

TESIS DOCTORAL

BARRIERS, BORDERS AND CROSSINGS IN BRITISH  
POSTCOLONIAL FICTION. A GENDER PERSPECTIVE

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**Barriers, Borders and Crossings in British Postcolonial Fiction. A  
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## Dedication

This thesis is dedicated to my husband, Jorge Luis Costa, my children Ma Soledad, Hernán, Andrés and Georgina and to all my friends who have shown their understanding of my extremely reduced time availability. Their patience has been a token of their love in the course of these last years of intense work.

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## **List of Acronyms**

*NB: The Nature of Blood*

*DS: A Distant Shore*

*OLD: Our Lady of Demerara*

*BB: Bethany Bettany*

*WT: White Teeth*

*EB: The Emperor's Babe*

*LHH: Life isn't all ha ha hee hee*

*AM: Anita and Me*

## **Introduction**

The present work is a study of a selection of novels by contemporary British writers as examples of current postmodern fiction. Caryl Phillips's *The Nature of Blood* together with Zadie Smith's *White Teeth* are taken as paradigmatic instances of the type while Caryl Phillips's *A Distant Shore*, Fred D'Aguiar's *Bethany Bettany*, David Dabydeen's *Our Lady of Demerara*, Bernardine Evaristo's *The Emperor's Babe* and Meera Syal's *Life isn't all ha ha hee hee* and *Anita and Me* will be analysed as further examples belonging to the same tradition and then displaying similar attitudes and technical devices though from their own peculiar stand and in varying degrees. The writers considered have another trait in common: they all share the experience of a mixed cultural background, British-West-Indian for Phillips, Smith, D'Aguiar and Dabydeen; British-African for Evaristo and British-Asian for Syal. With the advent of globalization, as a result of late-nineteenth century decolonization and the spread of the world market in the modern era, large numbers of people from the periphery have migrated to the centre producing unprecedented ethnical variation in former imperial states. As a consequence, British society has been most dramatically transformed, as a result of the cultural contact and mixing despite bitter conflicts and resistance to hybridity. This movement from the once peripheral colonies to the former centre has been going on for decades now and it has accelerated the speed of mutual influence and transcultural interpenetration with a marked change in the conception of national identity. In the literary world this is reflected in the fact that today many of the outstanding names in British literature trace their origin to the immigrant population and their work has greatly contributed to the creolization of U.K. culture. As a consequence of cultural contact and intermingling, the concept of British culture as essentialist and

organic, (Leavis) has suffered a fundamental change in the direction of greater flexibility. Irreducible ethnic difference with its obsession with purity has slowly given way to tolerance and acceptance of hybridity as the necessary condition of the multinational experience.

In this context, the gender axis offers variations in the quality of the experience of contemporary British intellectuals of mixed cultural origin. The situation of the black diasporic male intellectual is especially complex since he is under the pressure of contradictory forces coming from the European tradition on the one hand, and from his own ethnic origins on the other. Among these influences, he has to grapple with the widespread effect of the Enlightenment inheritance within the process of westernization to which he is subjected as a result of a British or British-influenced education. As a male descendant of colonial subjects he may find himself in the awkward ideological position of sharing gender viewpoints with his white counterparts while rejecting the stand of imperial patriarchy. The situation of the diasporic female population is different since the tensions described are not part of their experience. Women's struggle has always been an effort to resist the supremacy of the male, white or black. Postcolonial issues in their multiple complexity form part of the life of both the male and female writers studied in the present work and as such they appear as significant in their fictional production albeit affecting their perspective and consequently their characters' lives in profoundly different ways.

Built on the bases of Postcolonialism and Postmodernism, the central hypothesis that sustains this study contributes to connect the assumptions on which these movements stand and the attitudes that these positions inspire in the men and women writers exposed to them. Bridging the gap between the macro frame constituted by broad philosophical issues and the private life of individuals, it is possible to point to

links between the institution of gendered identities and the socio-political circumstances in which they come to be inserted. It is generally recognized that Postcolonialism and Feminism have a good number of issues in common, which stem from the possibility of relating the experience of oppression that characterized the colonial subject with an experience which might be related to that of the woman in phallogocentric cultures. Under patriarchy, the relation man/woman bore similar traits to that of colonizer/colonized. At the outset of postmodernity, the well-theorized fall of the grand narratives exposed men to the pain of dispossession and loss. Indeed, they lost centrality both in the context of Empire where the white man reigned and in the context of private and social life where the male was generally identified as the figure of authority. Although the black intellectual partakes of the same attitude of disenchantment, his position is more complex and self-contradictory than that of the white man as the generator of the colonial process since he suffered the denigration of his own ethnicity under the shadow of empire.

Women, on the other hand, have endured a long history of subjection from which they started to emerge in the late nineteenth century. Socially and personally deprived for centuries, they have learnt to live with difference. The practical impossibility to impose their views taught them to accommodate by developing the capacity to conceive of “multiple realities” (Spender 96) as a mechanism that would allow them to survive. As a cultural construct, a gendered subjectivity is created in the intersection of social practices and discourses and individual agency. Historical circumstances have favoured men’s adoption of the position of legislator (Bauman 1987) while women have found the role of interpreter more amenable. As a consequence of the collapse of the grand narrative of the Enlightenment, the sanctioned patriarchal locus was delegitimized. Dethroned, no longer in a position to impose their



own laws, men regret the loss of centrality and authority in private and public life and feel forced to work on the reconstruction of their gendered identity from alternative positions to safeguard their self-esteem. This process favours a feeling of tragic destiny in contemporary male writers, which finds expression in the treatment of the theme of violence by the literary figures here studied. Simultaneously, the male novelists show a tendency to hopelessness when confronted with the failure of the high ideals of the Enlightenment expressed in the project of modernity.

On the opposite side, the postmodern world offers an unprecedented advantage to women in re-valued positions as translators in a globalized and hybrid environment. Learnt patterns of behaviour in a long history of oppression predispose women to mediation in situations of conflict (traditionally in the restricted circle of the family, the only place where they enjoyed a certain degree of influence). Today, such capacity for flexible adaptation and negotiation can be taken as a model in a society that, given its heterogeneous constitution, demands flexibility and tolerance as central qualities in the struggle for peaceful coexistence of difference.

This research aims at situating the novels under scrutiny within Postmodernism and Postcolonialism demonstrating the existence of a different attitude towards the traits that characterize these movements according to the male or female perspective that marks the fictional works.

