

## GENDERED DIASPORAS CONSIDERATIONS ON SOME ENGLISH-LANGUAGE NOVELS BY WOMEN WRITERS OF SOUTH-ASIAN ORIGIN

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### **Abstract**

*This paper focuses on the gendered identities resulting from some English-language novels by women writers of South-Asian origin, namely Brick Lane by Monica Ali, Life Isn't All Haa Haa Hee Hee by Meera Syal and Looking for Maya and Transmission by Atima Srivastava. The discussion takes place in the postcolonial and postmodern contexts and addresses this topic in connection to other markers of identity: class, 'race', socio-economic group, caste, sexual orientation, generation. Gender is regarded as a process, in movement and development, from a balanced perspective, by equally taking into consideration feminist and masculinity theories. The question of culture today must be raised in the realm of the 'beyond', which expresses a transit period and is defined by a sense of disorientation, a disturbance of direction (according to Homi Bhabha in Introduction to The Location of Culture). Thus, gender identity is explored in the above mentioned novels as a cultural construct and on the migratory axis centre-periphery, metropolis-former empire, with some of the characters seeking to accede to what they view as the centre and others to go back to the periphery they or their parents had left. However, 'finding the centre' seems to pose controversial identity issues in the global contemporary world, where this is a personal construct rather than a generally acknowledged one.*

**Keywords:** gender identity, postcolonialism, women writers, South-Asian novels.

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### **1. Introduction**

Gender and diaspora are key notions in the novels *Brick Lane* by Monica Ali, *Life Isn't All Haa Haa Hee Hee* by Meera Syal and *Looking for Maya and Transmission* by Atima Srivastava. In all these postcolonial English-language novels written by women authors of South-Asian origins, all characters, male and female, question their colonial past and their postcolonial present, as well as their postmodern multiple identity(ies). Theirs is mostly a diasporic identity combined with the one of their origin, a gender identity, a class or social and economic group one, a generational identity and a sexual one. As emigrants/immigrants to a new reality and inhabitants of the centre their ancestors had long dreamed of, these characters,

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just like the authors of the novels under discussion, seem to find it challenging at times to adjust to their simultaneous insider/outsider positions.

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## ***2. Home and Away***

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Meera Syal was born in the English Midlands in a middle-class Indian family of mixed religions: her father (an accountant) is a Hindu and her mother, a Sikh (a teacher). She was a very creative child and she believes this playful creativity had to do with her ancestry and the way she lived in ethnic isolation in a 'typical' English mining town:

*If I had grown up a white, middle-class kid, I don't think I would have become a creative person. I was asked so often to explain myself, I thought, 'You don't get it – let me put it in the form of a joke.'* (Hattenstone)

And it is this creativity and boldness that made her describe her community so well. Her insider/outsider position is clear, and she claims in an interview that it is precisely because of that she managed so well personally and professionally. Being an outsider to your own reality makes people question themselves and this very reality and in the end leads to their own progress:

*Because I was always the outsider, it forced me to look at the bigger picture, and I think that every creative person is somewhere an outsider... you are always having to ask yourself the big questions, like who am I? Where do I fit in? Where do I belong? I realised early on: well, nowhere, actually, but that's not bad, that's good.* (Owen)

Also, her creativity had to do with her being of a certain generation, as her mother explains in the same interview. Her words are about the series *Goodness Gracious Me*, which brought Meera Syal in the limelight, and in fact this can apply to all her writings:

*My generation [Syal's mother's] didn't accept people making fun of us. Every minority is defensive. You can't show anything silly or funny – show only the good side. It was brave at the time.* (Hattenstone)

When talking about what being 'Asian' means, Syal herself says this is "one of those awkward umbrella terms that's increasingly losing relevance (...). We're not just one homogenous lump." (Owen) Moreover this is a raced vision, as she explains further on in the interview; racism in her childhood was "really obvious, like '70s-sitcom obvious, like, 'Hey, Paki!' – that kind of thing, not the kind of polite, smiley 'don't sell your house to them' kind of stuff you have now." (Owen)

She dedicated the role she makes in the film to her mother, and also to the women in her mother's generation. The gender and ethnic dimensions are obvious: the role is "homage to my mother's generation, really, and all of those women who have lives full of regret, missed opportunities and sacrifices they've made for their families". (Owen) Syal described very well this category in her novel, and she owes her knowledge and understanding mainly to her insider observations:

*I grew up surrounded by these incredibly vibrant, all-powerful women, or so I thought – until you just scraped the surface and you found out about the lives they had had in India and what they had left behind, the sacrifices they had made. You know someone who was a poet in India who ended up in a factory here, all that kind of thing. (Owen)*

Monica Ali, another of the South-Asian women writers under discussion, has English and Bengali ancestry and had to leave her original Dhaka when she was only three years old, during the civil war that led to the creation of Bangladesh. Ali has an idealized, somewhat mythical vision of "home", which is in contrast with what it means to Nazneen, the protagonist of her highly praised novel, *Brick Lane*:

*And home, because it could never be reached, became mythical: Tagore's golden Bengal, a teasing counterpoint to our drab northern milltown lives. (Ali)*

It is interesting in this context to explore the concept of 'home' and what it means for both the novelist and her characters. Is 'home' the point of departure, the outskirts of the former Empire, the starting point of her parents' life voyage? Or rather it is the 'centre', the 'metropolis', where she is actually living her life in the present? And to what extent are these questions valid in the contemporary postcolonial world? To Ali the similarities with her characters' existence are – as she puts it – a question of 'resonance'. She resonates to their desires, although she does not really have the same life experience:

