughout the novel, Tania’s perspective as a documentary filmmaker functions as a strategic meta-narrative through which Syal dismantles outdated notions of a migrant’s identity as being caught between two worlds or uncritical notions of hybridity. Seemingly corresponding to the problematic need of urban readers for neat metaphors in a scene when Tania is visiting her former neighbourhood, she points out: “the corner which separated the Eastenders from the Eastern-Enders; on one side auto-part shops and a McDonald’s; on the other, Kamla’s Chiffons and the beginning of two miles of sweet emporiums [...] It was possible, literally, to stand with a foot in each world in this corner” (*Life Isn’t* 40). Syal simultaneously deconstructs this very metaphor with much gusto by mediatizing it: “In

concert. As Simon Frith argues: “Music seems to be a key to identity because it offers, so intensely, a sense of both self and others, of the subjective in the collective” (110).

fact, she'd used this location several times in the many gritty documentaries she'd worked on, persuading some self-conscious presenter to stand legs akimbo, while they gravely intoned the Scandal of Britain's Lost Youth" (40).

Life Isn't All Ha Ha Hee Hee is interspersed with meta-commentaries regarding the representation of the city; London in particular. At one point, after an argument with Tania, Martin goes off to "catch a double Woody Allen bill at the Metro, *Hannah and Her Sisters*, followed by *Manhattan*. He was a big boy, he could see New York on his own" (128). The lack of inverted commas around New York may hint towards a mimetic understanding of Allen's portrayal of New York (no need to go there if you can see it on film), it may function as a generational marker (after all, *Manhattan* is from 1979 and *Hannah and Her Sisters* is from 1986) or it may most likely give us a clue of Syal's own conception of the genre of the urban novel and the fictional representation of London, just as Allen tries out different ideas for the beginning of a novel in the opening scene of *Manhattan*.

Al-Shaykh engages in a similar deconstruction of cultural markers, most prominent in a central scene when Lamis visits Leighton House near Holland Park, which, though now a museum, was the house and studio of the Victorian painter and one-time President of the Royal Academy, Lord Frederic Leighton. Designed for Leighton by George Aitchison to serve as a setting for the tiles Leighton had collected on his travels to the Middle East and to evoke the world of the *Arabian Nights*, which Leighton's friend, the Orientalist and explorer Sir Richard Burton, had translated, it was built in 1864-66 with a superb Arab Hall as its centrepiece (see Leighton House Museum Catalogue). Burton is also featured as a guide through the house in a video of a performance which took place at Leighton House in 1996 to commemorate the centenary of Leighton's death. Al-Shaykh explicitly refers to this performance in *Only in London* and exposes its Orientalist gaze by transferring agency to Lamis, who is taking the tour of the house:

An actor cloaked from head to toe in a white abaya [...] delivered a welcome peppered with Arabic [...] before he flung open the doors to a vista from *One Thousand and One Nights* [...] Lamis did not share the wonder expressed by the rest of the group. She gazed around at various shades of turquoise, the domes of the mosque, with a feeling of familiarity. [...] Lamis was irritated by the actress in the studio. She knew she could have played the part better. [...] They frame images engraved on our collective memory, not theirs. (61-2)

In contrast to Lamis's usual insecurity, setting in whenever she leaves her flat, on her way to the performance, it is not the taxidriver, the successor of "postmen as keepers of the topographical secret" (Wolfreys 21), who knows the way, but Lamis who directs him to Leighton House. When by chance, after her tour, she meets Nicholas there, who is also about to attend the performance, again, it is her, who guides him: "She knew the walls of the tour of Leighton House, and the steps and doors, like a blind man who has found out by repetition and practice how to avoid the pitfalls" (OL 64).

Conclusion

In contrast to the pessimistic tone of earlier urban writing, most of the characters in *Only in London* and *Life Isn't All Ha Ha Hee Hee* experience the city not as alienating, but, on the contrary, as providing them with a formerly unknown degree of freedom. The feeling of freedom and seemingly endless possibilities is also evident in

Al-Shaykh and Syal's topographical range, as they narrate tourist London as well as what Julian Wolfreys has called "the 'arcana' of London [...] the hidden court, the forgotten square, the unobserved portico, from which romance is waiting to emerge" (21). Neither do they foreground London's city centre. While former migrant writers often literally "wrote back" to the imperial centre by setting their narratives in London's centre; such as Bayswater in *The Lonely Londoners* or Paddington in Buchi Emecheta's work. Like Kureishi, Al-Shaykh and Syal have also recognised the potential of suburbia as a suitable setting for their characters' urban trajectories. The move from suburbia to the city does not only function as a motif for the move from a postcolonial country to the metropolis, but it also reflects the characters' social mobility and the women characters' increasing independence. At the same time, suburbia can function as a more comfortable space and as an alternative to the alienation and loneliness of postmodern urban dwelling as illustrated in Chila and Tania's case.

However, while as Keunen and Eeckhout have argued, there may, indeed, have been a shift in urban fiction from a more socio-historical perspective to a focus on individual and psychological experiences of the city. Both Al-Shaykh and Syal also show a concern for the so far rather humble representation of the sites of the international division of labour and its prime actors, such as, servants, labourers and nannies. Moreover, with the novels' cast of characters from all walks of life, whose urban experiences are invariably inflected by class, race, sexuality, religion, etc., both novels also exhibit what Scott Malcolmson has identified as "actually existing cosmopolitanisms":

Below the petty merchant is the average immigrant, who has only his or her labor to sell. [...] immigrant life, especially at the lower social levels [...] is a model of cosmopolitanism. One need not search long in an American city to find a stockroom worker or janitor who can communicate successfully in more languages than can most Ivy League graduates (238-39)

Thus, in Al-Shaykh and Syal's urban cosmos of Arab and Punjabi London Gans's "tenements, sweatshops, saloons, and public bathhouses" and vernacular social spaces are alive and well and Samir's genuine excitement upon first arriving in London and literally encountering the unexpected semiotics of Edgware Road may well be central for further analyses of transnational urbanites and their multi-directional movements:

he noticed they no longer seemed to be driving through London [...]. Signs on a restaurant, a chemist, a dentist, a letting agency, a shop, made him think they could have been back in Mazraa Street in Beirut. 'Come in and you'll find what you're looking for. We speak Arabic' [...] the Moonlight Café, Maroush, Ranoush Juice, Beirut Express, the Elegant Clothes Store, and there were Arabs in long white robes, black abayas. 'My goodness!' he exclaimed involuntarily. 'It's incredible! Mazraa Street has moved to London!' (OL 23).

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Özet

Arap ve Pencap Londra'sında Sakin Bir Gezinti Olmaz: Hanan Al-Shaykh'nin *Only in London* Adlı Eseri ile Meera Syal'ın *Life Isn't All Ha Ha Hee Hee* Adlı Eserinde Uluslarötesi Kent Manzaraları

Günümüz metropolleri, kentsel toplumsal ilişkilerin dönüşümü ve kenti meydana getiren yeniden kavramsallaştırma süreçleri üzerinde etkisi büyük olan, çok kültürlü bir insan, kültürler ve mekânların betimi ile belirlenmektedir. Kentsel deneyim sadece sanatçıların yaşamları ve çalışmalarında temel bir etmen olmakla kalmamış, bir şehri yazınsal temsilleri aracılığıyla okuma süreci, artan ve küreselleşen insan ve sermaye akışlarının bulunduğu zamanlarda yeni bir ivme kazanmıştır. Uluslarötesi ve diaspora edebiyatları bağlamında, “kimin şehri” sorusu ayrı bir öneme sahiptir. Uluslarötesi ve diyaspora çalışmalarındaki kavramsal çerçevelerden yararlanarak bu çalışma Hanan Al-Shaykh'in *Only in London* eseri (2001) ile Meera Syal'ın *Life Isn't All Ha Ha Hee Hee* eserindeki (1999) Londra'nın cinsiyet ve sınıf sorunlu tasvirlerini, kültürlerarası karşılaşmalara ve kültürel göstergelerin ayrılması ile tüketimine özellikle odaklanarak incelemektedir. Al-Shaykh ve Syal'ın Londra'nın fiziksel ve sosyal mekânlarına yaptığı keşfe ek olarak, bu çalışma ayrıca Al-Shaykh ve Syal'ın kentsel roman türünün temasal ve yapısal yeniden yapılandırılmalarını da ortaya çıkarmaktadır.

Anahtar Sözcükler: Arap Londra, kozmopolitlik, diaspora mekânı, melezlik ideolojisi, kesimlerarasıcılık, göç, çöknescililik, ulusötesicilik, kentsel roman

The Trajectory of the Hybrid Self

Şebnem Toplu

Abstract: This essay explores two women writers of diverse backgrounds: Meera Syal and Leila Aboulela, who portray their women characters projecting the emerging millennial tendencies of gender solidarity and religion respectively. Syal is a British writer with Asian background and her *Life isn't all ha ha hee hee* (1999) depicts three young women friends and their struggle for self-reflexivity utilizing solidarity against men, especially of Indian background. On the other hand, Aboulela, a Sudanese writer, in *Minaret* (2005) opts for a Sudanese woman in exile in London, whose struggle for locating her identity journeys from wealth to poverty, love and the newfound faith; Muslim religion, as the lucid title suggests. Exploring transforming identities in these fictions, I argue that the diversity of cultural backgrounds are utilized in foregrounding alterity, asserting a trajectory for the hybrid self.