## **1. Philosophical Contextualization: Modernity and Postmodernity**

The complexity of the relations between modernity and postmodernity is reflected in the many discussions over the definition of the terms and over the relation between the two movements. The issues have kept theorists busy for the last decades and arguments still continue with little agreement having been reached. Frederic Jameson and Gianni

Vattimo agree that postmodernity constitutes a break with the characteristically modern cult of the new. Vattimo (9) defines modern times as “la época en la que el hecho de ser moderno viene a ser un valor determinante”. This conception is based on a belief in history as a unitary process that evolves round a coherent centre. Postmodern historiography questions this idea and sustains the need for multiplicity of versions. In this line of thought, Vattimo sees in the irruption of the electronic means of mass communication a great hope for the future since they make the conception of history as unitary process impossible. Instead, they produce a multiplication of conceptions of the world which favours freedom and gives a voice to minorities. To Vattimo, this process leads to the liberation of difference and to emancipation from the centralizing rationale of history, an attitude that contributes to a spirit of exhilaration.

Other theorists, like Kovaldoff, Bauman (1987) and Lyotard disagree with the idea of modernity and postmodernity as two distinct and successive stages in the history of human thought. Santiago Kovaldoff argues that postmodernity is not a rupture but is in fact a continuation of modernity. What is dead is not modernity but its most classical, conventional and prejudiced versions. Today’s criticism of its mistakes and inconsistencies is part of its vitality and liveliness and not of its decadence. To his mind, postmodernity is modernity struggling with itself. For Lyotard, modernity and postmodernity are conditions rather than temporal periods. To be postmodern, you have to be modern in the nascent state, before that modernity turns into a dogma. It is the avoidance of dogmatism that will liberate humanity from totalitarianism. From Bauman’s perspective there is a coexistence of modernity and postmodernity in varying degrees in different ages. Rather than periods, they are modes that actualise different intellectual strategies. In the same direction, Foucault (39) in his discussion of modernity and postmodernity identifies them as attitudes: “...a mode of relating to

contemporary reality; a voluntary choice made by certain people, in the end, a way of thinking and feeling; a way, too, of acting and behaving that at one and the same time marks a relation of belonging and presents itself as a task.”

In spite of the apparent disparity in the views above, we can discern an insistence on the superposition of both modernity and postmodernity as well as the pertinence of the debate over power relations in reference to knowledge, civilization and progress. Foucault, together with Kovadloff, rescue the critical attitude of the modern philosopher and sustain in the former’s words that “[i]llegitimate uses of reason are what give rise to dogmatism and heteronomy, along with illusion; on the other hand, it is when the legitimate use of reason has been clearly defined in its principles that its autonomy can be assured” (38). According to these philosophers, this is the way in which the abuses of reason can be curtailed. If dogmatic application of reason can be a path to enslavement, legitimate uses of reason can result in liberation or emancipation from positions of subjection.

In the context of Foucault’s concept of modernity and postmodernity as attitudes adopted in the face of historical circumstances, we can situate the writers under scrutiny in the present work as choosing postmodernity though adopting alternative views within this perspective. While the masculine tendency lies in focusing on the negative aspects of the duality, mainly in the shape of criticism of the Enlightenment inheritance; the feminine view opts for an optimistic viewpoint that highlights the richness of possibilities offered by present-day free, power-balanced multicultural society. In agreement with Bauman (1987) the former writers see modernity as a historical error, as the pursuit of a false track. Bauman traces the pessimistic view of postmodern intellectuals to the crisis of European civilization and to the loss of their position as

moral legislators in the West. In his view, the role of the intellectual in the modern world was that of the legislator:

The typically modern strategy of intellectual work is best characterized by the metaphor of the 'legislator' role. It consists of making authoritative statements which arbitrate in controversies of opinion and which select those opinions which, having been selected, become correct and binding. The authority to arbitrate is in this case legitimized by superior (objective) knowledge to which intellectuals have a better access than the non-intellectual part of society. (4)

The fall of the grand narratives of modernity, most prominently the metanarrative of science, or of humanism for that matter, inevitably brought about the end of this traditional role for the intellectual who found that society was no longer in need of his authoritative statements. Men, who have traditionally enjoyed the role of "authority", have found it very hard to relinquish the centrality of this position; hence their hopelessness at the inevitable decline in influence.

The advent of postmodernity, in turn, offered an alternative function to the intelligentsia according to Bauman:

The typically postmodern strategy of intellectual work is one best characterized by the 'interpreter role'. It consists of translating statements, made within one communally based tradition, so that they can be understood within the system of knowledge based on another tradition. Instead of being oriented towards selecting the best social order, this strategy is aimed at facilitating communication between autonomous, sovereign participants. It is concerned with preventing the distortion of meaning in the process of communication (1987:5).

In the context of globalization and the multicultural experience, the expectations of universality that sustain the legislator role can only lead to ethnocentrism and intolerance. The interpreter role, on the other hand, facilitates coexistence in multi-ethnic, multi-national or multi-religious environments. Women intellectuals find this role amenable because

they ‘see more’...they are more experienced in accommodating apparent contradictions. They are often more flexible and they have a more complex awareness of meaning as they have learnt to juggle the dominant reality with their own. They have had to develop these skills. Their existence at times has depended on being able to make compatibility out of contradiction, on being able to ‘communicate’. (Spender 96)

Hutcheon (39) agrees with Bauman about the causes of male intellectuals’ pessimism in the postmodern era. She ascertains that the male intellectual’s apocalyptic conception of the dispersal of the ego may be ascribed to a subconscious phallogentric disappointment at his loss of centrality. On the other hand, the female writers on our agenda celebrate what they consider to be achievements of postmodernity. Linda Hutcheon identifies in postmodern female intellectuals a celebratory mood at their liberation from patriarchal metanarratives as well as a brighter spirit than that of her male counterpart who regrets the loss of his dominant position.

Through centuries, female upbringing and education (when a woman was lucky enough to get one) disapproved of the development of a strong dominant ego. As Miller sustains:

...women have not had the same historical relation of identity of origin, institution, production, that men have had, women have not, I think, (collectively) felt burdened by too much Self, Ego, Cogito, etc. Because the female subject has juridically been excluded from the polis, and hence decentered, “disoriginated”, deinstitutionalized, etc., her relation to integrity and textuality, desire and authority, is structurally different. (106)

As a result, while men may regret their loss of centrality and, subsequently, of identity, women do not suffer from lack of public recognition since they have always been deprived of this privileged position. On the contrary they have had to learn how to make their voices heard; they have had to find ways to encode their desire in cultures which systematically denied their perspective. According to Spender, quoting Ardner, (76) women have been “muted” by the “dominant” male. Introspection, the world of the emotions, the domestic realm, the building of webs of solidarity with their peers became the alternative to the world of public action. In those media they could grow in self-esteem and imagine the advent of the possible in creative ways. Having developed in an atmosphere of restriction and deprivation women have evolved the necessary flexibility to discover the narrow paths to achievement<sup>1</sup>, to find delight in irony and pleasure in the little they had, to face and cope with the vicissitudes of life in good humour and to adapt to the new scenarios that started to open to them in the twentieth century.