*A glossy women's magazine that interviewed me recently ran its piece under the headline: "I turned my life into a book." This was interesting. I did not grow up like Nazneen (my protagonist) in a small Bangladeshi village, have an arranged marriage, and move to Tower Hamlets unable to speak a word of English. But since reading that headline I have been trying it on for size. How much of what I have written as fiction is drawn from experience? "Going Home Syndrome," as one of the characters in the book terms it, might be a fertile area to examine. Many of the characters in *Brick Lane* nurture their dreams of home, even (or perhaps especially) the young radical who was born in this country and has never even visited Bangladesh. I cannot draw any clear parallels with my family history. But I can feel the reverberations. It is not so much a question of what inspired me. The issue is one of resonance. (Ali)*

As explained by Ali in this interview, going 'home' is a dream for some of the novel's characters, embodied by second or third generation emigrants/immigrants, but it is also a dream rejected by the first-generation ones. It is interesting to note what each character understands by the notion of 'home'. Also, we should mention their desire to connect to the 'centre' when coming from what had been long construed as the 'periphery'. It is a 'periphery' of the former Empire, but in the contemporary world, the two notions can be reversed or interchanged.

Monica Ali addresses the issue of writing in the same terms, by invoking the process of seeking the 'periphery'. Ali makes a parallel with the way another postcolonial writer, VS Naipaul, describes his struggle for the 'centre', while for Ali it is more important to seek out the periphery:

*For VS Naipaul, "finding the centre" has been an important part of his journey as a writer. Taking my first steps as a writer, I could argue, has involved the inverse process: seeking out the periphery. I find it difficult to fill these words with any meaning. The Muslim world (of which I have written a small section about) is at the centre of our gaze as never before; "subcontinent" literature (...) has always been more than a speck on my reading horizon, and many authors are firmly within the literary establishment; and in any case, what do we have, at the notional centre, to set against the periphery — VS Naipaul, writing about Wiltshire? Periphery is, nevertheless, a word which is useful to me. (Ali)*

In this process, Ali finds herself in-between two worlds, observing and describing both of them, both outsider and insider of reality. As an insider/outsider of two worlds, Ali raises the problem of acceptance and also of what she calls "the tyranny of representation" (quoting CLR James), in other words who is allowed to write about what? In context, it is of interest to mention the street protests and media campaign led by the Bengali community at the shooting of the film *Brick Lane*, mostly against the alleged false depiction of this community and their neighbourhood. Ali emphasizes in fact her advantageous position as an outsider/insider, and her right to write about the respective community:

*I can write about it [the Bengali community] because I do not truly belong. Growing up with an English mother and a Bengali father means never being an insider. Standing neither behind a closed door, nor in the thick of things, but rather in the shadow of the doorway, is a good place from which to observe. Good training, I feel, for life as a writer. (Ali)*

When writing novels, inspiration is unquestionably of the greatest importance. Next to it, Ali places 'race', as she mentions her "brown skin", which positions her both on the outside and the inside of the issue of ethnicity. She makes a parallel with the gender, as they both imply involvement and belonging:

Beyond the "inspiration" question, I could set lines of inquiry about my book into two broad camps. Tell us about "them," is one. The tyranny of representation — the phrase is not mine but belongs, I think, to CLR James — means that when I speak, my brown skin is the dominant signifier. The other reaction is rather different. What gives you the right to write about "us," when you're clearly one of "them?" In an audience recently at the Bengali World Literature Centre in the East End, a woman invited me to take a test. "How can you know what it is like to be a Bengali mother," she protested, "when you don't even speak our language? Come on, speak to us in Bangla." I've never subscribed to the "cricket test" and I declined the questioner's test also. (My Bengali is limited now to some tourist-phrase-type inquiries, a few nursery rhymes or song fragments and a quite extensive culinary vocabulary.) Of course, any literary endeavour must be judged on the work alone. It stands or falls on its own merits regardless of the colour, gender and so on of the author. A male author does not need "permission" to write about a female character, a white author does not transgress in taking a black protagonist. But the "two camp" split in my case brings me back to the idea of the periphery. How can I write about a community to which I do not truly belong? Perhaps, the answer is I can write about it because I do not truly belong. Growing up with an English mother and a Bengali father means never being an insider. Standing neither behind a closed door, nor in the thick of things, but rather in the shadow of the doorway, is a good place from which to observe. Good training, I feel, for life as a writer. (Ali)

In the same way as Monica Ali, Atima Srivastava has revealing views of her own ethnic and gender identity. For her, both her Indian and London diasporic roots define her identity, and very interestingly she talks about the relationship with her two origins in terms of ownership and belonging. It is London she owns and India she belongs to. Srivastava is the mistress of the metropolis, of the imperial centre, London, and not a part of the Empire itself; she feels a Londoner, never British, or even English. She feels more a non-resident Indian (a NRI), which is a term describing either an Indian citizen who migrated to another country or a person of Indian origin who is born outside India, but never fully an Indian or a Westerner:

*I have always felt myself to be Indian and a Londoner, never British, never English....My most potent image of myself is that I always have the feeling that I am from here and also from there. When I am here, I feel Indian constantly and when I am there, I feel ... English, or western, or ... I suppose I feel like an NRI, which has become a relevant identity. And yet, even this is problematic, because I do not feel like a tourist in India, although I am, of course. I feel that I belong to India, while I feel I 'own' London. (Srivastava)*