Keywords: hybridity, Syal, Aboulela, gender solidarity, identity, religion, hijab

“Nations require narratives through which individuals
imagine themselves as national subjects
and align themselves in the national narrative”
(Brinker-Gabler 17)

At the turn of the new millennium Zadie Smith's *White Teeth* was celebrated by critics as the new literary voice of London because of its political importance of what John McLeod terms as “millennial optimism” (2004, 160). However, in an interview, Zadie Smith claimed that “[t]o reduce writers to the role of representatives who are expected to delegate, or speak on behalf of a particular community, is to curb their artistic freedom” (Procter 102). According to Procter, Smith's contention “foreground an important tension” between “representation as a process of fictional depiction” and “representation as an act of political delegation” that has become increasingly apparent since the late 1980s (102). I believe that the multicultural writers' in-between state is highly reflexive in their works. Despite the fact that they may also project other cultural backgrounds rather than their own biculturalism like Smith's *The Autograph Man*, writers voice transcultural identities; “the trajectory of the [hybrid] self” (Giddens 70) and hence fiction is disclosed as an act of political delegation, at least as an understatement. As Bhabha contents the dual heritage, the “‘in-between’ spaces provide the terrain for elaborating strategies of selfhood -singular or communal- that initiate new signs of identity, and innovative sites of collaboration, and contestation, in the act of defining the idea of society itself” (1-2). However, alongside the idea of redefining society, multicultural fictions in general focus on hybrid identity, self-reflexivity and in recent times religion, as well. Accordingly, the term hybridity has become a blanket term for all kinds of differences and marginalities in current cultural and literary criticism. Therefore, difference, pluralism, hybridity and heterogeneity are contested themes underpinned by a notion of “multiplicity” (Brah 214). Kuortti and Nyman, on

the other hand, note that as a critical term hybridity is often discussed in connection with a set of other terms denoting “intercultural transfer” and the “forms of identity” such a change generates (4).

Streamlining the arguments to the British multicultural writers in particular, and including feminism, despite the humor that women writers such as Andrea Levy, Bernardine Evaristo and Meera Syal, to name a few, choose to fashion their fiction with, I believe that, whilst multicultural fiction has become innumerable and highly diverse in focus, the constitution and adaptation of identities may be claimed to shift by millennial ideological currents such as politics, religion, gender and/or the cultural background of the writers. Yet, the focus still seems to be on identity itself, in this particular case, the hybrid identity: contingent, fragile and incomplete, and a highly controversial concept of debate for various disciplines.

Not exclusively for multicultural personae, the positionality of identity is disclosed like an impossible task for multifarious approaches. González notes that questions of identity, difference, and multiculturalism have been central in feminism, but those concepts are also main issues for the social sciences, since the intersections of social categories- race, gender, class, and so on are essential for understanding contemporary identity which is an open, flexible and changeable entity (22-23). Hence, to compare and contrast two women writers of diverse backgrounds; Meera Syal and Leila Aboulela, who portray their women characters projecting the emerging millennial tendencies of gender solidarity and religion respectively, is illustrative for the multicultural cartography. Syal is a British writer with Asian background and her *Life isn't all ha ha hee hee* (1999) depicts three young women friends and their struggle for self-reflexivity utilizing solidarity against men, especially of Indian background. On the other hand, Aboulela, a Sudanese writer, in *Minaret* (2005) opts for a Sudanese woman in exile in London, whose struggle for locating her identity journeys from wealth to poverty, love and the newfound faith; Muslim religion, as the lucid title suggests. Exploring transforming identities in these fictions, I consequently would like to point out the means that the diversity of cultural backgrounds are utilized in foregrounding alterity, asserting a trajectory for the hybrid self.

Syal's *Life isn't all ha ha hee hee* is the epitome of the long way that the Black and Asian British fiction has come from Sam Selvon's *The Lonely Londoners* (1956). Selvon's narration likewise Syal's holds humor, however, the underlying depression reflects basically the psychology of black immigrant men's loneliness in an alien host country. Syal's characters, on the other hand, are London-born young, educated and witty women, offsprings of immigrant families who no longer suffer from loneliness and more importantly of the basic black versus white controversy. Nevertheless, although the situation is reflected more lightly on the surface level, the underlying conflict is highly complex; of patriarchy, matriarchy, love and betrayal. Racism, on the other hand is an undertone, which does not protrude the narration, but signals that it simply proceeds as it has always been. Thereby, it is possible to place Syal's fiction in the space of liminality where she discusses serious points about the choices women face today, locating her protagonists as British women with Indian backgrounds living in London; lives at the threshold of the new millennium, their ethnic background forming a double story, the one “seamlessly informing and invigorating the other” (Freud n.p.). Syal's narration treads a fine line between sympathy and satire in its portrayal of Asian British culture moving on two axes; one is the young women's relations with their

Indian community and their traditional upbringing, the basis of their hybridity, and the other is love, friendship and betrayal.

Syal focuses on three childhood friends, Tania, Sunita and Chila, in their thirties. Tania is single and quite successful in her career as a film maker, Sunita sacrificed law school and works to support her husband's career and has two children, and Chila is a homemaker, married at the beginning of the novel with a very rich and handsome man, becomes the mistress of a perfect home and at the end of the novel, she has a baby.

The cinematic exposition of the multicultural and hybrid face of London is disclosed by the depiction of a setting with minarets and an Indian wedding ceremony: the groom arriving in an open horse-cart with tinsel around him and a huge turban on his head under a drizzle of snow: the bizarre show is watched by the bewildered local English people. It is the wedding ceremony of Chila and Deepak and the Indian traditions are fulfilled minutely to the end by the parents, regardless of the feelings of their British-born children. Thus, the theatricality of the displaced Indian wedding scene immediately exposes the alterity of the couple and their community from the host nation. Yet, Syal ironically adds that Chila is supposed to be a virgin and she is not, secretly confronting her Indian root which is based on the virginity and humbleness of the bride. Syal depicts the wedding ceremony in minute detail and concludes "[f]or everyone else, it had been, despite the weather, a lovely day. A perfect day, because the rituals had been observed, old footsteps retraced, threads running unbroken, families joined, futures secured. 'Now they are settled,' the women said, satisfied, their biggest worry over" (26). Nevertheless, Syal adds sarcastically; they are "blissfully unaware that some settled things can melt away, as easily as snowfall" (26), signaling the superficiality of expectations and the internal drama of arranged marriages and patriarchy, they desire to overlook.

Although the expository chapter is narrated by a third person, Syal's three women protagonists narrate themselves individually, thus, confronting traditional narrative styles, she allows them to voice their individual hopes and frustrations, polyvocally. Hybridity of the characters is essentially revealed in the conflict they have in their family relations, more than in the society they live in. However, these hybridized cultural forms produce the micro scale of family relations projecting the macro dilemma of multiculturalism. The significance of the shift from the focus of intercultural or diasporic narratives from explicit racism to hybridity is voiced by Syal's protagonist Tania who has a successful career. While complaining of a patriarchal father, Tania fashions her transnational shift and the hypocrisy of the English as follows:

When I get asked about racism, as I always do in any job interview when they're checking whether I'm the genuine article (oppressed Asian woman who has suffered), as opposed to the pretend coconut (white on the inside, brown on the outside, too well off and well spoken to be considered truly ethnic), I make up stories about skinheads and shit through letterboxes, because that's the kind of racism (144) they want to hear about. It lets my nice interviewer off the hook, it confirms that the real baddies live far away from him in the SE postcode area, and he can tut at them from a safe distance. I never tell them about the stares and whispers and the anonymous gobs of phlegm at bus stops, the creaking of slowly closing doors and the limited view from the glass counter (we never get as high as the ceiling), which all scar as deeply as a well-aimed Doc Marten. Maybe I would not have learned

about them so early on if it hadn't been for dear Papa. Maybe I should thank him for that (145).

The above quote is the unique explicit reference to racism in Syal's fiction which signifies the sophisticated twist from Selvon.

In Bhabha's process of "DissemiNation", cultural difference addresses "the jarring of meanings and values generated in the process of cultural interpretation", which is "an effect of the perplexity of living in the spaces of national society [...]" Cultural difference, as a form of intervention, participates as a logic of supplementary subversion" therefore, "the subject of the discourse of cultural difference is dialogical or transferential in the style of psychoanalysis" (162). It is "constituted through the locus of the Other which suggests both that the object of identification is ambivalent, and more significantly, that the agency of identification is never pure or holistic but always constituted in a process of substitution, displacement or projection" (162). Thereby, hybridity's complexity is revealed basically on Tania who is beautiful, "clever and spiky" (129) and a rebel to her community, besides having a successful career making films and documentaries for TV and film companies.

Refusing her family and refused by them, Tania attains a successful media career, proud of having been one of the pioneering Asian-British women in filmmaking years ago, now that "it had replaced pharmacy as the new aspiring Asian vocation" (54). Tania believes her life does not follow the "ordained patterns for a woman of her age, religion, height and income bracket. The sheer physical effrontery of her people, wanting to be inside her head, to won her, claim her, preserve her. Her people" (15). Distancing "her people" from her life follows a very complicated pattern throughout the fiction. Since childhood, the dilemma created by her English education and her Indian upbringing collides and causes a major stress. Tania suffers from "Indian time", of being behind schedule of at least two hours at all family activities, from picnics to cinemas; "mute with shame at her clan's inevitable late entrance" (15). She worries so much that she gets migraines. Fighting against patriarchy, Tania has always acted against the wishes of her family trying to be free from them, and when her mother dies, her father moves in with her brother "freeing her finally" (42). When Martin, the English man she lives with asks "'What is it you are supposed to have done to make him [her father] hate you so much?' [...]" "'It's what I haven't done, really,'" (110) Tania replies. "'I haven't been at home, feeding everyone, supporting everyone, smiling at everyone, keeping the family going, filling the hole [...]" A mother-shaped hole [...]" They were big women, our mothers, in all sense of the world. They had plans, boundaries, a place" [...]" (111). For the first time Martin witnesses Tania's tears, which signifies the ambivalence of the tension created between patriarchy and hybridity despite the feminine insubordination. Dislocated in England, Tania relocates herself abandoning her overpowering patriarchal father and the brother who made money and refused to have her name mentioned in his mansion. She admits "she does not belong" to her background (16) however, her best friend Sunita remarks that Tania still sits like one of them; "crossed legs, shoes off, unknotting herself in a way that suggested, despite her protestations, that part of her still responded to them like Home" (19).

The Indian-British women's womanhood is also hybrid, mingled with their mothers' patriarchal views. Tania points out that her mother's training her began early and not in the expected areas, cooking, shopping or cleaning, but as a "spatial exercise: how to take up as little room as possible. How to read the moods of everyone in the

room and flow smoothly about them, adapting to their edges and hollows, silver and silent as mercury [...] and most importantly, save any rages and rumbles for the privacy of my dark bedroom” (145-6). For the paradoxical positionality she adds sarcastically: “[s]trange that so many of us become doctors and business people; the women are so much more suited to the service industries. We aim to please. Any complaints, please see the manager. No tipping necessary” (146).