It is important at this stage to clarify that the present work does not coincide with philosophical positions that consider sex as an immutable essence and that identify gender and sex conceptualizing the physical as absolutely determinant. On the contrary, we believe that gender is a socio-cultural construction which is anchored in the body

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<sup>1</sup> In this respect there is as famous saying of Jane Austen in a letter to her nephew James Edward Austen, on Monday 16th December 1816 ironically comparing her writing to his: his is, “strong, manly, spirited Sketches full of Variety and Glow.” Hers is comparable to a “little bit (two inches wide) of ivory on which I work with so fine a brush, as produces little effect after much labour?” (Chapman 188-189).

and as a consequence partakes of both the social and the biological. We agree with Amy S. Wharton Wiley

[t]hat the biological and the social worlds are interdependent and mutually influential. The biological or genetic aspects of maleness and femaleness cannot be understood as fully separate and distant from the social processes and practices that give meaning to these characteristics. It is thus impossible to neatly separate the realm of sex from that of gender when we are trying to explain any aspect of social life. (16)

The statements above, however, do not imply that the link between the physical and the social is fixed and immutable. Being a man or a woman is not a fixed state predetermined by sexuality; it is rather a process and a personal positioning. As Raewyn Connell (6) argues, “People construct *themselves* as masculine or feminine. We claim a place in the gender order – or respond to the place we have been given – by the way we conduct ourselves in everyday life”. Gender is a complex multidimensional concept which concerns personal identity, social insertion, sexuality and questions of power within society. While it may be viewed as a set of individual traits, it can also be seen as a set of practices inscribed in institutions, as well as the result of social interaction (Wharton Wiley 16). As a process that implies both the personal and the social, it is “continually produced and reproduced”, a fact that allows for change in accordance to personal, cultural and social circumstances. At the same time, differences between the sexes can never be “categorical” (28), as a consequence when we refer to gender traits we can only speak of tendencies or average characteristics. In every case there is a large degree of overlapping of similarities that coexist with the differences. The present study eschews the concept of men and women as opposite categories, a view which would enact the modern tendency to understand the world and society in terms of binary

opposites. The concepts of gender here deployed will underline all the ideas referred to the position of men and women in society and to the literary choices made by the male and female writers studied in the present work.

The question of gender is necessarily imbued with power since the former “is a critical dimension upon which social resources are distributed” (Wharton Wiley 9). The social positions offered to men and women have suffered dramatic changes in the course of the complex socio-historical circumstances that have characterized the history of the Western world since the second half of the 19<sup>th</sup> century. These changes have had their impact both in the public and in the private sphere leading to a different distribution of power in society, which can be paralleled to the changes suffered by former colonial states in their process of independence. Given the common phallogocentric ground on which both modernity and imperialism stand, the comparison between the position of women, colonial subjects, Jews and blacks is a common place of Theory (Loomba 163, Ashcroft 174). In imperial and in totalitarian regimes as well as in modern societies where dogmatic applications of instrumental reason prevail, the appearance of the practice of “Othering” becomes current. Phallogocentric societies segregate and oppress certain groups alienating them from power and depriving them of basic human rights. On the other hand, to the philosophical crucible that the contradictions inherent in the modern/postmodern duality produced, we must add the parallel issues raised by the emergence and subsequent fall of the great imperial powers whose expansion led to the confrontation of nations and ethnic groups in large geographical areas of both the Western and the Eastern hemispheres. The imperial frame of mind with its ethnocentric fostering of the policy of colonialism is as much the heir of the Enlightenment as of the spirit of modernity. In the same way, in the literary field, the contrastive arguments of Postcolonialism echo those of Postmodernism since



both raise issues that concern the distribution of power, definitions of knowledge as well as of the concepts of civilization and progress. As poststructuralist movements, both Postcolonialism and Postmodernism stem from the same philosophical postulates: they both develop around the criticism (or, alternatively, re-inscription) of modern viewpoints as seen in their preference for heterogeneity over homogeneity, of hybridity over racism, of relativity over dogmatism, of pluralities and multivocality over binary oppositions. Such opposites are the centre of interest in both Postcolonialism and Postmodernism in the fields of identity, history and subjectivity. Lewis and Kelemen (254) offer a clear systematization of the oppositions that differentiate the modern from the poststructuralist positions in terms of their respective ideology, ontology and epistemology. While in ideology the modern has a sharp “selective focus” that concentrates on authorship and promotes “chosen voices, beliefs and issues”, the postmodern stresses “fluctuating and fragmented discourses” and “accentuate[s] difference and uncertainty”. Modernity is characterized by a strong ontology that highlights essences and states in which “entities are distinct, determinant and comprehensible”. Postmodern ontology, on the other hand, is weak and relies on “processes of becoming” while “meanings are indeterminant, in constant flux and transformation”. In terms of epistemology, the modern model is prescriptive, “restricted” and systematic, constructing “cohesive representations to advance paradigm development” while the postmodern is “eclectic”, “use[s] varied methods freely” and “deconstruct[s] organizational contexts and processes to produce small stories or modest narratives”. Definitions of subjectivity and identity within the models described become urgent and determinant in a study of contemporary writing since both paradigms manifest themselves within a social construction in the present global era that is typically marked by cultural diversity. The above description of the modern

paradigm in terms of essences and fixed states may lead to intolerance, division and oppression when difference is appropriated and “treated as reified symbols of an essentialist historic past” (Brah 1996: 91). To this position, Brah (92) opposes what is described as the postmodern attitude with its weak ontology that favours a conception of cultural identity as a process in which a variety of subject positions are possible together with tolerance for coexistent, heterogeneous discursive practices in flux. Modern nation states with their insistence on the preservation of a univocal and static identity that the community possessed shared a tendency towards essentialism and an inclination to apply racist and patriarchal policies (157). Nation states felt the need to preserve internal cohesion and this led to the institutionalization of stratified modes of being along the categories of gender, race and ethnicity. A conception of subjectivity as “neither unified nor fixed but fragmented and constantly in process” (121-122) may contribute to modify those reified practices that have led to the creation of mythological constructions in detriment of basic ethical tenets of human co-habitation. Anne Mc Clintock (89) has said that all nationalisms are “invented” and “dangerous” because they depend on “technologies of violence”. In this context, the figure of the cultural hybrid may represent a more appropriate image in the direction of a “more gentle, subtle” mode of identification in a multicultural environment (Tomlinson 275).