Srivastava's diasporic existence includes (to use Syal's words) 'reverberations' of India, reverberations doubly mediated by her own memories or by present-day trips to India, and also by her parents' notion of India, which interestingly includes their speaking Hindi. Thus the India she relates to is not what she calls 'authentic'

(although that is also a concept which needs to be analysed), but a mitigated image, a creation validated by the writer for the use of herself and of her readers:

*My situation is different, although I came to England at the age of eight. My 'India', if you like, came from my parents' very present idea of India, which involved speaking Hindi, having visitors from India over etc. - very little assimilation - and also from my very frequent trips back. So yes, although the 'broken mirrors' is a concept I understand, an India, even it is not a real or authentic India (whatever that is!), has, does and continues to exist certainly for my sense of self. (Srivastava)*

This is a description which is very well fitted to the image of the postcolonial world, as described by Homi Bhabha. The postcolonial is a person with a multiple identity, from 'here' and 'there', living in the transitory world of the 'beyond'.

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### **3. The Postcolonial "Beyond"**

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According to Homi Bhabha in *Introduction to The Location of Culture*, the question of culture today must be raised in the realm of the 'beyond'. This defines a transit period and is defined by a lack of orientation, a disturbance of direction. Our existence is placed on the borderline of the present, where space and time produce complex figures of "difference and identity, past and present, inside and outside, inclusion and exclusion" (Bhabha, 1994: 1).

Identity is multiply defined by race, gender, generation, institutional location, geopolitical locale, sexual orientation. The focus is on those moments or processes that are produced in the articulation of cultural differences. Contemporary culture has a transnational character due to the demographic and phenomenological impact of minorities and migrants. The realm of the beyond described by Homi Bhabha is where culture is placed; it is an exploratory restless movement in the "au-dela, here and there, on all sides, fort/da, hither and thither, back and forth". (Bhabha, 1994: 1)

It is a space in which we can elaborate the strategies of selfhood that initiate new signs of identity in the act of defining the idea of society itself, a space in which the intersubjective and collective experiences of nationness, community interest or cultural value are negotiated. According to Bhabha, the 'beyond' requires an encounter with newness - it does not recall the past, it renews it, refiguring it as an 'in-between space' that innovates and interrupts the performance of the present. To 'dwell' in the 'beyond' means "to be part of a revisionary time, a return to the present, to redescribe our cultural contemporaneity" (Bhabha, 1994: 10).

Homi Bhabha introduces the idea of a 'new internationalism' which is "the history of postcolonial migration, the narratives of cultural and political Diaspora, the major displacements of peasant and aboriginal communities, the poetics of exile,

the grim prose of political and economic refugees". (Cf. Bhabha, 1994: 19) National cultures are being increasingly produced from the perspective of disenfranchised minorities, and the effect of this phenomenon is not the proliferation of "alternative histories of the excluded producing a pluralist anarchy, but a changed basis for making international connections, a radical revision in the concept of human community itself". The problem now is not the 'selfhood' of the nation opposed to the otherness of other nations. The nation is split within itself, articulating the heterogeneity of its population; it is internally marked by the discourses of minorities, the heterogeneous histories of the peoples, antagonistic authorities and cultural difference. (Bhabha, 1994: 1-19)

Coming to terms with one's diasporic self and managing simultaneously several personal and national historic narratives are the necessary actions for the ones that populate this space. This is due to the existence of different threads that co-exist, not in parallel, but inside the postcolonial one:

*The Western metropole must confront its postcolonial history, told by the influx of postwar migrants and refugees, as an indigenous or native narrative internal to its national identity; and the reason for this is made clear in the stammering drunken words of Mr 'Whisky' Sisodia from The Satanic Verses: "The trouble with the Engenglish is that their hiss hiss history happened overseas, so they dodo don't know what it means".* (Bhabha, 1994: 9)

There is another type of the 'beyond' of which Anthony Smith speaks (Smith 143-160), where the new transnational forces are also situated: regional power blocs, transnational economic corporations, global telecommunication systems, also massive population movements and the growing importance of environmental pollution and disease on a regional or global scale. It is in this 'beyond' that massive movements of population take place, and they contribute to a constant and sometimes violent redefinition of the 'national body'.

Whereas colonialism saw the displacement of the people from the metropolis to the periphery of the Empire, to rule over the territory and to 'civilize the natives', postcolonialism witnesses movements in all directions. There are the economic or cultural migrants, moving from periphery to the centre, but also the ones who, at the second or third generation in the centre, reverse this process in search of cultural and national roots, in the same way as the authors under discussion, and also their characters.

In *Identity, Culture and the Postmodern*, Madan Sarup describes the journey of the migrants, which presupposes a continuous transformation of their identity, while every step forward can also be a step back. The migrant is here and there:

*Exile can be deadening but it can also be very creative. It can be an affliction but it can also be a transfiguration – it can be a resource. What I am trying to say is that identity is to do not with being but with becoming* (Sarup, 1996: 6).

The category of ‘stranger’ needs to be defined in this context. While in physical proximity, the unclassifiable ‘strangers’ are culturally remote, they are suspended between the space which they have left and the one which does not accept them: “the stranger blurs a boundary line. The stranger is an anomaly, standing between the inside and the outside, order and chaos, friend and enemy”. (Sarup 10)

The way the local population fights against the stranger is through stigma, which the ‘strangers’ try to fight back, sometimes through assimilation:

*Stigma (undecidable) is a convenient weapon in the defence against the unwelcome ambiguity of the stranger. The essence of stigma is to emphasise the difference of the undecidables; and a difference which is in principle beyond repair, and hence justifies a permanent exclusion. Many strangers try to erase the stigma by trying to assimilate. The harder they try, however, the faster the finishing-line recedes. Unlike an alien or a foreigner, the stranger is not simply a newcomer, a person temporarily out of place. S/he is an eternal wonderer, homeless always and everywhere* (Sarup, 1996: 10-11).