Although not one of them, because she is liberated from her family and matrimonial obligations, the example Tania bitterly reveals, sums up all the women including all “colored” girls “ranging in hue from tinted copper to Dravidian blue-black” (147) who are torn between patriarchal upbringing and career. In the outside world they run business, but when they reach their front door, forget it all:

I’ve seen it happen right before my eyes, the most frightening and speedy transformation since Jekyll and Hyde (the Spencer Tracy version, natch). One moment, my friend Meena was describing how she’d sacked three of her staff and organized a buy-out of a rival firm in her lunch hour, the next she was simpering her way around her husband, who stood at the top of the stairs, baffled by a piece of complicated equipment called an iron. She was so apologetic [...] If any of her colleagues had dismissed her, patronized her, ordered her, spoken to her the way the man she loves spoke to her then, she’d have wiped the floor with their battered carcasses. Instead, Meena smiled and said sorry (147).

Being the only rebel, Tania includes her best friends Sunita and Chila in this general tendency as well. According to Tania, although Sunita is “hardly a high flyer Akash was canny enough to clip her wings before she’d realized her potential” (147) and Chila believes in Fate and let things happen, or when things go wrong blames karma. Tania names this phenomenon as “our collective shameful secret” (147). Tired of fighting with her cultural background permanently, Tania points out: “[s]ometimes, you just get weary with having to explain yourself all the time. And sometimes, the fact that he [Martin] will never understand is perfect” (153).

While Tania is a fighter, conversely, Chila is a “slow” (34) girl and does not mind being called that. Since childhood years, she has cut and pasted pictures making up an ideal home with only herself in it, signifying her intentions to become a homemaker. Chila points out: “it is a good job that I am thick, I reckon, because my world is small, tidy and hoovered and I like that” (34) and she likes following traditions, too, despite slightly bending the marriage rules, mentioned at the beginning of the novel. Nobody expects her marriage prospects to be high and her mother tries all kinds of Indian magic and many astrologers, and finally leaves it to “Fate”, yet Chila ends up marrying the hard to catch Deepak, becomes another simpering wife who enjoys taking care of her home.

The third friend Sunita meets and falls in love with Akash during her university education, marries with him failing her law degree. Akash, instead, gives up the law, his childhood dream of the “brown barrister in white wig overturning the fascist system” (47) and decides on therapy; “a growth industry [...] and transcultural therapy, which he’s so perfect for, because he’s bilingual, that’s where money is” (47). Consequently, Sunita also turns into a typical Indian woman with two children. Syal remarks ironically:

[Sunita's] delicate, doll-like features were now softened by the fleshy mantle worn by married Indian ladies [...] it was like a uniform, the designer silks, the ostentatious gold jewellery, collected on booty trips to Bahrain, the rippling belly rolls escaping from painted on sari blouses. No guilty aerobic sessions for them. The old rules still applied; coming from a place where starvation was a reality rather than a fashion statement, fat meant wealth and contentment. So Sunita could claim her cellulite was a political stance, rather than something, like many other things in her life, which had crept up on her unawares. (19)

Sunita who has been married for seven years also follows the patriarchal Indian tradition: "Sita, the good Hindu wife, walked through fire for Lord Rama to prove her purity. It was an image that had haunted Sunita throughout her childhood" (48). Thus, after marriage "she chose to acquiesce, and he became putty in her hands, responding to her sweetness with immeasurable tenderness" (49). However, Sunita knows well what her feminist friend Tania's response would be to any man asking her to "enter flames for him; Tania would push him in and add petrol for good measure. And then invite her mates round for a barbecue" (49).

Despite the humorous stance, as Syal unfolds gradually, all three women's lives are unhappy whether they insubordinate against patriarchy and oppressed womanhood or not. Tania takes the newlywed Chila and Sunita out to Soho to a posh restaurant for dinner, where only important people like actors and filmmakers can get a reservation at. Tania enjoys her tentative, fragile power:

[t]he sense of dislocation that dogged her like a shadow momentarily faded. She was used to not belonging anywhere totally. In fact it was quite a relief to peel off the labels randomly stuck on her forehead somewhere around 1979, which read 'Culture Clash Victim- Handle with Care' or 'Oppresses Third World Woman- Give her a Grant' [...] being different, having an objective eye, that's what her business wanted. (56)

Even in her professional life Tania utilizes her difference, nonetheless, she feels the 'fatigue' of "swimming upstream all the time" (56). The night out of the friends ends in misery as Sunita learns that Akash had to take their baby Sunil to hospital. Tania has to make a choice between friendship and career and instead of taking Sunita to the hospital she chooses the latter because her boss tells her to attend a party. Tired of the "victim mentality", Jonathan wants her to make a film of those "strange brown people" as happy couples (63); to film "the Asians who like who they are, who just get on and do it and ... live" (64). The tension created between friendship and betrayal explicitly starts at this point for Tania, since in order to be a successful film maker she basically uses her friends to show "the Asians" as happy couples. Nonetheless, as a woman and a friend while she uses Chila and Sunita in the cast, she is led by her own feelings and reflects her own identity along with the identities of her friends and the film becomes a crisis point.

Syal's second axes, womanhood, love and betrayal gains access during filmmaking. Deepak's mask is stripped off first, when he hears that Chila will be included in Tania's film. Chila unaware of Deepak and Tania's former relationship says "I thought you knew, you know, you and Tans being close" (119). Deepak thinks that Chila is hinting at their secret relationship, so catching Chila by the wrist Deepak asks

“‘And what’s that supposed to mean?’ For a moment, Chila did not recognize him. The features were familiar but someone mad and cold borrowed his eyes, someone she did not know, who made her feel sick with fear” (119). That momentary revelation discloses the real Deepak who had a makeshift marriage with Chila, since he has always loved Tania; “the woman he would have died for”, instead (133).

The premier of Tania’s film comes out as a shock to them all; instead of projecting them as happy Asian couples, Tania has angled her camera in such a way that Sunita and Chila realize their unhappiness and the superficiality of their marriage bonds. The distress of Tania’s betrayal by the film doubly intensifies when her secret kissing with Deepak after the show is witnessed by Chila, Sunita and Martin. The eradication of their friendship curiously separates Sunita and Chila as well. However, Chila continues her relationship with her husband as if nothing has happened; she is pregnant and overlooks Deepak’s renewed relationship with Tania since the film. As a woman she decides to keep her marriage, yet again Indian patriarchy is revealed as a destructive force in her identity. Her mother utters the words: “My first three [babies] kicked like elephants and we still got girls until Raju arrived” (200). That comment makes Chila realize her misdirected potentials: “[n]o wonder she was left alone, with her catalogues, her Hindi films and her fantasies” (201). “‘You thought there was something wrong with me, didn’t you? Is that why you didn’t want me?’” (201) Chila asks her mother. “There was something wrong with her. She should have been happy, and she wasn’t” (201). Chila’s despair in fact reveals her mother’s fears that Chila “might utter words that would shatter the fragile throne upon which she sat, afraid that her daughter’s confession would force her to confront her own demons of disappointment” (201). Hence, her national outfit becomes the signifier her bondage: “‘I ...’ begins Chila, ‘feeling her dupatta heavy on her shoulders, yoke of ages, transparent as air, heavier than iron, a woman’s modesty symbolized by a scrap of silk [...] a family’s honor is carried by its daughters. Maybe because the strongest of the men would break their backs on its weight’” (202). As a result, under the weight of matriarchy she gives up confronting her mother. Betrayed by her mother, Chila’s makeshift home is also finally shattered to pieces, when she realizes that on the night of her giving birth to her son, Deepak has been sleeping with Tania.

Tania’s documentary also causes a revelation for Sunita who realizes that in fact she is not happy and decides to enjoy herself going out with her girlfriends and trying to overcome her feeling of desolation: “[t]he last time I thought I was having one [panic attack] was that night, the night of the film, when I had to sit in a room full of people patronizing me with their vicarious tear, when I stood in the darkness afterwards and watched a twenty-year friendship kissed to death” (235). When Sunita accepts the fact that she is unhappy she gets stronger “I wasn’t trampled by them [panic attacks], I reigned them up, drew them in and rode them like a madwoman, all the way down the stairs, all the way home. I do that a lot now” (235). Sunita starts catching up on the youthful rebellion she never had, by putting unnatural colors in her hair, going out a lot, coming back late and having periods in the day when she forgets that she has two children. However, although she feels liberated like Tania, her relation with Akash does not improve: “[m]aybe now I need him less, he loves me less” (235).

As a result, Syal’s protagonists forge their hybrid selves through rebellion, the womanhood regained only by raging against their patriarchal background. Nonetheless, the ambivalence that hybridity causes ends in complex, mixed feelings. Tania gains Deepak back betraying Chila, but when she realizes that he had not told her that Chila is

pregnant and spent the night with her while Chila was giving birth, she leaves him. Chila finally leaves Deepak for his betrayal and decides to raise her son alone and Sunita drifts away from her husband. Curiously, the three women reunite after a series of events, and refashion their solidarity at womanhood and Syal discloses them content, living at the liminal space of hybridity and womanhood or what Bhabha coins as 'beyond':

[t]he 'beyond' is neither a new horizon, nor a leaving behind of the past [...] Beginnings and endings may be sustaining myths of the middle years; but in the *fin de siècle*, we find ourselves in the moment of transit where space and time cross to produce complex figures of difference and identity, past and present, inside and outside, inclusion and exclusion. For there is a sense of disorientation, a disturbance of direction, in the 'beyond': an exploratory, restless movement [...]" (Bhabha 1).

Accordingly, for Bhabha through the process of dissemination "of meaning, time, peoples, cultural boundaries and historical traditions" (166), the alterity between the wider culture and the ethnic community will create new forms of living and writing. In this vein, McLeod notes that the "optimistic" multicultural representation of London in literature which gathered at the end of the 1990s may be "legitimately considered as cheerful", for its advocates were making a political statement about the positive and creative processes of transformation wrought by multicultural energies. Yet for McLeod, the success of *White Teeth* distracted attention away from other representations of postcolonial London by such writers as Andrea Levy, Bernardine Evaristo, Ferdinand Dennis and Meera Syal who raised similar issues in different modes and different currents (163).