Postmodern Feminism (Rosi Braidotti 2004) sustains a similar conception of the subject as constructing identity in terms of a complex process of relations and heterogeneous simultaneities in opposition to a fixed, stable identity valid for all times and places. Braidotti (55) conceives human subjectivity as “un fenómeno completo, multiestratificado, más próximo a un proceso que a una entidad sustancial y más parecido a un acontecimiento que a una esencia”. Such a subject acquires its identity not only in reference to sex but in the interaction of a good number of variables that act

simultaneously such as race, culture, nationality, social class and life style (44). In the context of this conception of the subject the current agenda demands the effort to find the means to explain difference in ways that supersede phallogocentric perspectives and allow for the representation of women in non-logocentric ways. According to this theorist, postmodernity can be defined as “la situación específica de las sociedades postindustriales después de la decadencia de las esperanzas y los tropos modernistas” (107). A new syntax, a new symbolical system must be devised to allow for an ethical mode of life within the multiple differences that mark contemporary Western societies, a symbolical system which shuns the disembodied universal and the tendency to centrality and wholeness that the failed ideals of the Enlightenment promised. In agreement with Lyotard, Braidotti believes that modernity showed: “el triunfo de la voluntad de tener, de adueñarse, de poseer; ello implicó a su vez la objetivación correlativa de muchos sujetos pertenecientes a las minorías” (41). According to Cixous (in Conley, 137) the male libidinal economy is characterized by appropriation. This spirit is fundamentally manifested in the conflation of “el punto de vista masculino con el punto de vista general, ‘humano’” (Braidotti 2004:134). The effect of this mode of thought is that while men erect themselves as the representatives of the universal, women are relegated to the status of the “Other” on the basis of a system of dualistic oppositions with the purpose of establishing a hierarchical scale of power relations between terms such as culture/nature, active/passive, rational irrational, masculine/feminine (138). The generalization of this tendency led to the subjection of the different under the dominance of the white, Western male and his logocentric modality. Feminists propose that the application of rationality is not the only way and not even the best mode to approach the reality of human existence and suggest the practice of alternative ways of thought (39) in which imagination and affect play an

important role. Braidotti (128) sustains that we need “ternura, compasión y humor para recuperarnos de las rupturas y los raptos de nuestro período histórico. La ironía y la capacidad de reírse de uno mismo constituyen importantes elementos de este proyecto y son indispensables para asegurar su éxito”. Contemporary women and men react differently to the complex task that the postmodern subject faces. Braidotti (172) identifies “un yo jubiloso discontinuo, en oposición al ser melancólicamente consistente, programado por la cultura falocéntrica”. With this dichotomy she points to two different modes of reaction to the situation of crisis that the postmodern condition implies: the celebration of change and the identification with a movement forward into a better future as against a melancholic sense of loss and a difficulty to adjust. These responses are identified with feminine elation at the perspective of building a new intellectual, political, social and economic future for humanity and masculine fear in face of “un mundo cambiante donde sujetos distintos de los hombres blancos, heterosexuales y cultivados toman en sus hábiles manos el destino del mundo” (65).

The detailed analysis of the novels under scrutiny in the present work will show how the attitudes described above, which have been connected to masculine and feminine perspectives, are reflected in the tone and the mode of approach to significant postmodern issues that the male and female novelists chosen adopt in their respective artistic productions.

## **2. Literary Contextualization**

As paradigmatic examples of current poststructuralist writing, the novels examined in the present study express the paradoxes and contradictions that stand at the core of the relation between modernism and postmodernism both in their form and in their content. The lexeme “postmodern” illustrates the inevitable duality at the core of the movement it describes since it both contains and oversteps the lexeme “modern”. This paradox is a semiotic index of the many contradictions that traverse poststructuralist cultural productions, which simultaneously employ and criticize inherited traditions as seen in the use of realistic narrative conventions in the novels under scrutiny. The novelty in these writers’ view of realism lies in their keen understanding of its ideological implications. They see realism as a system of representation which simultaneously reflects and grants meaning within society. By inscribing and subverting the traditional realistic mode at the same time, these novels reflect the postmodern preoccupation with representation. Borrowing Linda Hutcheon’s words (7), we can say that these contemporary artists are interested in “how we see ourselves and how we construct our notions of self, in the present and in the past”. Their novels reflect a preoccupation with historical circumstances and their aftermath and have political significance as long as they undertake a critique of domination and exclusion in the context of imperial or otherwise totalitarian policies.

Concern with the individual and the value conferred on the subject as origin of meaning is a further issue inherited from the realist tradition that is both deployed and challenged in these novels since such postulates are contrasted with the recognition of the effacement of subjectivity under the domineering influence of cultural models. The co-presence of the ideas described implies an opposition between individual autonomy

and the supremacy of cultural structures among which language stands as the paradigmatic model. While the narrators in the novels may use language to create the effect of the real, quite frequently the presence of irony comes to superimpose a further critical meaning creating a characteristic state of undecidability.

However, irony produces a very different effect in accordance with the tone that prevails in each of the novels. As Linda Hutcheon (10) acknowledges, two versions of Postmodernism can be recognized: one of “apocalyptic despair” and another of “visionary celebration”. Bitter irony is employed in Caryl Phillips’s and in David Dabydeen’s novels to scourge at the negative aspects of the modern inheritance with the resulting tragic perspective. Fred D’Aguiar’s *Bethany Bettany* offers a similar insistence on the negativity of the Enlightenment inheritance but chooses to deploy its criticism through the ironic superposition of rational-irrational epistemological perspectives in the form of magical realism. While the male novelists’ productions are heavy in dark tones, Zadie Smith, Bernardine Evaristo and Meera Syal prefer to adopt a comedic approach in their respective novels, deploying a light ironic view on the contradictions that beset the current postmodern circumstances that their characters encounter and fostering a tolerant attitude to difference as well as a capacity for humorous self-scrutiny. All the novels studied in the present work deal with the distribution of power within society as seen from a postmodern perspective but while the male writers focus on the tragic consequences of the imposition of hierarchies and the building of insurmountable barriers between individuals or between ethnic groups, the women novelists rescue the value of heterogeneity, border crossings and a tolerant attitude in the encounter with the other.