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#### **4. Gendered Diasporas**

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In the postcolonial and postmodern contexts of the four novels under discussion gender identity should be viewed as a process, in movement and development, from a balanced perspective, by equally taking into consideration feminist and masculinity claims. It includes the dynamic relationships among different characteristics and forms of diverse interpretations of femininities and masculinities, including, for example, ‘Third World’ women who claim their right to different experiences (or different interpretations of the same experiences), as well as to new voices.

As concerns the theories of masculinity, cultural representations of men and masculinity, with traditional characteristics such as power, strength, action, control, male bonding, work, and competition are constantly challenged and re-valued in the contemporary society. Although the emphasis is now more on emotions, intimacy, and the ornamentation of the body and of the self, we are also experiencing a revival of traditional masculinity. According to Robert Bly and his book *Iron John: A Book About Men*, men in the 1990’s needed to get back in touch with their masculine side (rather than their feminine one, as was proclaimed in the previous decades). This is due to the fact that in the Western society the traditional role of the father had been lost (mainly as a result of many divorces and the

changing role of marriage and the image of the family), while matriarchy seems to re-emerge and regain a central position in society.

Gender should be discussed in relationship with other markers of identity, such as 'race', class or social group, sex, generation, etc., as it does not exist as a separate and independent entity. Ania Loomba in *Colonialism/Postcolonialism* does not specifically discuss gender, she links the concept of class with that of 'race', with the subtext that 'male' is the considered denominator in the context. The superiority of the white race as a colonial discourse is a definite instrument of power and it clearly signifies the racially identified working classes. 'Caste' was a concept that got used in Britain due to its colonial experiences, especially in India, "and it marked a social, economic and religious hierarchy overlaid with connotations of purity and pollution, similar to those that shape the idea of race" (Loomba, 1998: 123).

In *Imperial Leather*, Ann McClintock analyses the imperial power discourse in connection with gender, class and race. She quotes Engels on the working class: "a race wholly apart", so that it and the bourgeoisie are now "two radically dissimilar nations, as unlike as the differences of race could make them"(McClintock 43). Domestic workers, female miners and working-class prostitutes were stationed in Victorian times in the in-between category, between the white and black races, having fallen from the perfect white race and sharing a lot of the characteristics of the debased black one. McClintock uses 'abjection' to define certain social groups under imperial power:

*Under imperialism, I argue, certain groups are expelled and obliged to inhabit the impossible edges of modernity: the slum, the ghetto, the garret, the brothel, the convent, the colonial banthustan and so on. Abject peoples are those whom industrial imperialism rejects but cannot do without: slaves, prostitutes, the colonized, domestic workers, the insane, the unemployed, and so on. Certain threshold zones become abject zones and are policed with vigor: the Arab Casbah, the Jewish ghetto, the Irish slum, the Victorian garret and kitchen, the squatter camp, the mental asylum, the red light district, and the bedroom* (McClintock, 1995: 72).

It is thus the 'white man's burden' to tame, isolate, educate and if necessary annihilate these debased layers of society and he does that by violent means, through the instruments of imperial administration, the Police, the Army, the School. Violence is a means of achieving one's duty, which is ensuring the direct implementation of the rule of law over a group of people who, through their very race, is defined by its need of discipline. The justification of violence comes from different areas of social life: the family (the father disciplining his children), the school (the 'master' disciplining his pupils), the local administration (the Police disciplining the wrong-doers), the national defence system (the Army general

disciplining his troops), the law (the judge disciplining the criminals). They all come together in a corollary of the white man's imperial duty: that of isolating the natives while ruling over them. The parallel we can make with the category of 'woman' is obvious: the natives, like women, need to be disciplined. And native women need to be doubly disciplined.

Hanif Kureishi also reflects on race relationships and the place white men hold in society in *My Ear at His Heart*. He regards race in direct relationship with gender. In colonial times, white men held a position of power, and the same position is held by the white man in the postcolonial world. Kureishi speaks of the imposition of the white man's values, in opposition to which everything else is 'backward' or 'undeveloped'; "the non-white seems to exist, can only exist, in the gaps in the white world". The white man seems to believe he will always hold political power, and therefore feels he can give in a little on the cultural terrain, where non-whites are allowed to sing and dance, and they do so with "the energy of the marginalised". However, according to Kureishi the white man is always in charge and "imagines he always will be, even as he becomes more and more paranoid" (Cf. Kureishi, 2004: 107).

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#### *4.1. Marriage as Marker of Identity*

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In the four novels under discussion, marriage is a marker of identity. It is viewed as a passage for men and women alike, a multiple layered and complex passage, for which not only the protagonists seem to be responsible, but also the smaller and the larger communities where they lead their existence. Their families, their social group or caste, the village or town, and even the nation at large are involved in this process, in which not only the individual lives of the bride and groom are at stake, but the very functioning of society. In their turn, the protagonists know they have to respect the unwritten social laws of this union, and when they do not, and when rules of caste, gender, ethnicity or nationality are transgressed; their destinies can only turn bad. Marriage can also be understood as a passage from childhood to maturity, and as passage into another world, for which some of the characters come badly equipped: it is a violent world of male domination, of ethnic and racial discrimination, or of cultural misunderstandings.