In Kathleen Paul's terms "it is the nature of immigration to remake a society and the fate of societies to be remade" (xv) thereby, moving from the Indian cartography of multiculturalism to the emerging Islamic religious point of view, we have a wholly different narrative attitude in the early decades of the twenty-first century from what McLeod terms as "millennial optimism". As McLeod also reconsiders his book *Postcolonial London: Rewriting the Metropolis* (2004) in an essay he wrote a year later, he states that millennial optimism has not lasted, especially after the bomb attacks on London's transport system in July 2005, which denoted to the fact that in pushing the issue of religious faith to the fore in the novel, Smith's *White Teeth* (2000) made a departure from previous representations of postcolonial London, since it locates the problematic of faith as perhaps the most significant consequence of and challenge to postcolonial London (2005, 40-41). In this context we also find that the Sudanese Aboulela basically foregrounds Islam. Besides the religious signifier of her title, Aboulela's *Minaret* at the back cover projects its writer's photograph with her head cover. The epilogue is reinforced with the subtitle "Bism Allahi, Ar-rahman, Ar-raheem"; I start with the name of God. It is a curious way to start fiction with, because for those readers who comprehend the words, she re-emphasizes her particular religion and for those who do not, it alienates the reader, reflecting the Sudanese protagonist's own alienation in the host nation, England. The first section, meant as an epilogue reveals that the minaret is literally of Regent's Park mosque's. Aboulela's protagonist Najwa proceeds the epilogue with her yearning for going to 'hajj' (pilgrimage) and with Muslim terminology "alhamdulillah" (thank you God) when she is pleased that the Arab woman who wanted to employ her to care for her daughter has kept her promise.

Najwa's image as reflected on the mirror is of "a woman in a white headscarf and [a] beige, shapeless coat. Eyes too bright and lashes too long, but still [...] homely and reliable" the "right age" (3) for a nanny. Abundant in Arab religious discourse throughout the fiction, Aboulela's epilogue stresses the humble position of Najwa and her Islamic identity. The epilogue is followed with a flashback which reveals Khartoum in 1984-5 where Najwa had a reckless Western style of life; living with her parents and her twin brother Omar, having a beautiful mansion, luxurious cars, wearing miniskirts, having fun at the American club, going from party to party and attending the Khartoum University. Her father, a minister in the government, is in close relationship with the President. The striking paradox that the Western style of life reflected from a prejudiced and superficial angle of Aboulela's point, does not match with the Muslim faith hence is disclosed as having no compliance throughout Aboulela's fiction; Najwa has everything except faith which lies submerged, disguised in pain:

I had a happy life. My father and mother loved me and were always generous. In the summer we went for holidays in Alexandria, Geneva and London. There was nothing that I didn't have, couldn't have. No dreams corroded in rust, no buried desires. And yet, sometimes, I would remember pain like a wound that had healed, sadness like a forgotten dream. (14-5)

Najwa is so reckless that even Anwar, her Marxist boyfriend, a member of the Democratic Front, cannot bring her to understand the signs of underlying tension in the society. Anwar asks him if it does not strike her wrong for such discrepancies to exist between people, since there is famine in the west of Sudan, nonetheless, Najwa's reply is "[t]here is nothing I can do about it" (34). Although she is taken along with her mother, Najwa's mother's charity work does not extend more than taking lollipops to the children in distress. Living Western highlife in a Muslim country brings occasional awareness of Islam to Najwa such as when she hears the dawn 'azan', the prayer from the minaret, on the way home from a party: "[t]he sounds of the azan, the words and the way the words sounded went inside me, it passed through the smell in the car [Omar's drug], it passed through the fun I had had at the disco and it went to a place I didn't know existed. A hollow place. A darkness that would suck me in and finish me" (31). While Najwa is torn between a non-religious communist boyfriend and her Western dreams, Anwar openly accuses her father of corruption and her mother of her aristocratic background, in his public speeches. During the classes in the university, the professors have to give a break for the praying time, so the dichotomy expands when Najwa feels a yearning for the students who pray while Anwar explicitly tells her that her father is called "Mr. Ten Per Cent" because he takes illegal commissions on every deal the government makes with a foreign company. The irony here is revealed as an either or situation; while she envies the people who pray she cannot at least think about how their wealth is acquired. Finally, there is the military coup, their father is arrested and their mother taking her children has to run away in exile in London, leaving their father in Sudan. The father is tried, found guilty and hanged and their fall starts.

Aboulela, then moves in time to present, to 2003 and her employer Lamya is what she could have become if things had not gone wrong for Najwa and if she could have had her education in London; the ghost of a past. Lamya lives in a posh area and a fine building in London. Thus, shifting a great lapse in time Aboulela immediately moves from a poor woman seeking a job as a maid and child sitter, to the striking

background of that woman as a rich teenager in Sudan, revealing the downfall and then weaving how she has become what she is. Always feeling guilty Najwa basically condemns the family's weak faith for their downfall, never explicitly questioning and/or acknowledging her father's taking bribes and their immense affluence. Aboulela chooses to punish her protagonist by her constant feeling of guilt for not being more religious in practice, especially the superficial hair cover, yet, ironically Najwa never brings herself to questioning deeper aspects of their sin, like why they had not helped the poor despite their excessive wealth or his father's sin in taking bribes, the basis of why he is called "Mr. Ten Per Cent". Furthermore, she has been given choice for a university education twice, but declined twice: after moving in London her mother wants her to continue her education while they are prosperous and after her mother dies and she does not have much money left, her uncle Saleh offers her to continue her education living with him in Canada. The way that Aboulela's narration moves, although it is disclosed that Najwa's becoming a poor humble maid is God's punishment because of her not fulfilling the basic rules of Islam, especially by praying, I believe that it is in fact her self-punishment, because in Islamic faith there is free will; that is, individuals are given choices and God does not necessarily punish everyone for their wrong doing in this world, besides the Judgment Day. So, Najwa's attribution of the result of her free choices to fate only, would mean that individuals are not given choices and thus one is innocent of every wrong deed as the consequence of fate.

The contrast Najwa feels between herself and the British born girls is significant since she believes that being a Muslim differs locationally, although the religious rules do not change, but the traditions differ: "[u]sually the young Muslim girls who have been born and brought up in Britain puzzle me though I admire them. I always find myself trying to understand them. They strike me as being very British, very much at home in London. Some of them wear hijab, some don't. They have individuality and an outspokenness I didn't have when I was their age, but they lack the preciousness and glamour we girls in Khartoum had" (77). The words "preciousness" and "glamour" are strikingly paradoxical since the analysis starts with admiration and ends in contempt, yet ironically Najwa also decides to live in London in the end, although offered money and job in Sudan by Lamyia's mother "Doktora" Zeinab. Furthermore, Aboulela's using the term "hijab" in Arabic, instead of scarf or head cover is significant in the way that "hijab" means "shame". This idea denotes to the fact that it is shameful when women show their hair, which is highly superficial and explicitly a subordination to patriarchy in itself, while it is also a highly debatable topic especially by theologians whether women are required to cover their heads or not, as we see in the various applications in various countries from Pakistan to Turkey to Iran and Saudi Arabia. At the same time, as the Muslim Council of Britain has itself pointed out there is nothing in the *Quran* itself that requires women to wear the veil, "[t]he wearing of the *hijab* in Britain is a statement of difference and separation" (Deakin 464). The sociologist Heyat states that women's wearing "hijab" in Morocco points out the importance of division of space in Muslim communities and assumptions about differences between men and women that underline the respect for veiled women among them. A veiled woman in the public space is presumed to signal distance and unavailability to unrelated males, thus warding off any unwanted approaches. This aspect was also pointed out by young informants who found being veiled helpful in gaining permission from jealous husbands and possessive parents to move freely outside the home (366). In fact, it is highly intriguing that while covered from head to foot with only her face showing, but with "eyes too

bright and lashes too long” (3) Aboulela’s protagonist still manages to attract Lamya’s brother Tamer’s attention and seduce him to fall in love with her, despite the significant age gap about twenty years, for which Najwa keeps reminding herself that Tamer is like a younger brother or she herself looks almost like his mother. Aboulela underpins this love affair through religious talk between the lovers disguising the attraction under Tamer’s devoutness. Najwa states that: “I always feel uplifted when I see him. It is natural; a beautiful, devout youth with striking eyes” (100) disguising the inappropriate situation, which is plainly a love affair between an older woman who is the maid and cares for the child and the young boy of the house. Aboulela permits them to have one quick kiss which is observed by Lamya, which results in Najwa’s immediate dismissal.

Through the English eyes, though, Najwa believes that they see Tamer as: “[t]all, young [and] Arab-looking” with “dark eyes and the beard, just like a terrorist” (100), reflecting the prejudice against common Arab outlook reinforced after 9/11, and which is also stated recently in Mohsin Hamid’s *Reluctant Fundamentalist* (2007) that the common Arab outlook has become a terrorist attire. In this respect, instead of racial abuse Aboulela voices Muslim harassment as an understatement like Syal’s implied racism. Three young men get on the night bus Najwa is on. First they throw something to Najwa’s head and miss it. The bus driver looks away. Next, they walk up to her and saying “‘You Muslim scum’” pouring Tizer on her head and face. (81). She gets off at the next stop and is not followed. Her initial reaction is first anger and then curiosity to find out if the substance is alcoholic. She tastes the fluid and feels ‘lucky’ that it is not. The incident is also significant in Aboulela’s religious fixation that her protagonist is worried if the fluid would be of alcohol; although drinking alcohol is forbidden for Muslims, being attacked by it would not enable Najwa to commit that kind of a sin.

Najwa’s twin brother Omar is in jail and her religious explanations are to no avail to him. Najwa asserts that it was only the servants who prayed in the house in Khartoum and if their parents also prayed they would not have this catastrophe. Again it is curious that Najwa stresses the actions rather than the faith itself, as if choosing one for the other, meaning that they may not have prayed but could have enough religious belief in realizing that theft is a greater sin than not praying; the former being a sin on the society itself involving a great number of people, while praying is an individual act. Omar, on the other hand, neither believes in religion nor that their father embezzled millions, although the context reveals that the father was not innocent since the mother’s hospital expenses and their living cost for years in one of the world’s most expensive cities were met without either of them earning a penny.