### 3. Female as against Male Response to the Challenge of Postmodernity

A comparison of Caryl Phillips's novel *The Nature of Blood* and Zadie Smith's *White Teeth* in the above context, can illustrate the contrast between the tragic masculine view expressive of the suffering that results from the irrevocable loss of centrality and autonomy of the male in the postmodern world, and a comedic response to the challenges of postmodernity. While Phillips focuses on and criticises the modern version of Cartesian dualism with its corresponding hierarchical classification of entities, its crusade for purity and the imposition of insurmountable borders, Smith celebrates hybridity and liminality with their institution of cleavages and gaps where individual choice is possible. In the fictional worlds presented in these two novels, oppression is opposed to subversion, restriction to freedom and tragedy to comedy. Phillips describes the tragic nature of a world in which dualism favours evaluative judgements and leads to the classification of genders, nations, races and religions. This hierarchical stratification, experienced as natural and common-sensical fostered the expansion of empires, the development of colonialism and the subsequent experience of diaspora, as a consequence of confrontation with the others, that is, those regarded as different, inferior or downright subhuman. Smith's novel, starting at the time when *The Nature of Blood* ends, depicts a different world in which relativism and ambivalence demolish hierarchies and allow for freedom of choice. Mutability and fluctuation lead to contradiction and inversion of meaning. At the same time, the novel favours the union of heterogeneous elements, the shattering of the conventional, the transgression of borders and the consequent possibility of the construction of an alternative reality. The celebration of difference and the transgression of borders liberate the spirit to laughter in a carnival pageant that, according to Bakhtin, brings echoes of the festive folk spirit.

Smith's and Phillips's positions come to enact two different ways of conferring meaning on similar realities that concern the unequal distribution of power within society. A fundamental postmodern theoretical postulate underlies their endeavour: language and narrative constitute the basis of the construction of meaning in culture. It is through telling stories to ourselves that we give meaning to our own lives and to the world around. Raw data call for the imposition of cultural models that confer coherence and significance upon them. Such models are typified in the logic of tropes and in the form of generic structures, which rescue facts from the chaos of experience and save them from oblivion (Hayden White 1999: 1-4). Owing to their concern with present and past circumstances, both Smith and Phillips become involved with the interpretation of historical situations. According to White (1999: 6), there is a fundamental similarity between the task of the novelist and that of the historian since both operate by organizing data through the structure of language though one does so over fictional and the other over real events. The textual operation described implies both the presence of a referent and of "intentionality" (7), elements which simultaneously activate the poetic and the referential function in both kinds of texts. The historian as much as the artist makes use of linguistic tropes and fictional forms as logical modes of conferring coherence and hence meaning to her/his texts and to the situations s/he describes. Such fictional choices correspond to identifiable mythical archetypes and "figure forth different *meanings* –moral, cognitive, or aesthetic-within different fictional matrices" (White 1985: 127). According to White (1992: 60) discourse is "un aparato para la producción de significado más que meramente un vehículo para la transmisión de información sobre un referente extrínseco". A change in form will not produce modifications on the referential content but will affect its signification. In this way, the narrative process institutes itself as a mode of meaning construction, which is in the



hands of the writer and in the cultural lore of the reader who understands the text through recognition of the type to which it belongs. Such genres are chosen from those offered by the common cultural tradition and respond to basic or mythical modes of making sense of the world around. No set of events (fictional or real) are humorous or tragic by nature, it is in fact the narrator's imposition of a certain pre-existing generic model on his/her material that will determine the general tone of the text (9). The affirmations above highlight the basically interpretative character of all narrative writing or even of all writing itself, since, in accordance with Lyotard, we recognize that the difference between narrative and scientific writing is in fact deceptive as long as science makes use of narrative to legitimize itself.

The logical consequence of this line of argument comes to be that, if the historian is working on the same epistemological basis as the novelist, history is as imaginary and mythical as fiction itself. This is not to say that historical facts did not have actual existence at the time of their occurrence but that all history is interpretation, and then ideologically loaded, as a consequence of which it can become a naturalizing instrument. On this basis, White (1992: 107) explains the function of narrative in society as that of creating "un tipo específico de sujeto lector u observador capaz de insertarse en un sistema social que constituye su campo potencial de actividad pública históricamente dado". When this process aims at producing a humble, patient subject ready to submit to the patterns imposed by society, writing is identified as producing a "domesticating effect". On the other hand, when the piece of writing "proyecta un sujeto lector alienado del sistema social" it institutes itself as revolutionary or at least socially threatening. When writing creates a sense of continuity, totality and closure based on a stable and centred subjectivity, the domesticating effect is produced. However, subjective instability, discontinuity and open-endedness favour the adoption

of a critical position in the reader. Such an opposition stands for the difference between passivity and activity, between dogmatism and critical flexibility in the way in which the subject positions himself in reference to his particular historical circumstances. As White (1985: 129) sustains, "...there is no value-neutral mode of emplotment, explanation, or even description of any field of events, whether imaginary or real, and...the very use of language itself implies or entails a specific posture before the world which is ethical, ideological, or more generally political..."

Smith's and Phillips's postmodern novels, from their different standpoints, acknowledge the above postulates by offering alternative subject positions from where the reader can assess past and present historical circumstances in which power relations are involved avoiding the closure of dogmatic viewpoints. Simultaneously, and though working within the same tradition, Phillips and Smith represent alternative affective reactions to the postmodern dilemmas from their different gender inscriptions. In the present work *The Nature of Blood* and *White Teeth* will be approached as paradigmatic examples of the positions described above while Phillips's *A Distant Shore* and the novels by D'Aguiar, Dabydeen, Evaristo and Syal will be considered as further examples of similar attitudes to sustain the hypothesis of the varied reactions to the postmodern challenges corresponding to each novelist's gender inscription within the postmodern convention.

The position of the woman in the contemporary world has given rise to the struggles of Feminism in its varied and often conflicting assertions. From its origins in the materialism of social and political controversies about active participation in the public world to the later rejection of physicality because of the risk of essentialism, Feminism has developed and assumed a variety of voices. The debate over difference isolated the physicality of sex from the concept of gender as a social construction with

the purpose of avoiding the pitfalls of patriarchy. When sexuality was conceived as coincidental with gender, certain social and psychological attitudes came to be seen as indissolubly tied to women and then considered “natural”. Such naturalization of attitudes and modes of behaviour were used by patriarchy to keep the woman restrained to the private sphere of life connected with the bodily functions of reproduction and the responsibility of the family. This form of essentialism rooted in biology was rejected by Feminism as the instrument used by patriarchy to favour its political agenda. However, the argument of essentialism is dangerous since it is easy to fall into a different kind of essentialism by upholding the necessity of a definite socio-historical core in terms of the feminine gender. In this field, the present work adheres to the postulates developed by Rossi Braidotti who, in terms of Morag Shiach (159), proposes “...a negotiation between the social, the sexual, and the corporeal, as mediated by the unconscious...”. Braidotti opposes patriarchy and attempts to find a unifying bond between the political and the psychological in the agenda of Feminism.