The emigrant/immigrant is one type of character that is described in the novels in connection to marriage. It is both a male or female character, an 'almost English' one (if we are to use Kureishi's words in *The Buddha of Suburbia*: "My name is Kamir Amir, and I am an Englishman born and bred, almost. I am often considered to be a funny kind of Englishman, a new breed as it were, having emerged from two old histories." Kureishi 1), trying to adapt to a new reality of the diaspora. The emigrant/immigrant characters are varied: the dutiful wife who came to the metropolis through an arranged marriage or the young career woman, playing with her Asian image to obtain recognition in the West, or 'the new man', as announced

and acclaimed by the masculinity theories of the 1990's, who tries to copy an image for which he is not fully ready.

The emigrants/immigrants are, as expected, the most common in these novels. Most of them came to Britain, with London the desired centre/metropolis, in which individual fulfilment is considered possible and social recognition, irrespective of origin, is expected to be the natural follow-up. However, reality contradicts the dream, as most of the novels seem to show. Also, we should note that diasporic experiences are clearly gendered; the way new life is both acquired and perceived is differently described through the eyes of male and female characters.

Some of the female characters come to Britain through an arranged marriage, as Nazneen from *Brick Lane* by Monica Ali. The story of Nazneen's fate (she was stillborn and recovered) is told and re-told to saturation, as "The Story Of How You Were Left To Your Fate". This is in opposition to her beautiful sister, who, having run away at 16, "kicked against fate", or is it, the heroine asks herself, that she just followed it? But, as her mother had put it back home in her village in Bangladesh, "if God wanted us to ask questions, he would have made us men" (Ali, 2003: 64). And on the same lines, "I don't want anything from this life", "we will suffer in silence", "we are just women, what can we do?", "God made the world this way" (Ali, 2003: 83-84). Due to her cultural background, it is easy for Nazneen to live her English life confined to her flat: "regular prayer, regular housework, regular visits with Razia" (Ali, 2003: 41).

Her husband, Chanu, is the one who imposes this kind of life to her after having 'obtained' her from back 'home'. Chanu considers himself open-minded and educated, and possibly he is, if we judge him against the prejudice and stereotypes of his native land. Telling his wife that her going out would not bother him, but it would make people talk about him and make him look like a fool is a clear instance of his in-between identity: "and anyway, if you were in Bangladesh you would not go out. Coming here you are not missing anything, only broadening your horizons" (Ali, 2003: 35).

This can also be interpreted as male violation of the female body, done within the family context but nevertheless unacceptable from the Western point of view. However, some women tacitly consent to it, at least to a certain extent. Nazneen's image (the submissive traditional woman) is contrasted on the one hand with that of Razia, her emancipated neighbour, who has a haircut, dresses in western-style trousers, smokes and gets a job, as she has correctly assimilated the Western cultural elements. On the other hand, Nazneen is contrasted to her sister Hasina, who, not having listened to her parents and rebelled against her fate, now has to struggle on her own in Bangladesh.

Nazneen however is herself torn between following her fate (“It was her place to sit still and wait”) and to rebel (but wouldn’t that be following her fate, after all?): there was “a shapeless nameless thing that crawled across her shoulders and nested in her hair and poisoned her lungs, that made her both restless and listless”. (Ali, 2003: 82-83) It is the call of emancipation and empowerment, which somehow forced by the uselessness of her husband, she eventually follows. Nazneen gets a job, one considered proper for a woman in her situation by her traditional family, still confined to the flat. Through this job she meets young Karim, born in Britain, who has never travelled to Bangladesh, with whom she has a love affair – a real act of emancipation on her part. It is interesting to see how each of the two characters constructs the other one through an ideal which was lacking from their lives. For Karim, Nazneen embodies “the real thing. She was his real thing. A Bengali wife. A Bengali mother. An idea of home. An idea of himself that he found in her” (Ali, 2003: 380). On the other hand, for Nazneen, Karim represented the idea of emancipation. By offering her body to a man other than her husband, Nazneen clearly makes a step towards embracing her new culture.

The second step is her refusal to physically return to her old country. Karim is the prototype of the second-generation immigrant, lost in his new home, and who longs for his parents’ native land. His life choice is terrorism (like another character from the film *My Son, the Fanatic*, with a script by Hanif Kureishi), and eventually he leaves Britain in search of his roots. Like him, Chanu, Nazneen’s husband, goes back ‘home’, provoking her act of disobedience: she refuses to leave England, together with their two daughters. The final scene of the book finds Nazneen ready to fulfil a long awaited dream: she is taken ice-skating by her daughters and friend, Razia. To her words “But you can’t skate in a sari”, Razia answers: “This is England. You can do whatever you like”. The final words of the novel are an expression of Nazneen’s empowerment and the final image a perfect example of sisterhood.

*Life Isn’t All Ha Ha Hee Hee* also describes an arranged marriage, this time of second generation immigrant characters. The ‘arrangement’ was not done by their families, but by a common friend. They met through this friend, dated in modern Western style, then turned to tradition through marriage. He proposed and then they had a traditional wedding – there was a comment at the wedding by one of the guests which seems to embody all that gender bias is: “you see how nicely she walks beside him? She will follow his lead in life. That is good”. (Syal, 2000: 14) However, we come to learn that this novel presents a story of empowerment too, in fact a triple story of empowerment, of the three female protagonists: Chila, Sunita and Tania. They live their lives in between the patriarchal life of their parental homes and their modern life in London. Chila and Deepak’s marriage is arranged by Tania, Deepak’s former (and future) lover. She is too afraid of leading too traditional a life with him, as she is looking for the perfect English (read ‘modern’) lifestyle. Deepak himself is thrilled to find in Chila the Punjabi wife he always

dreamed of, in a marriage which reminds him of his parents' and which helps him to distance himself from his former English lovers in the past and his Western lifestyle. They accept the marriage ritual after having lived together without their parents' knowledge, adapting to the English style while still preserving the Indian one.