Tamer and Najwa’s conversations essentially focus on religious topics, and since he is a “devout” youth, Najwa’s support of Tamer’s views becomes part of her seduction, because Tamer’s parents and sister Lamya do not support his strong inclination to religion. For instance, when Tamer says he has to study Business obeying his parents wish although he would like to study Islamic History, Najwa’s comment is “‘I’m sure Allah will reward you for trying to please your parents’” (101) “‘Insha’ Allah,’ (if God wills) he says and smiles as if I had paid him a compliment” (102).

Even in her relations with her best friend Shahinaz, Najwa supports both religion and patriarchy/matriarchy, disregarding her friend’s oppression. Shahinaz lives with her husband Sohayl, their four little children and her mother-in-law. Once, when she gets too distressed with constantly dealing with her children, Shahinaz wants to leave the children to her mother-in-law’s care and go out to dinner with her husband. Despite the fact that the husband wants to take her out, Sohayl asks permission from his mother and

she decline and he complies with her decision. When Shahinaz reveals her frustration to Najwa, she consoles her with: “[l]ook, we’ve talked about this before. If she lived somewhere else, Sohayl would spend hours away from you visiting her [...] It’s so much more convenient for you all to live together [...] And think of all the reward from Allah you’re getting” (105) and Shahinaz immediately succumbs saying “‘I know it is the Islamic thing for a man to obey his mother and I should support him in this—but sometimes it gets too much’” (105). Again Aboulela while seemingly supporting religious views, disregards oppression, emphasizing Arab/Eastern traditions, since obeying parents in not taking your wife out thus in a curious fashion her understatement reveals Islam as oppressing women under both patriarch and matriarchy. It also parallels with the non-Muslim Indian matriarchal views Chila’s mother utters in Syal’s fiction, thus the similarity of the women’s positionality is revealed as an unfortunate patriarchal view specifically reflected in traditions more than religious rules. The religious talk Tamer, Najwa and Shahinaz go to attend in the mosque also deviates from Muslim religion, signaling different comments than what is covered in the *Quran* since curiously, they believe that Jesus Christ will come back to the world and that Tamer would like to be in the “Mahdi’s army fighting the Antichrist” (108).

Aboulela’s narration on hybridity is also a revelation of the idea that the selves who are dislocated and which cannot manage with an ethnic identity seek consolation in a religious one as a way of overcoming identity crisis. Tamer states that he is a transnational person whose mother is an Egyptian and father a Sudanese and who lived at different places except Sudan: Oman, Cairo and London (110). Tamer points out that: “My education is Western and that makes me feel that I am Western. My English is stronger than my Arabic. So I guess, no, I don’t feel very Sudanese though I would like to be. I guess being a Muslim is my identity” (110). Although Najwa had lived in Khartoum until 18 and had spent twenty years in London, because of the trauma she has gone through by means of her father, she also projects on religion as a conception of identity: “I feel that I am Sudanese but things have changed for me when I left Khartoum. Then even while living here in London, I’ve changed. And now, like you, I just think of myself as a Muslim” (110). In this case, their revelations allude to transnational identities that are incapable of adapting to the societies they live in, utilizing both cultures as in line with what Syal’s fiction projects. Yet, the identity crisis is not resolved since Najwa right after her above revelation thinks: “For a brief moment I am not sure who I am, the Najwa who danced at the American Club disco in Khartoum or Najwa, the maid Lamyia hired by walking into the Central Mosque one afternoon” (111). Hence despite the seeming religious haven taken for granted, loneliness is disclosed as the main motive under their religious cover and paradoxically another tool for difference in another country since Najwa also voices that: “[h]e [Tamer] might not know it but it is safe for us in playgrounds, safe among children. There are other places in London that aren’t safe, where our very presence irks people. Maybe his university is such a place and that is why he is lonely” (111). Consequently, despite racism which depends on the color of skin, the religious attire reinforces the discrepancy from the host culture. Modood maintains that

[e]ven if white British society sees and treats Muslims as a “colored Other”, it doesn’t follow that Muslims accept that description for themselves. Excluded groups seek respect for themselves as they are or aspire to be, not simply a solidarity on the basis of a recognition of themselves as victims; they resist

being defined by their *mode of oppression* and seek space and dignity for their *mode of being* [...] I am not contrasting situationally or politically constructed identities with something primordial. My point is that a minority will respond to some forms of exclusion or inferiorization and not to others. It will respond to those that relate in some way to its own sense of being. (159) (emphasis original)

Tamer and Najwa also look down on the Arab people who are not as religiously devote as they are, basically targeting Lamya who studies for her doctorate degree. When Lamya's necklace is lost and she accusingly asks Najwa where it is gone, it is brought by her young daughter Mai soon after since took it to play. Yet Najwa runs away from the house, putting the blame on the child, despite the fact that she has tried it on and left it somewhere the child can reach. However, Tamer accuses his sister Lamya for her rudeness simply because of her non-religious attitude rather than upbringing:

'I don't approve of her. She hardly prays. She doesn't wear hijab. It's wrong. She has bad friends. They go and see rude films together. They smoke and even drink wine- it's disgusting. I tell her but she doesn't listen to me. Her husband should tell her but he's just as bad. It's all to do with pride, the way she talked to you just now' (115).

On the other hand, for her own spoilt behavior and her brother Omar's becoming a drug addict, Najwa always accuses Western tastes. However, her childhood friend Randa studies medicine in Edinburg and becomes a doctor and her cousin studies in Cardiff. Randa conversely complains about the Sudanese in Edinburg especially of their wives' wearing "hijab" and having one baby after another adding that the sight of the women students' wearing hijab "irritates" her (134). Yet with the underlying perception of the narration, Randa disdains her own people because she had a Western education and had become a doctor, parallel to Lamya and her mother Doctor Zeinab, which signifies and reinforces Aboulela's understatement that education and Islam cannot be reconciled.

As for Najwa, when her mother dies, one of the Egyptian women, Wafaa, who washes her mother, teaches her a prayer for the dead and realizing that she does not have religious education invites her to the mosque. As one of the women describes they get together once a week and "enjoy" themselves (135). The idea inspires closed community activity, which attracts Najwa who feels lonely, however she does not accept the invitation for two years. She works at her uncle Nabeel's travel agent but does not like it, so instead, she starts helping his wife Eva and gradually becomes her maid, believing that it is because of the nostalgia for her past and her yearning to be with a family.

Before she decides to join the Islamic group, Najwa reunites with her Communist boyfriend Anwar in London. The revolution that was supported by Anwar and which killed her father has not lasted for more than five years and then it had been followed by another revolution this time of the religious group, thus Anwar had to seek asylum in the west that he had despised as capitalist. Najwa asks "What's wrong with us Africans?" to Anwar and ponders how it would feel like to have a stable country, a place where one could make future plans and it would not matter who the government was: [a] country that was familiar, reassuring background, a static landscape on which to paint dreams" (165). This is followed with: "that was why we were here:

governments fell and coups were staged and that was why we were here. For the first time in my life, I [Najwa] was conscious of my shitty-coloured skin next to their placid paleness" (174). This is the sole revelation of the source for their ambivalence: to belong to a country where there is no stability and to "unbelong" a country which is stable. She starts living with Anwar feeling the freedom of being in London and having no family except a brother in jail, but the guilt feeling starts to creep in: "This empty space was called freedom" (175). In this respect it is contrary to the notions of Indian virginity before marriage which is confronted by Syal's protagonist Chila. Najwa turns to religion and explains this to Anwar saying: "I'm tired of having a troubled conscience. I'm bored with feeling guilty" (244). Still, she thinks if he had proposed marriage there and then, she would have accepted and gone back to him" (244) and her reaction after she covers herself and her hair is: "[a]round me is a new gentleness [...] I was invisible [...] 'oh, so this is what it was all about; how I looked, just how I looked, nothing else, nothing non-visual'" (247). Massey writes "[s]paces and places are not only themselves gendered but, in their being so, they both reflect and affect the ways in which gender is constructed and understood" (179). Additionally, in Foucault's terms, self is genealogical and ontological, "a philosophical life in which the critique of what we are is at one and the same time the historical analysis of the limits that are imposed on us and an experiment with the possibility of going beyond them" (50).

Haunted by loneliness and guilt, Najwa finally joins the mosque group and says: "I am happy that I belong here, that I am no longer outside, no longer defiant" (184). After being covered for a long time and attaining covered Muslim friends, at the Eid party, Najwa's remarks reveal the attained identity by religious attire:

[w]e are pleased to see each other without our hijabs and all dressed up for the party, delighted by the rare sight of each other's hair, the skin on our necks, the way make-up brightens a face. We look at each and smile in surprise. It is not only the party of clothes; some of us are transformed without our hijabs [...] Without her [Um Waleed] hijab, in a tight crimson party dress, her tinted face brimming with make-up, (184) she looks so Arab, so unsubtle that I think this is how she is, her secret self. It is only faith that makes her a Qur'an teacher with hardly any pay, pleading with us to learn to change. It is not her personality that makes her cover her soft ample body in a huge *abaya*. The alarmed look in her eyes is not really alarm- it is her own excitement over life (185) [...] This is not a fancy dress party. But it is as if the hijab is a uniform, the official, outdoor version of us. Without it, our nature is exposed. (186).

Saira Khan comments that "the veil restricts women, it stops them achieving their full potential ... and it stops them from communicating" (*The Times*)

Nonetheless, Aboulela narrates religious faith as a salvation for sins for Najwa ironically for the ones her father committed: "[t]he rest of the year I have hope but in Ramadan I have confidence, the certainty that, if I keep plodding this path, Allah will give me back that happiness again, will replace the past with something grander, more potent and enhanced" (189) so Najwa expects to be rewarded immediately, also believing that Shariat would have prevented her brother from using drugs: "I wish that he had been punished the very first time he took drugs. Punished according to the Shariat- one hundred lashes. I do wish it in a bitter, useless way because it would have put him off, protected him from himself" (193). Najwa also believes that her brother is

in jail because he pushed his mother asking for her purse when she was ill (196). Another paradox reveals itself in that; despite her faith, Najwa never believes that her father has committed one of the greatest sins; stealing poor people's money.