In order to make sexual difference operative within feminist theory I want to argue that one should start politically with the assertion of the need for the presence of real-life women in positions of discursive subjecthood, and theoretically with the recognition of the primacy of the bodily roots of subjectivity, rejecting both the traditional vision of the subject as universal, neutral, or gender-free and the binary logic that sustains it. (1993: 90)

Braidotti sustains the need to rescue the body in our conception of identity so that the experience of real women can become part of the discussions of Feminism, “refusing the separation of the empirical from the symbolic, or of the material from the discursive, or of sex from gender” (93). This has to be achieved without flouting philosophical

postmodern concepts of identity that deny the unity of the phallogocentric subject. At the same time the identity of women has to be re-thought in terms that will not imply the opposition to men which is the basic antagonistic pair in a series of such hierarchical binarisms that define women as other. The debate over “difference” should not be waged in the opposition man-woman but conceived in terms of “...differences *among* women: differences of class, race and sexual preferences for which the signifier ‘woman’ is inadequate as a blanket term”. To this must be added the “differences *within* each single woman, meant as the complex interplay of differing levels of experience, which defer indefinitely any fixed notion of identity” (93). The concept of unity of the speaking subject, required for the feminine struggle is only a necessary fiction or a “grammatical necessity” that encapsulates a multitude of selves that constitute our “bio-psychic entity” (97). As to the body, it is defined as “the point of intersection...between the biological and the social” (97). As Braidotti (101) clearly argues:

One is both born and constructed as a woman, the fact of being a woman is neither merely biological nor solely historical and the polemical edge of the debate should not, in my opinion, go on being polarized in either of these ways. Sexual difference is a *fact*, it is also a *sign* of a long history that conceptualized difference as pejorative or lack. What is at stake in the debate is not the causality, the chicken-and-the-egg argument, but rather the positive project of turning difference into strength, of affirming its positivity.

Braidotti’s arguments can justify the positive attitude that women adopt in reference to their position in the present-day European context as responsible for re-inventing a definition for women by denying a long history of denigration and imagining a fairer ethical background for the question of sexual difference. The medium

of literature is particularly pliable for the application of the imagination in envisaging a better future for both men and women in the near future.

### **3.1. The Postmodern World as Tragedy or the Burden of Modernity.**

Although human intolerance and unfair distribution of power are as old as history itself, we can trace their modern version to a mistaken application of the principles of 18<sup>th</sup> century Enlightenment, a philosophy that owes its basic postulates to Descartes' rationalism<sup>2</sup>. Descartes sustained the primacy of rational thought over feelings, emotions and sensations. In his view, the human mind can only trust the world of limpid ideas which rationality can create. For him, analytical thought was the proper instrument in the search for truth, while feelings and the senses can mislead us. What we grasp with reason is more reliable than what we grasp with our senses. The thinking "I" is more real and intimate to me than the world outside which I can only reach through the mediation of the senses. Descartes was a dualist who sustained the need of the prevalence of the mind over the body, the flesh and the world, three factors which can have a negative influence upon the rational mind, often leading it astray. The aim of the human being should be to maintain the mind independent from extension or matter, assuming command over base, bodily needs.

From the roots of this binary and hierarchical interpretation of experience, the Enlightenment philosophy was born in the 18<sup>th</sup> century in France and Scotland to flourish in the modern era in the whole of the Western world. According to Kant, as read by Foucault (34), the "Enlightenment is a process that releases us from the status of 'immaturity'. And by 'immaturity', he [Kant] means a certain state of our will that makes us accept someone else's authority to lead us in areas where the use of reason is

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<sup>2</sup> The following account of Descartes' ideas is based on Manuel García Morente's *Lecciones preliminares de filosofía* (1948: 130 - 143).

called for.” The movement so described should be understood in terms of the context of its emergence in an 18<sup>th</sup> century Europe struck by extreme poverty, flagrant crime and generally inhuman treatment of a large proportion of the population who did not have access to the minimum requirements for a dignified life. Reason was seen as the instrument that would help man rise above current conditions to a more humane social system. The successful application of reason through appropriate methods would help humanity achieve the goals of knowledge, freedom from ignorance and superstition and deserved happiness. The development of methods for the application of reason in the study of the sciences and mathematics among which Descartes’ contribution is a paradigmatic example, led to confidence in the human being’s universal capacity to attain knowledge and reach the incontestable truth.

Locke and the British empiricists bridged the gap between the mind and the world that had been opened by the rationalism of Descartes. Their trust on the experience of the senses coupled with the observance of the analytical method allowed for the swift development of inductivist science. The observation of singular sensory experiences produced under specific conditions ruled by the laws of logic could lead to the discovery of scientific facts of universal application. The optimistic view that resulted bred the conception of history as a record of general progress. In the 19<sup>th</sup> century the view of the past as obscure, inhibiting and crippling still prevailed and there was general reliance on science and technology as the basis for an industrial society which would offer the answers that human beings were in search of. Although we can recognize a historical origin for modernity, the present paper, in agreement with Lyotard, Bauman (1987), Foucault and Kovadloff, will consider modernity more as an attitude than as a historical period. This means that modernity and postmodernity are inextricably connected and co-exist in a permanent state of tension. It also means that

however much we may struggle against it, modernity is part of a heritage which Western civilization cannot escape, must recognize and understand.

According to Docherty (5), the problem with the Enlightenment is not so much its theoretical principles as its practice. In the course of its history, since its birth in the 18<sup>th</sup> century to its climax in the 20<sup>th</sup>, the principles suffered a transformation as to their application to the point that reason was changed from a valid instrument into an end in itself. It is by this process that “[r]eason becomes no more than a discourse, a language of reason (mathematics), which deals with the ‘foreign’ matter of reality by translating it into reason’s own terms; and something - non-conceptual reality itself - gets lost in the translation” (6). This process cannot be accepted as a means of knowing reality, it is a mere projection of the rational structure of the mind on the world. What is thus obtained may be called knowledge but is no more than a reflection of the very laws that govern the mind. Whatever is not amenable to these laws will forever be left out of this kind of so-called knowledge. The human mind’s desire to control and dominate may be formally satisfied in this way though such power over nature is no more than an illusion. In Docherty’s (6) terms what this kind of knowledge “...does give in the way of power is, of course, a power over the consciousness of others who may be less fluent in the language of reason.” “From now on, to know is to be in a position to enslave.” What the Enlightenment produces is “...a formally empowered Subject of knowledge.” This distortion of the originally enlightening use of reason, completely transforms the demystifying aims of the 18<sup>th</sup> century movement to turn them into “the locus of ideology” (8).