Tania is an interesting character, with her free and open ways, her English boyfriends and refusal to get married and have children, but mostly her career, that of a television reporter. All these conduct to a lifestyle envied by her two childhood friends. The way she behaves, and especially the way she shows ownership of her own body are clear signs of her desire to transgress her culture of origin and to cross over to the Western one. However, her emancipation seems to take her too far, she loses Chila and Sunita's friendship by stealing Chila's husband and by exposing their lives to the public in a television documentary she was making on Indians in Britain. Tania was ready to be an achiever no matter what, and the price she pays is the loss of her friends and her community. Meera Syal is at her best when she describes humorously and (self-) ironically what to be an Asian young woman in Britain means and the cross-cultural balancing they constantly have to manage. About Tania:

*The 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 "Oppressed Third World Woman – Give Her a Grant'. She'd met enough people like her whose isolation was their calling card: being different, having an objective third eye, that's what her business wanted. (Syal, 2000: 56)*

And about Sunita when she was at University, part of different women's groups, "...far too busy picketing rugby players' socials or attending meetings like Examine your own Cervix. Speculum Provided..." (Syal, 2000: 87):

*I came, as I was often reminded, from a repressive culture in which women were treated like cattle. (I kept quiet about cows being holy, it would only have confused things). If I ever wanted to win a point all I had to do was to start the sentence with 'As an Asian woman' and end it with 'You don't understand'. So I marched and put up posters and organized pickets and spent drunken evenings dancing along to "I Will Survive" and even considered taking up lesbianism as it would have been a logical and convenient choice, given how I lived. Life was good, simple and mine. (Syal, 2000: 87-88)*

There are other characters embodying the young and successful second-generation immigrant, mostly female ones, such as Atima Srivastava's novels' main protagonists, Mira in *Looking for Maya* and Angie in *Transmission*. They are

strong career women who sometimes have to fight against the prejudices and stereotypes of the societies they live in.

Both Mira and Angie try to find their place in a multicultural metropolis, London, where they encounter other characters from diverse social, sexual, ethnic backgrounds, they fall in love and separate, they follow their careers (Mira is a writer, Angie, a television researcher). The impression their characters give to the readers is that they live the moment, they cope with situations as they arise, and try to get the best out of everything. Love for a person infected with HIV in Angie's case, love for an older man who does not reciprocate her feelings, but who provides her with material for a novel she is writing, especially by telling her the story of his teenage love for Maya back in India, and later an abortion in Mira's case are simply a succession of events in a London continuously on the move and within a frame of life constantly placing new challenges on their paths.

These characters perfectly assimilated the way of life of the metropolis and have a Western understanding of one's (especially women's) relationship to their bodies. Treatment of the body in both novels is done alongside the Western tradition of women's empowerment through knowledge, acceptance and ownership. Moreover, the way their families are portrayed gives the same kind of insight into Asian traditional couples that these female characters are trying to escape from. Mira's first person narrative account of her twin-like parents (reminding us of MamadPapa from *Fasting, Feasting* by Anita Desai) is relevant in the context:

*All my life I had been surrounded by emotions, they were littered round my house like confetti. RaviKavi were major shareholders in the ooze business. My mother sobbed openly for days when the council came and chopped down the three cherry trees at the bottom of the garden, so that there would be a clear light. My father hollered with laughter as he sat up all night with a friend who was visiting from India. They bickered constantly over irrelevancies.* (Srivastava, 1999: 146)

These descriptions are relevant for the different gender roles characters adopt in their diasporic lives. If in the case of their first-generation emigrants parents, these roles seem to closely follow the ones they grew up into, their daughters take a distance from these traditional roles, and adopt a different, more self-assertive, cultural view. These female characters are a long way away from the weak, frail and weeping images of their mothers; they aptly cross to another cultural space by taking hold of their own lives. In the same way, male characters are depicted at the point of intersection of Eastern and Western cultures, more or less successfully adapting to new life styles, while sometimes holding on to (parts of) the traditional ones.

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#### 4.2. *Man Enough?*

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The male characters Deepak and Akash in *Life Isn't All Ha Ha Hee Hee* by Meera Syal are representations of the new man, embodiments of the highly praised new masculinity, following the several decade long dominance of feminism. Deepak is a high flyer like Tania, with an important job in the City, but longing for the quiet life of a traditional Indian. Akash, Sunita's husband, in his turn, is according to her "the best of East and West in one perfectly formed package". (Syal, 2000: 89)

Akash is a couple therapist, yet he cannot see the signs of his own couple falling apart. His words are perfect, but with a fake ring to them, as when he talks about the need for Asian men to reassess their own cultural habits: "...we are also the generation that can change things, redefine what being Asian and male or Asian and female means, without losing pride in who we are. Because culture evolves and changes, just like human beings". (Syal, 2000: 103) He is probably well read in such theories, but this is not quite what is expected of a practician, and therefore his words in Tania's documentary on Asians' modern life in London are somewhat ironic.