Her hypocrisy in trying to find a girl for Tamer to marry at the house party Lamya gives, ends in their kissing. When she is dismissed from the house and meets Tamer again, to his proposal she says she will accept marrying him unless he promises her he would take a second wife because she might not be able to have children. Finally Doctora Zeinab visits her offering to give her money and a job if she goes back to Sudan, to lead a decent life, probing her deepest insecurity "what will happen to us, those of us who don't have children or whose children can't cope? Will we end up in nursing homes where they will spoon feed us mashed pork and we don't know the difference?" (260). However, she rejects the offer but in the end, since she believes that a mother's curse works on his son as her own mother's on Omar, in order to save her lover Tamer from his mother's curse, she accepts the money she gives her. Ironically, she could have left Tamer without getting the money but she accepts it for another religious cause: "[m]ore than anything else, [...] 'I would like to go on Hajj. If my Hajj is accepted, I will come back without any sins and start my life again, fresh' " (209), which is a supposition and is not based on the Qur'an. Najwa's story ends with her dream; she is together with her parents and brother in makeshift happiness, but their house is in ruins, "the crumbling walls smeared with guilt" (276), against humanity.

To conclude, Aboulela focuses on an Islamic identity throughout her narration and why there is a discrepancy between black and/or Islamic difference among the ethnic groups is explained by the sociologist Tariq Modood who contends that the development of a contemporary British black (i.e. non-white) oppositional identity was confused with the development of a black ethnic pride (African roots) movement in England. Thereby, the black ethnic pride movement triggered off other ethnic assertions, such as Asian, Muslim, and so on, and "reduced a political black to an ethnic blackness" (158). Furthermore, Modood also maintains that not only have British ethnic minorities not united under a single identity capable of mobilizing them all, but the number of identities grows all the time according to the context and in particular with what one needs to react against: "Pakistanis were black when it meant a job in a racial equality bureaucracy, Asian when a community center was in the offing, Muslim when the Prophet was being ridiculed" (158). It is possible to detect these shifts in both fictions especially by adding gender roles to Modood's examples as well, and the covered women who project their hybrid identities, exposing themselves as "hypervisible" (Donlon 343).

Kuortti and Nyman state that the contemporary world is characterized by transnational migrations, cultural appropriations, and diasporic peoples, all contributing to increased cultural contact and mixing, and to the intermingling of the local and the global (3). Considering the arguments on hybridity, the term is conceived not as any given mixing of cultural materials, backgrounds, or identities, but as a "markedly unbalanced relationship" (Kuortti and Nyman 2). As disclosed by two women writers, whether non-Muslim Indian or Muslim African, hybridity unbalances the individual trajectory of the self and this ambivalence is projected in diverse aspects. Consequently, dislocation brings about loneliness, emerged as a result of diversity despite living in a community of their own "kind", different from Selvon's "lonely Londoners". Fighting against racial discrimination and/or seeking haven in religion with the addition of complicated relationships as in the case of Tania, Deepak and Chila, the complicated

positionality of these personae signals that the dilemma of the multicultural selves does not seem to resolve in the near future, at least, as in this case; in the multicultural English metropolis. As Bromley avers “[u]nbelonging is the permanent condition of being on the eve of an uncertain tomorrow” (168).

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Özet

Melez Kişiliklerin Gezinesi

Bu makalede farklı artalanlara sahip Meera Syal ve Leila Aboulela adlı kadın yazarlar irdelenmektedir. Bu yazarların özelliği kadın karakterlerinin yeni milenyumun şekillendirdiği kadın dayanışması ve din olgularını ortaya koymasıdır. Syal Asya kökenli bir Britanyalı yazadır ve eseri *Life isn't all ha ha hee hee* (1999) Hint asıllı İngiliz üç kadın arkadaş ve onların kendini ifade etme amacıyla erkeklere karşı kadın dayanışmasını anlatmaktadır. Diğer taraftan, Aboulela Sudanlı'dır ve *Minaret* (2005) adlı eserinde Londra'da sürgünde olan bir kadının kimliğini bulma serüvenini, bu süreçte zenginlikten fakirliğe, aşktan dine geçişini anlatmaktadır. Bu makale adı geçen romanlarda kişiliklerin nasıl değişkenlik gösterdiğini ortaya koyarak kültürel artalanların farklı olmasının kişinin kendini farklı hissetmesine neden olduğu ve bunun da melez kişiliklerin gezinesini oluşturduğunu tartışmaktadır.

Anahatar sözcükler: melezlik, Syal, Aboulela, sosyal kimlik dayanışması, kimlik, din, “hijab”

**“Making do with light”:
Mimi Khalvati and the Poetry of Intimate Perception**

Heather Yeung

Abstract: This essay looks at the early poetry of the Anglo-Iranian poet Mimi Khalvati. It offers readings of “The Bowl” (from *In White Ink*, 1991) and “Mirrorwork” (from *Mirrorwork*, 1995) in terms of the poet’s own concerns with ideas of perception, visual and otherwise. The article is concerned with the manner in which Khalvati’s poetic explorations of perception lead the poet to investigate and test her mixed cultural (Iranian and British) and linguistic (English and Farsi) heritage, the question of otherness in respect both to this mixed heritage and also to language, and the structure and bounds of poetic syntax itself.

Keywords: Mimi Khalvati, contemporary British poetry, Anglo-Iranian poetry, visual perception, poetry.

The spy is stood motionless to draw his diagrams, a debauchee to keep a look out for a woman, the most earnest men stop to observe progress on a new building or a major demolition. But the poet remains halted before any object which does not merit the earnest man’s attention, so that people ask themselves whether he is spy or lover and that he has been looking at in reality in all the time he seems to have been looking at that tree. (Proust 147)

Mimi Khalvati’s poetry is, above all, a poetry of intimate perception. The strength of her poetic world rests upon the many unnoticed habits of the quotidian, and creates novelty from the very moment that these habits *are* noticed. More often than not, the perception of the quotidian will trigger a moment of Proustian remembrance, but, contrary to Proust’s narrator in *À La Recherche*, Khalvati’s speaker’s remembrances are usually catalysed by the illumination of a particular object or action. The moment of perception will trigger a series of self-conscious episodes in which the speaker recognises and comes to terms with the difference that lies within herself—the differences between her Persian mother tongue and English, the language in which she creates her literature, and her position as a woman living in and between these cultures. Therefore, contrary to one of her speaker’s final articulations in an aubade, Khalvati does not just “[make] do with light” (Khalvati 2000, 15). The outside world, treated with wonder, need not be thought of as other, or, indeed, treated with disgust. The distance-engendering exile necessary for poetic production is not created for this poet through a pat use of her multiculturalism and the difference thus created. Rather, for Khalvati, her speaker’s surroundings, her native or non-native landscapes, are less other than the act or moment of perception itself, whether this perception is visual, aural, or sensory. The act or moment of perception crosses cultural and linguistic boundaries, and more often than not, the initial moment of perception will, for Khalvati, be a visual one: a moment of visual disturbance leading to a renewed sense of what is perceived. Acute to the manner in which the play of light constructs the perceived world, for Khalvati,

neither quotidian light nor colour are “mere” or “other”. Rather, light and colour are celebrated. The poet herself questions “what can I write that’s not in the eye?” (Khalvati 1997, 63). Thus, in turn, the recognition of light as an independent force, but simultaneously one which is necessary for visual perception to occur, sheds light on the act of perception, and in this way the otherness of language and of the self are investigated.

Language itself tends to be both the personal and also the dominant othering force in Khalvati’s poetry, complicating meaning and simultaneously creating a breathing space inside acceptance where the speaker can articulate and retreat from the world. For Khalvati, English is a linguistic force which is inherently other to her, and through this distance the use of English makes the poet more conscious of her own *poiesis*: “it’s almost as though it’s outside myself; it’s something with many aspects, many dimensions, all of which have to be understood and worked with, and experimented with, or addressed in some way or another” (Khalvati 1999, 59). Indeed, Bruce King and Jonathan Bate, writing of the internationalization of English literature, identify Khalvati from amongst her peers as a “highly textual poet” (292), and Michael Schmidt sees in Khalvati’s poetry “a different syntax, a distinctive rhythm and rhyme” (859). This textuality, a hallmark of Khalvati’s poetic style, is one which the poet sees inextricably linked with her poetic explorations in perception: “[my] interest in syntax, especially, is something I went with in *Entries on Light*; related also to my interest in speed of perception, any fleeting sensation” (Khalvati 1999, 61). The poetry dwells both on and in the moment of perception, and Khalvati’s poetic “I” is the means by which the perceived object and perception itself articulate and communicate. The moment of perception, for Khalvati, is also generative: it provokes memories of past moments as well as wonder at the beauty of the single, present, moment of perception. Julia Kristeva speaks of Proust’s great project in terms that may equally be applied to Khalvati’s poetry: “[*À la recherche* is concerned with] the exploration of memory, with the ‘I’ unfolding ideas and images, recalling flavours, smells, touches, resonances, sensations, jealousies, exasperations, griefs and joys” (Kristeva 1993, 6). It is unsurprising, therefore, that the poet herself speaks of her primary literary influences to be Proust and Woolf, two Twentieth-Century writers who are frequently analysed in terms of language, perception, memory and embodiment:

Both Proust and Woolf had this way of looking at everything through a huge magnifying glass. Catching every little nuance. I’m really not interested in subject matter, but I’m interested in ways of perceiving, and ways of remembering, ways of thinking [...] tracking what goes on inside your mind, your perceptions. And I love the kind of textural, pinpoint accuracy that I find in those two writers. (Khalvati 1999, 60)

This “textural, pinpoint accuracy” is best expressed through the speaker’s experience of things rather than with regard to the things themselves, producing an effect in a writerly world where “it is best [. . .] to rub along with humble facts until the mind at last is all of a glow and sees the sunset without its being described” (Woolf 32). Khalvati’s early poem, “The Bowl”, published in *In White Ink* (1991), demonstrates the manner in which Khalvati’s poetry of intimate perception mixes the Woolfian and the Proustian in a poetic exploration of perceptions present and remembered, English and Iranian. The poem is exemplary in its use of a single object as a vehicle through which

the speaker can stream, and blur, the moment's perception and memory, whilst at the same time the speaker uses this vehicle (the bowl) to flesh out, locate and transpose her "I". Tellingly, the first person pronoun does not appear in the poem until the fourth stanza. The subject of the speaker's immediate vision is initially given primacy:

The bowl is big and blue. A flash of leaf
 along its rim is green, spring-green, lime
 and herringbone. Across the glaze where fish swim,
 over the loose-knit waves in hopscotch-black,
 borders of fish-eye and cross-stitch, chestnut trees
 throw shadows: candles, catafalques and barques
 and lord knows what, what ghost of ancient seacraft,
 what river-going name we give to shadows. (*Selected Poems* 16-7)

The bowl, the object of the speaker's perception and the canvas onto which she originally projects herself, is more complex than the simple opening sentence suggests. It is both the hill-confined Persian lake-basin implied in the poem's preface and also a blue Persian finger bowl that the author owns in England and whose touch elicits a remembered landscape in the mind's eye of the speaker. The "flash of leaf" may be an inscribed pattern in the fingerbowl or the trees lining the lake-basin. Equally, "glaze" is both the literal glaze of the ceramic bowl and the water in the lake, "where fish swim". Thus, literal descriptions of both the ceramic and the geographical bowl are interchangeable as each can also represent a metaphorical description of the other. The bowl is not fully the ceramic hand-basin, nor lake-basin. Through the speaker's blurred visual and remembered perception, the images of each bowl blur. Like Kristeva's reading of Proust's madeline, "The Bowl" (sometimes referred to without the definite article as simply "bowl") is "both elsewhere *and* here at hand, past *and* also present, a sensation *and* an image at the same time, just as it is both a name *and* a meaning" (Kristeva 1993, 49). It is not long before the objects of literal and remembered perception fuse, through metaphor, with the overtly imaginary and the artistic. "Chestnut trees" "throw shadows", making the world of bright colour that opens the poem also one that has the three-dimensional qualities associated with chiaroscuro. The floral "candles" of the chestnut are also, the speaker implies, light-(and shadow-) giving, and the wood of the tree produces vessels for both life (barques) and death (catafalques). The speaker thus demonstrates a refusal to be empirical about vision, and is eminently conscious of the poem's status as a literary object as well as an articulation of perception and memory.

By the second stanza the opening green "flash of leaf" is fossilised and is thus without illumination and colouration. These fossilized leaves now lie at the bottom of the bowl and are at once literal and textual; they are related to the speaker's vision and memory, her poetic articulation, and the written inscription of the poem:

[The leaves] are named: cuneiform and ensiform,
 spatulate and saggitate and their margins
 are serrated, lapidary, lobed (17)

The language that describes (or names) the fossil leaves implies their remembered living embodiment, and the act of inscription is related to the speaker's sense of groundedness in her self. We will see the relationship between the bowl,

inscription, and embodiment develop as the poem progresses. The opening of the following stanza sees the green of the ‘flash of leaf’ leach into the speaker’s book, as she uses the first person possessive for the first time: “my book of Botany is green” (17). It is pertinent to note here that the first use of the first person possessive is in relation not to the bowl, nor to the past, but to a textual object, and it is not long before textuality and the speaker’s own physicality are blurred. As light illuminates the bowl and catalyses the speaker’s meditation on the real and imagined space of the bowl, so light illuminates the book. The speaker soon possesses the bowl as well as the book, stating, “inside my bowl a womb of air revolves”. That the bowl is something that is organic in its appearance and is something that elicits interpretation (or reading) is emphasised by the conflation of book-and bowl-related metaphor, as the speaker asks “What tadpole of the margins, holly-spine/of seahorse [...] be cobbled in its hoop?” (17).

The final stanza of section ii of “The Bowl” introduces the first person pronoun for the first time. As the bowl encloses in upon itself and presents an open universe to the speaker, folding over or eliminating horizons, the speaker is represented squatting outside and enveloping the bowl, perhaps in an attempt to control its wriggling organicity:

I squat, I stoop. My knees are either side
of bowl. My hands are eyes around its crescent.
The surface of its stories feathers me (17)

Lacking any article, however, the bowl escapes the speaker’s control. Rather it is the bowl, and its cascades of projected potential historical meaning that disturb the speaker, and she becomes “feathered”, as if the water held in the lake-basin were disturbed by wind, and then “wrung”, thus immediately divested of her new, fluid, identity. Arguably at this point in the poem the speaker has lost sight of the initial catalyst of this string of perceptions, the vision of a bowl that is simply “big and blue”, and suffers from a loss of focus as there no longer seem to be any clearly delineated spatial and temporal boundaries. Juhani Pallasmaa links the state of blurred vision to a proliferation of images and a new sort of gaze: “the loss of focus brought about by the stream of images may emancipate the eye [...] and give rise to a participatory and empathetic gaze” (Pallasmaa 35-36). Feathered and wrung out with empathy, Khalvati’s speaker is made strange to her surroundings through her search for meaning, and acknowledges the disruption of specific perception in a state of imagistic panic as the first section of the poem closes:

On a skyline
I cannot see a silhouette carves vase-shapes
into sky: baby, belly, breast, thigh;
an aeroplane I cannot hear has shark fins
and three black camels sleep in a blue, blue desert. (17)

Space, for the speaker, is now as overwhelming as sense, and neither sense nor space are regulated by the single object of perception (the bowl) but rather they are complicated by it. The speaker is a participant not only in her own histories and landscapes, but also in those of others—a receptacle through which both personal and national histories are streamed.

It is logical now that the speaker, as well as the bowl which both represents and complicates her presence in the poem, exist in a space of liminality, beyond empirical meaning or definition, eschewing conventional methods of perception and articulation. Overwhelmed by the stream of history that has emanated from the single moment of perception, the speaker stands engulfed. She must find again a stable centre, and extract herself from the mess of history, make sense of the waste of her past and the past of others. The possessive pronoun that opens the second section of the poem is the coordinate through which the speaker seeks to re-place herself in relation to the seen and unseen landscapes before her. Kristeva links this search for location in chaos and literature explicitly to the narrative “I” and the spatialization of memory, and calls (in relation to Proust), the speaker’s “search for an embodied imagination”, “a space where words and their dark, unconscious manifestations contribute to the weaving of the world’s unbroken flesh, of which I is a part” (Kristeva 1993, 5). Mieke Bal also links sense to the subject’s self-creation of their position in space: “the issue is feeling: how the subject *feels* his position in space. What we call “feeling” is the threshold of body and subjectivity” (151). Indeed, in “The Bowl”, time, memory, and vision become spatialized, and the speaker’s embodiment in the poem goes so far as to mimic the shape of the bowl, now representative of memory, over and over again. She maps this space onto her body: her eyelids are indented by the hoofprints of “Ali’s horse”, her skin is imprinted with “caves where tribal women stooped to place tin sconces”, her gums “scooped” by “limpet pools” (Khalvati *Selected* 17). Each phrase in this stanza begins with a bowl-shaped word (hoofprints, caves, limpet-pools) and ends with the relevant part of the speaker’s anatomy (eyelids, skin, limbs). Her embodiment alongside the bowl is one engendered by language, and it is language that bridges (linking and separating) the speaker and her vision.

As the first stanza of this section began with the speaker’s acquisition of simultaneous birth, vitality, and death through the bowl (“My bowl has cauled my memories. My bowl/has buried me” (17)), the second articulates this removal of boundaries and the resultant onslaught of perceptions:

My bowl has smashed my boundaries: harebell
and hawthorn mingling in my thickened waist
of jasmine; catkin and *chenar*, dwarf-oak
and hazel hanging over torrents, deltas,
my season’s arteries... *Lahaf-Doozee!*...
My retina is scarred with shadow-dances
and echoes run like hessian blinds across
my sleep; my ears are niches, prayer-rug arches. (18)

The landscapes of the speaker’s present (England), her childhood (Iran), and her body conflate. With the boundaries between these places “smashed”, the speaker is open to the world, a state that is articulated not only in image but also in voice, as the speaker’s mother tongue (Farsi) punctuates English. The cauled, buried speaker is now open to all affect, and lies between all places, eventually becoming embodied as her surroundings without the bowl as intermediary. Interestingly it is the speaker’s nervous system rather than her lost mother tongue that is equated with her place of birth: “my backbone is an alley/a one-way runnelled alley, cobblestoned/with hawker’s cries” (18). Indeed, this use of the spine rather than the voice to embody the speaker’s lost Persian childhood corresponds with Kristeva’s idea about the trauma of severance from the

mother tongue and the resultant confusion of both linguistic and cultural inheritance. As the section closes, the speaker finally finds the means by which she can stream her vision—through the idea of maternal inheritance as represented by the bowl. By way of corresponding cross-generational images, the bowl is once again possessed by the speaker—her vision is controlled:

Lizards have kept their watch on lamplight, citrus-
 peel in my mother's hand becoming baskets.
 My bowl beneath the tap is scoured with leaves. (Khalvati *Selected* 18)

The leaves that scour the speaker's bowl both imprint and divest the bowl of inscription, leaving it open again to the projection of the speaker's vision. The scoured bowl represents the ordering of her vision. At the same time as mirroring the leaf green embellishments of the opening section, and the fossilized leaves, leached of colour, the leaf-scoured bowl anticipates the change of *milieu* and colour at the beginning of the final section of the poem.

There is an immediate sense of distance and separation in the final section of the poem. The speaker is no longer close to, oppressed by, or embodying her remembered past, rather, that past is firmly placed in a space of memory. The speaker states "The white rooms of the house we glimpsed through pine/quince and pomegranate are derelict" (Khalvati *Selected* 18). "White" implies a *tabula rasa* that is both old (formed clean through erasure) and new. In the context of *In White Ink* as a whole, the use of this colour at this point also accentuates the relationship of inheritance between mother and daughter, as the epigraph to the volume quotes from Cixous: "A woman is never far from her 'mother' ... There is always within her at least a little of that good mother's milk. She writes in white ink" (Khalvati *Selected* 9). To return in this way to Kristeva, the "white" of the house, alongside the implied sense of calm and space also relates to the speaker's process through in the poem. The excess of the previous section gives way to separation in the same way as the Kristevan being is born into separation through emancipation from the excess of the maternal. Thus, the speaker develops a sense of separateness from the accumulated visions of history at the same time as acknowledging her debt to this inheritance. She situates herself as both a part of and apart from the noise of her ancestors, stating "I too will take my bowl and leave these wheatfields" (Khalvati *Selected* 19), and takes up a position of dominance over landscapes real and imagined—on a prayer rug "above the eyrie" (19) (emphasis mine).