Together with its confidence in progress and the apotheosis of science, modernity dreamt of an exemplary Western model of life which inevitably led to ethnocentrism. Science, unlimited progress and ethnocentrism are ideological

constructions that can be interpreted as central metanarratives born out of the Enlightenment in its distorted application. In the 19<sup>th</sup> century, to be modern was a highly valued quality and the present was always the highest point of development in the history of humanity. In this context, nations who did not reach the standards of scientific and technological development of the central European states were condemned as inferior and in need of authoritative guidance. This mode of thought evolved into imperial policies which explained political and military intervention and settlement in terms of moral duty. Intellectuals, as much scientists as politicians, legitimised this practice on the basis of the universal validity of the principles applied. As Bauman (1987) sustains, the paradigmatic figure of the modern intellectual is that of the legislator conceived as a human being who has the knowledge, the capacity and the power to impose his judgement and who is certain of the superiority of the values on which his clear view is sustained and in comparison with which other forms of life are seen as primitive. Among the assumptions taken for granted by this position, which Bauman (120) recognizes was sustained during a couple of centuries by “the north-western tip of the European peninsula”, he mentions that “West was superior to East, white to black, civilized to crude, cultured to uneducated, sane to insane, healthy to sick, man to woman, normal to criminal, more to less, riches to austerity, high productivity to low productivity, high culture to low culture.” It is in this fashion, through the imposition of hierarchies, order and a harmonious unity that the Enlightenment becomes totalitarian and “...Reason [becomes] racist and imperialist, taking a specific inflection of consciousness for a universal and necessary form of consciousness” (Docherty13). What is good for the Western modern intellectual cannot fail to be good for the whole of humanity. Countless injustices have been committed in the course of history as a result of the application of this universalizing spirit.



According to Bauman (2002: 26), the “post-Enlightenment epic tragedy” can be endorsed to the modern political invention of the nation-state defined by Giorgio Agamben as that kind of state that makes “ nativity or birth” the “foundation of its own sovereignty” (in Bauman 2002: 28). Sovereignty is inevitably bound to a territory and consequently to the dichotomy inside-outside. The nation state is an institution based on division and then prone to provoke exclusion. The concept of the human being with his/her basic rights is replaced by that of the citizen whose very existence or right to live depends on his/her legal standing. Not to belong to a nation state can be equated to non-being, to becoming homeless and a non-person. “Territory with no nation-state had become a no-man’s land; nation without a state had become a noxious, obstreperous and obtrusive alien body given the choice of surrender or annihilation, state without a nation or more than one nation a constant product of time pasts facing an urgent demand of modernization” (Bauman 2002: 30). Within this highly economical but broadly inclusive outline, we can accommodate many of the atrocities committed in the course of history from mass transportation of black Africans for the purpose of enslavement or enforced labour, to the constitution of the Jewish ghetto and holocaust, and the mass extermination or forced assimilation of native populations in the context of imperial policies as well as the less dramatic but equally humiliating practice of religious, racial or ethnic discrimination worldwide.

For Bauman (32), imperialism and colonialism served the function of “disposal and recycling plant” for human waste. Non-European lands became the dumping ground for the undesirable. At the same time, and now within the modern nation-state, the normal policies to solve the problem of the stranger were either to assimilate them and then obliterate their “alien ness” or to eliminate them either through murder or

expulsion. In our postmodern condition, neither choice is available, so the answer is reduced to closing the doors to immigration (35).

The incapacity to accept the other on equal terms in spite of difference has its most paradigmatic expression in the form of racism. This term is here used in its broader conception as defined by Charles Sarvan (133) as "...feelings, attitudes, and behaviour arising from an imagined and unscientific notion of "race"; from a difference in language, religion or colour". These feelings are usually discriminatory and lead to varied forms of ostracism or violence. Although racial difference is a social construction and it has never been possible to justify it scientifically, there are countless events in the history of the Western world that give testimony to racial discrimination, most notoriously that of the persecution of Jews under the stigma of belonging to a race/religion which was responsible for the murder of the prophet Jesus and of black people on the ground of colour.

The concept of race is connected with that of ethnicity defined as "...an aspect of relations between groups where at least one party sees itself as being culturally distinctive, if not unique. This sense of difference influences the perception and treatment of others" (Sarvan 131). The term ethnic is often applied by white speakers to refer to national groups identified by difference from the apparent normality of white Western civilization. In this context the white, Western Christian becomes the norm against which other races are judged as inferior. Imperial powers have used the weapons of race and ethnicity to subjugate or annihilate their others. Ethnocentric feelings have led Western civilization to decide on the fate of large numbers of racially different human beings who suffered oppression and humiliation and cultural denigration in the hands of imperial powers. Forced transportation under the system of enslavement

submitted large populations to the experience of deterritorialization with the consequent alienation in the form of loss of personal freedom and cultural identity.

Similar connotations can be discerned in the experience of diaspora suffered in the course of history both by Jews and black African populations. In its origins the concept referred to the dispersal of the Jews after the destruction of Jerusalem in 586 BC and in Cohen's (508) terms emphasized "...in particular the experience of enslavement, exile and displacement". Today, postcolonial studies apply the term to the great migratory movements produced by the policies of imperialism with their load of suffering in the form of forced journeys, dislocation and death. The Jewish and the black diasporas can be assimilated in the effects they had on their victims as well as on the disruptive effect on the modern institution of the nation-state. The victims of diaspora feel fear, and cannot avoid sustaining a state of alertness and suspicion in reference to their victimizers. Simultaneously, the rising modern nation states saw the presence of diasporic communities as a threat to their union and integrity. According to Cohen (520) "What the nationalist wanted was a 'space' for each 'race', a territorializing of each social identity". The presence of ethnically different groups inspired hostility since they were seen as a challenge to the supremacy of national paradigms. There is only a short step from this generalized intolerance to the concept of "The Final Solution" developed by the Nazi regime in Germany.

On the lines of Docherty's idea of the wrong interpretation of rationality mentioned above, Adorno and Horkheimer sustain that the Cartesian dichotomy of subject and object, leading to the need of reason to control the world, eventually turned its power against itself and directed human beings to the "...repression of those elements of human nature that do not correspond to the rigid system of instrumental reason" (in Wulf Kansteiner 196). The application of instrumental rationality in

isolation from moral values is, according to these authors, what gave rise to the “...self-destructive dynamics...” of the holocaust. The otherwise positive achievements of science in the direction of efficient use of resources and the satisfaction of human needs through the development of technology resulted in the empowering of the Nazi regime towards the destruction of millions of victims. The result was the use of bureaucratic industrial methods for the purpose of mass extermination. Eric Santner describes Auschwitz as “a sort of modern industrial apparatus for the elimination of difference” (in Lindenfeld 14). In the fascist regime, a deviant application of the faculty of reason was put to the service of an evil-directed ideology based on intolerance and prejudice as is exemplified by the Nazi identification of Jews with vermin or rats thus classifying part of humanity as non-human. The making of the other the embodiment of evil is a self-evident ideological construction which found its justification in the pseudo-scientific theory of polygenesis. This theory sustained the existence of a variety of races (conceived as different species) which risk degeneration, infertility and eventual extinction if they happen to intermingle through sexual union.