It is very similar to the masculinity theories of the late 20<sup>th</sup> century. To exemplify, here is a fragment from the book *Man Enough*, in which V. Seidler looks into the masculinity crisis we are living and describes how men deal with it:

*Though postmodern theories have helped to reinstate the different voices of the marginalized, who had felt that they had to prove their adequacy as human beings in the universal terms of the rational self, they have also made it hard to recognize the integrity of particular cultural traditions. If we cannot wish away who we are or where we have come from, then we have to accept and learn from our own individual and collective histories and traditions.* (Seidler, 1997: 220)

When his wife Sunita is crossing her second rebellious phase (at thirty-five, married with two children), she reads empowering books such as *Psycho-Sexual Counselling: A Journey; If You're Not Listening, Why Am I Still Talking? Or Women and Fear: Dare You Read the Truth*, or *Mind Sex: The Big O Revealed*, or *Dark Lotus: The Mythology of Indian Sexuality*. These are books that Akash himself would read for his therapy sessions, and he juxtaposes the feminist theories in them to the masculinity ones. The female Indian goddesses used as explanations for women's complexes and misbehaviour find counterparts in Krishna or Superman, the latter a "mild-mannered wimp, good with small animals and kids, jumps into phone booth and comes out with big muscles and pants over his tights, ready to save the world...I think *not!*" is Akash's comment. (Syal, 2000: 211)

The new masculinity theories praise the newly re-found old male habits, ready to do away with the feminist expectations of life in a couple. Starting with Robert Bly

and his *Iron John* which came out in the late 1990's to claim men's right to rediscover their masculine self (mostly through initiation into manhood with the help of other men) and continuing with the so-called 'laddism' of the young British men, finding this initiation in heavy drinking, drug-taking and riotous behaviour (Beynon, 2002: 108-114), the 'new man' concept is present in nowadays British cultural and social theories. It can also be found in the character of Akash, ironically portrayed as the 'new-man-as-nurturer' of the 1970's, appearing as a "response to feminism, to male consciousness-raising and the activities of men's groups and the influence of both male and female intellectuals". This new man was, according to Beynon, "widely criticized for being middle class, elitist, 'western-centric' and remote from the lived experiences of ordinary men", but "the stereotypical image of the anti-sexist, caring, sharing man nevertheless gained credibility and strength throughout the 1980's". The other interpretation of the 'new man' concept, which is, according to Beynon, clearly linked to the first one and with origins in the 1980's, is a hedonist image of male seekers of the latest fashions, the consumerist, narcissist one (Beynon, 2002: 108-114). It is the very image of Deepak, the modern Asian man, fully successful in the world of finance but not quite ready to sever all the ties with the old traditions, thus marrying Chila instead of Tania or any of the other former English girlfriends.

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### *4.3. Woman, Body and Violence*

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As shown above, marriage can be a case of violation over female bodies, especially when it involves spatial restrictions or forcing women into a union with a person they had not known before. It is the case of the characters in *Brick Lane* by Monica Ali. Nazneen is the female character who finds herself in this situation, and her sister, trying to escape her destiny, ends in a worse situation.

Female circumcision is another instance of violation over female body, and it is mentioned in *Life Isn't All Ha Ha Hee Hee* by Meera Syal. Female circumcision provokes a cultural incident in the narrative and leads to the separation of the University Women's Group one of the protagonists was a member of in her student days. What happened? The black Nigerian Yaba, who was a member of the royal family in her country, had a violent controversy over this issue with Angela, the group protest coordinator. Angela, a white woman only partially condemns female circumcision, as it could also be construed as a "very ancient and precious custom which we're just too white to understand. Like nose piercing". (Syal, 2000: 88) This is one of the controversies of the contemporary postcolonial world and it includes gender, race and social group at the same time: to what extent can white middle class women speak for or in the name of black poor women? Also to what extent can they assume the civilizing role – "the white woman's burden" – over these colonized women?

Syal describes the episode with a touch of subtle humour towards the momentary extremism of otherwise perfectly legitimate feminist policies: “Yaba threw some furniture and likened Angela to a portion of the female anatomy, which in other circumstances might have been an attempt to reclaim a rude word, and in this instance was just rude” (Syal, 2000: 88). Yaba supplemented the violent meaning of her action with more words, meant to underline the clash, this time constructed along racial lines (‘black’ was imagined as the superior race in students’ and intellectual circles – “Anybody who was not white was given the honorary title”. Syal, 2000: 87) and raised the added questions of the presupposed cultural superiority of the West, which she denies with the help of the historical and cultural arguments:

*Our ancestors were living in cities with drainage systems while they were still shitting in caves. They ain't got no culture, which is why they're trying to own ours. What makes you think they know the answers, huh?* (Syal, 2000: 88)

The same issues are raised later in the novel, at a women’s reunion of protest against domestic violence interpreted by the British multicultural society as cultural crimes. They challenge the too permissive (in their opinion) British state, which in the desire to celebrate the different cultures of the ethnic minorities living on its territory, fall into the mistake of accepting deeds that are against universal human rights. One of the stories is of a South-Asian woman who legally separated from her husband after twelve years of marriage, and was given custody of their two children. Her former husband did not accept the situation and burned himself and their two sons to death. There are two interpretations of this violent criminal act: on the one hand, the official British one, which called it “an act of passion, a tragic event” and on the other hand the private one, supported by the ethnic community, that it was the woman’s *karma*, her fate for leaving her husband. (Cf. Syal, 2000: 218) Both interpretations are opposed by the group.