The speaker unrolls her rug "in shade", and the landscape below her absorbs the illumination and colours of the sunset. Ideas of maternal inheritance and the speaker's own *tabula rasa* conflate in the image of the mountain, "*Sineh Sefid*" (in Khalvati's own translation, "Mount White Breast"), which is illuminated and upon which the light of the sun is projected and reflects under the speaker's calm gaze. From this image we return to the main vehicle in the poem that represents all these things: the bowl. The convexity of the sky and the concavity of the bowl, also representative of illumination and the vision observed, come together to create a whole, as illumination and control of the landscape combine:

...My bowl will hold the bowl of sky
 and as twilight falls I will stand and fling
 its spool and watch it land as lake: a ring
 where *rood* and *river* meet in peacock-blue

and peacock-green and a hundred rills cascade. (19)

The bowl now represents a composite vision that implies inheritance but may be read to be as simple as the bowl that opens the poem. The confluence of “Rood” and “river” could be a simple geographical phenomenon, where the river spills into the lake-basin, which is a quarter of an acre big. However, “rood” and “river” also represent neat a symbolic conflation of Khalvati’s inheritances: paternal and maternal, English and Persian. The speaker’s renewed confidence in and control over the multiple resonances that the bowl has elicited is emphasised in the confident resonance of sound across the line, the only full rhyme in the poem combines action (“fling”) and articulation (“ring”), separation and resonance. Equally, neither colour nor history are overwhelming, as the speaker is able to descend “to/bowl”, and the green-blue of the bowl can now be read easily as the meeting-place between the speaker and “old reflections” (19). The end of the poem sees the speaker return from the geographical bowl to the ceramic bowl clasped between her hands. The final lines emphasise the poem’s (and volume’s) preoccupation with cultural and familial inheritances, remembrance, and sense-impression, spilling at times into myth:

And from its lap a scent will rise like Mer
from mother-love and waters; scent whose name
I owe to *Talat*, gold for grandmother:
Maryam, tuberose, for bowl, for daughter. (Khalvati *Selected* 19)

As the poem closes the object and speaker (bowl and daughter) are receptacles of inheritance both together and apart. They eventually represent each other, given and holding the scent of marjoram and agave, creating a new receptive space.

In “The Bowl” we have seen speaker and object represent a “point of equilibrium [that] generates a chain of memories which is at the same time a cascade of spatial metaphors” (Kristeva 1993, 48). This is not an unfamiliar theme in Khavati. The titular sequence from the poet’s second volume, *Mirrorwork* (1995), again demonstrates her use of an object through which a speaker can channel a multiplicity of visions and impressions, seeking to resolve problems of belonging through association. “Mirrorwork” investigates a personal relationship through an exploration of the difficulty of familiarity and strangeness, both interpersonally and cross-culturally. Rather than engender memories, as in “The Bowl”, the mosaic tree, and the willow and cherry trees of “Mirrorwork” are conflated and comprise a single canvas upon which the speaker projects her disparate sense of self, a kaleidoscope through which she attempts to investigate a relationship that has only exacerbated her own sense of difference and separation. The ‘mirror tree’ that is the *idée fixe* of the sequence also becomes an ikon to the speaker, representative of her sense of self: “somewhere to/come home to on my own terms” (Khalvati *Selected* 29). Speaker and tree in “Mirrorwork” are as inseparable and simultaneously other as the bowl and the speaker are in “The Bowl”, and the streaming object (the tree) is just as conflicted as the bowl: where bowl was both ceramic and geographical, the tree is a mosaic, a symbol of national identity, and a real tree. From the central image of ‘tree’ the speaker creates a diverse and multiple world out of many different quotidian things, out of the “mere arrangements of colour and light” that refract from the mirror-work mosaic.

Although most of the momentum between sections of “Mirrorwork” is gained

through the unifying image of the tree and the speaker's relationship to this image, the speaker seems keen to construct a relationship between herself, the tree, and the addressee that is defined by perceived and articulated difference:

I refuse the natural detail to tell you how
things look, how sky would look without a
tree to blot my view of an avenue through
cloudbanks like the genie from the bonfire
growing longer, quieter, skyward. (30)

Although the definite articles here endow the passage with a sense of familiarity, it is this very assumption of familiarity that emphasises the speaker's sense of difference. At this point the speaker uses the vehicle of tree to imagine a visual space without it, admitting the tree's quotidian state through negation and hypotheses. The tree is present in this image through the speaker's tacit acknowledgement of its absent necessity to her spatial imaginings. This negation may be seen as an experiment in perception and otherness as legitimate as the act of describing the seen. In fact, often in this sequence the tree is defined through negation, which in turn creates a sense of otherness that can not only be projected upon the relationship between the speaker and the addressee, but upon the speaker's own sense of otherness:

My tree is nothing but the thought of something
not itself: a bare land that throws its
own desire for shadow, orchard, rain (31)

The tree becomes representative of and a mirror for the relationship and the speaker's sense of self. The speaker states: "Standing in its plot, its absence of a/paving stone, my cherry tree dissembles / intimacy in echoes" (30). Light illuminates the object of perception and also creates visual disturbances that could lead to a momentary absence of the original perception. In the terms of David Grandy, it is light that is responsible for one's recognition of otherness: "light presents otherness to our view [...] the inscrutability of light informs the inscrutability or otherness of the outside world" (Grandy 3). To return to Khalvati's mirrortree, like any reflective object, the tree fragments light and impressions, it breaks up a sense of the real, and lies between the speaker and her projections, her home in England and her birth place in Iran. The effect is to create an overwhelming sense of displacement, multiplying the speaker's perceived otherness. Again, through the mirrortree, Iran and England conflate, but, conflicting at the same time they create an underlying sense of estrangement. The speaker is not so much scathing of England and nostalgic about Iran than keen to work through her own sense of being between, to align these disparate parts of her sense of self successfully. However, success tends only to come through the acknowledgement of the otherness in one's self rather than the projection of that otherness upon the world.

As we have seen in relation to "The Bowl", the Kristevan realisation of self is dependent upon the recognition of a space *between* things that designates otherness. In the main, this space is created at the point of separation from the mother and exacerbated during the mirror stage of development. After this, for Kristeva at least, difference (strangeness or alterity) becomes something inherent in ourselves, almost quotidian, and is something that must be recognised and accepted. She states: "strangely, the foreigner lives within us: he is the hidden face of our identity, the space

that wrecks our abode, the time in which understanding and affinity founder. By recognizing him within ourselves, we are spared detesting him in himself" (Kristeva 1991, 310) "Mirrorwork" charts the speaker's self-becoming in a manner altogether different from "The Bowl". The speaker must not only deal with her split geographical inheritance, but also with a sense of physical and emotional place that is as diffracted as the reflection that comes off the mosaic, "each fragment whole, each unit split" (Khalvati *Selected* 33). Finally, it is in the recognition of difference's roots in the everyday that the speaker can withdraw her vision from the complicating image of the tree, her mind from the spatially imposing idea of the failing relationship and her problems with self-identification:

I glance as I pass. Not with indifference
but an incipient sense of the customary.
Seeing things as they are. You, me.
Accommodating difference. On its own terms. (35)

The dullness implied by "the customary" here is negated by the fact that the customary is "incipient" and not indifferent. The speaker, as the poem closes, is no longer dazzled by the refraction of light that the tree produces. She allows her gaze to be lead rather than distracted by light. Merleau-Ponty speaks very strongly of the two characteristics of light as distractive and as facilitating to perception: "lighting and reflection, then, play their part only if they remain in the background as discreet intermediaries, and *lead* our gaze instead of arresting it" (310). However, the phenomenologist does not seem to acknowledge the tacit *normality* of light; it allows the speaker to prioritize the object of her immediate perception, to "[see] *things as they are*", and to do these things in a space to which she has "come home to on [her] own terms", albeit mitigated by having to accept and work with difference "*on its own terms*". The terms projected by difference and refracted by the speaker are also those created from the play of light. They are terms that not only include facilitation of vision and the resultant empirical space-creation, but also the refraction or disturbance of vision and the resultant impressionistic space-creation. They are terms that are dictated by light and by the speaker's ability to perceive that light. The gaze itself is distractive enough, allowing the speaker to realise and thus accommodate difference through, an exploration of her own interest in "speed of perception" and "fleeting sensation" (Khalvati 1999, 61). More often than not, the speaker's idiosyncratic and changeable perceptions of her surroundings lead to fluctuations in visual perception, and a stylistic impressionism akin to Khalvati's assessment of Woolf's and Proust's "way of looking at everything through a huge magnifying glass" (1999, 60)-an observational act dependent, above all else, upon light.

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Özet

"Işıklı idare etmek": Mimi Khalvati ve Samimi Algının Şiiri

Bu makale İngiliz-İranlı şair Mimi Khalvati'nin ilk şiirlerine göz atmaktadır. Şairin algı, görsellik ve diğer konulardaki kendi meseleleri bağlamında "The Bowl" (*In White Ink*'ten, 1991) ve "Mirrorwork" (*Mirrorwork*'ten, 1995) eserlerinden okumalar sunmaktadır. Bu makale; Khalvati'nin algı konusundaki şiirsel keşiflerinin şairin kendi melez kültürel (İranlı ve Britanyalı) ve dilsel (İngilizce ve Farsça) mirasını, hem bu melez miras hem de dilsel bağlamda ötekilik sorununu incelemesine ve sınamasına sebep olan durum ile şiirsel sözdiziminin kendisinin yapısı ve sınırları ile ilgilidir.

Anahtar Sözcükler: Mimi Khalvati, çağdaş Britanya şiiri, İngiliz-İranlı şiiri, görsel algı ve şiir.

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