Gayatri Spivak tackles this issue in her essay “Can the Subaltern Speak?”. She refers to learning to speak rather than listen to or speak for in the case of the historically muted subject of the subaltern woman. In so doing the postcolonial intellectual systematically ‘unlearns’ female privilege; this involves learning to critique postcolonial discourse and not simply to substitute the lost figure of the colonised. (Nelson, Grossberg, 1988: 295) In another paper, “Questions of Multiculturalism”, Spivak and Gunew (During, 2004: 194) raise two questions: “who should speak?” and “who should listen?” The question of ‘speaking as’ involves a distancing from oneself; when one speaks as an Indian, a feminist, a woman, etc. one tries to generalize oneself, to make oneself a representative. When the hegemonic, dominant people talk about listening to someone “speaking as” something or other, we have a problem: they make some kind of homogenization, they want to hear an Indian speaking as an Indian, etc. (During, 2004: 194) One gains the right to criticize, according to Spivak, when one wants to learn through

language, through the specific progress of study, and at the same time through a historical critique of one's position as the investigating person.

*The person who knows has all the problems of selfhood. The person who is known, somehow seems not to have a problematic self (...). Only the dominant self can be problematic; the self of the Other is authentic without a problem, naturally available to all kinds of complications.* (During, 2004: 202)

Acid burns (in *Brick Lane*) is another type of gendered family violence described in these novels by South-Asian female authors, and the only answer women are expected to give is to endure the test gods have put in front of them (Cf. Ali 267). The violent institutional treatment of South-Asian women and the cultural, religious and educational context in which they are raised are masterfully rendered in some of the novels. One such instance is described in *Brick Lane*; it is the marginal story of a female character who appears only once in the parallel plot of the two sisters' lives: Hasina, who ran away at sixteen with her lover and Nazneen who was married by her family to the England-emigrated Chanu. Monju's tragic death told through Hasina's limited linguistic resources in a letter to her sister is for that very reason even more dramatic; her description on the hospital bed made with realistic means is meant to shatter and challenge the reader, and does so successfully:

*I go to hospital and look around for friend Monju. (...) When I walk close is bad odour emitting from thing lie on mattress. I must put hands over nose and mouth and stomach made threat on me. (...) Left eye is narrow and stuff come out. Cheek and mouth is melt and ear have gone like dog chew off. (...) She say God give them the pain I suffering now. Mouth cavity shrinking from which she cannot shout cry or talk loud. (...) It is her husband who have done this with his brother and sister. Brother and sister hold tight and husband pour acid over head face and body. All over is infection on body and smell make it difficult for people to go near.* (Ali, 2003: 223)

In the same way, pregnancy or giving birth as women's experience and the importance of the sex of the child are explored in *Life Isn't All Ha Ha Hee Hee*: Sunita's abortion "for the better", and the subsequent pain at this memory, together with her husband's refusal to talk about it, the birth of her two children as told by herself to Tania. Another important instance in which the characters' bodies are on the forefront of the narrative is the scene of Chila giving birth, with the details of this act itself, and also the details of her marital failure and Deepak's betrayal unveiled in her monologue. The British multicultural society with its written and unwritten rules is explored ironically in the episode of Chila's ultrasound examination, when she is not told the sex of her baby, as this is the hospital policy regarding their Asian women patients, as they had cases of requesting the termination of the pregnancy at the discovery of a baby girl.

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### 5. *Brown is Beautiful*

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But there is another role assigned to these diasporic characters: 'outsiders' (i.e. people not quite English) are very fashionable in artistic circles ("There's nothing more fashionable than outsiders", claims Shahid from *The Black Album*. Kureishi, 1995: 145), and indeed at least for a certain type of people, "India-blah, Bharat-burburle, the so-called Wisdom of the East, is definitely back in fashion. In fact, India in general is hotter than ever: its food, its fabrics, its doe-eyed domes, its direct line to Spirit Central, its drums, its beaches, its saints" (Rushdie, 2000: 496), 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". (Syal, 2000: 109)

Being of the 'right' gender, sexual orientation, race and class are felt to be the necessary ingredients for acceptance in these artistic circles, and Martin from *Life Isn't All Ha Ha Hee Hee*, a white middle class male, tried hard and unsuccessfully to position himself in the right angle. However, he felt his pedigree did not allow him visibility, for "who wanted to watch a sitcom about three lads much like himself? What conflict could there be, except a fight about the remote control or a woman?" (Syal, 2000: 109). Humorously depicted, Martin's portrait is of an artist who feels betrayed by his origin in a society in which biographies seem to count more than talent, as they provide the experience necessary to enhance or even to replace it:

*Now, if he [Martin] had been born a black woman, a single mother on a council estate with an errand ex-partner, bossy God-fearing parents and a radical lesbian rapper for a sister, he could write something amazing (...). He would have suffered the first prerequisite for creating Great Art.* (Syal, 2000: 109)

This shows quite another interpretation of the roles these characters have to play in the complicated postcolonial history. It is a world of political correctness, felt by some of the white middleclass English majority as unfair, but a world which tries to set right past injustice.

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### 6. *Conclusion*

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All the characters taken into discussion are representative diasporic typologies of South-Asians who physically live in a postmodern postcolonial Britain. Emotionally they inhabit the transitory space of their ethnic and national selves suspended in the 'beyond' of which Homi Bhabha speaks. In terms of gender, these characters embody different individual his(or her)stories to eventually depict communities permanently questioning their past deeds, present happenings and future options.

The final image is that of a puzzle created from pieces that don't quite fit together, but the challenge is to make sure the readers view it from various angles, thus validating its multiplicity of possible interpretations. All the three women writers under discussion create this versatile universe with subtle humour and definite mastery.

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