In the mid-nineteenth century a new ethnology evolved that claimed that races could be identified through physiological, anatomical and psychological differences, which determined their capacity to achieve a certain degree of civilization. This idea gave rise to the establishment of a hierarchy of races through the “modern identification of culture with race and nation” (Young 83). As Young sustains, from the universalist and egalitarian philosophy of the Enlightenment, we move to a recognition of difference and inequality in the 19<sup>th</sup> century (93). This position was fostered by the economic needs of the expansionist policies of the emerging empires. The moral grounds on which the imperial enterprises were based were the superiority of the white race as the originator of Western civilization and the consequent responsibility to bring the light of

reason and advancement to backward corners of the earth peopled by inferior races. Simultaneously, within the nation states, the preservation of racial purity dictated policies of alertness and supervision to avoid miscegenation leading to the creation of ghettos, to the fostering of diaspora policies or to more active intervention through actual extermination of the unwanted, minority race. It is on the basis of such ideas that Hitler's massacre of the Jewish nation operated as seen in *Mein Kampf* (in Young 8).

[I]n the chapter on "Nation and Race" in *Mein Kampf* Hitler argues that Nature's rule consists of 'the inner segregation of the species of all living beings on this earth' and that where this natural apartheid is infringed, Nature resists 'with all possible means...and her most visible protest consists either in refusing further capacity for propagation to bastards or in limiting the fertility of later offspring'

An equal horror of the mixture of races is to be found in reactions against the union of black and white people as seen in the exhaustive 19<sup>th</sup> century classifications of offsprings of such unions in reference to the degree of presence of black blood seen as a stigma or a stain in the purity of the white race. The white race being taken as normality, deviations tended to be ideologically identified "with other forms of sexual and social perversity as degeneracy, deformation or arrested embryological development" (Young 180).

If in the context of colonialism, the figure of the black is objectified as merchandise for the benefit of the master race, ostracized and denigrated, the situation of the black, feminine subject is still more definitely oppressed as a victim of both racism and patriarchy. As goods in the slave trade and as objects of the white male sexual desire, black women were twice subjected and personally obliterated. As June Jordan says in Anzaldúa (174),

As a Black woman I exist as part of the powerless and as part of the majority peoples of the world. I am powerless compared to any man because women are kept powerless by men. I am powerless compared to anyone white because Black and Third World peoples are kept powerless by whites. And because I am Black and a woman I am the most victimized of the powerless.

Through the arguments expounded above, the fate of the black, the Jews and women can be assimilated as victims of ideologically infused cultural practices that have exercised their potent influence in the course of history. Victimization of Jews and women have probably the oldest history in the west through Christian and patriarchal ideological positions. It is no simple coincidence that racist thinkers such as Otto Weininger who equated women to “non-entities” and qualified them as “the sin of man”, should also describe Jews as “Womanly men” as a form of contemptuous devaluation (in Ellman 477). On the other hand, the black diaspora has a more recent development in the context of modern imperial policies. In all cases, however, we can identify a similar philosophical substratum which highlights hierarchical distinctions that become dogmatic and normative with the subsequent totalitarian effect.

The burden of history, especially the trauma of slavery has been identified as the source of black nihilism with the resulting “meaninglessness, lovelessness, and hopelessness of black metropolitan life” (Gilroy 2000:198-199). The sense of exhilaration and excitement that the white could experience in the process of work applied to mould and control the environment with the resulting achievement of progress could not be shared by the black since this very achievement was the cause of their enslavement: “The plantation system made that way of dominating nature part of the slaves’ experience of unfreedom” (Gilroy 2000). Such circumstances lead to

disappointment and rejection of the values of Western civilization. Diasporic black intellectuals are located in the borders of a culture which they partly share through the benefit of education and partly reject owing to ideological tenets. According to Gilroy (70), this particular circumstance accounts for their “distinctive variety of dissident consciousness” characterized by “profound disenchantment” as well as for their conviction that the union of humankind will only be achieved “at the price of a reckoning with colonial modernity” (71). The present work agrees with Gilroy’s postulates but would like to specify that the described attitude is most easily recognized among male intellectuals while the socio-cultural conditions that mark the position of women in the postmodern era favour a different response to the dilemmas of the age.

Caryl Phillips’s *The Nature of Blood* and *A Distant Shore*, Dabydeen’s *Our Lady of Demerara* and D’Aguiar’s *Bethany Bettany* exemplify the melancholic view of the postmodern black male faced with the failure of the great metanarratives of the Enlightenment, as well as the difficulty of envisaging an alternative and fairer order in the near future. The optimistic project of the 18<sup>th</sup> century with its ideals of equality and solidarity and the centrality of reason as the means to achieve unlimited progress for the betterment of the bulk of society has met the moral judgement of utter failure as a consequence of the historical events of the last two centuries. Phillips’s, Dabydeen’s and D’Aguiar’s tragic view appears in this context as an attempt to come to grips with such colossal failure and to exorcise the evils committed under the influence of distorted concepts derived from mythological constructions.

### 3.1.1. Caryl Phillips's *The Nature of Blood* and *A Distant Shore*

*Borders: arbitrary dividing lines that are simultaneously social, cultural and psychic; territories to be patrolled against those whom they construct as outsiders, aliens, the Others; forms of demarcation where the very act of prohibition inscribes transgression; zones where fear of the Other is the fear of the self; places where claims to ownership...are stacked out, contested, defended, and fought over. (Brah 1996:198)*

Bénédicte Ledent (166-167) places Caryl Phillips as subscribing to the postulates of Postcolonialism with its progressive attitude of rejection of imperialism and its defence of concrete victimized communities in opposition to Postmodernism, disqualified as reactionary and exclusively concerned with inertia and the sense of the end of civilization. Although it can be conceded that Phillips's position in *The Nature of Blood* and *A Distant Shore* is much closer to the postcolonial attitude of defence of subjected peoples than to the sophisticated and disembodied stand of French Postmodernism, it is also true that the latter movement is much broader, varied and complex than Ledent's restricted view makes it. As Gilroy (2004: 80) sustains, there is more to Postmodernism than "hyper-individualism and consumerism". It can be conceived as a highly critical position, conscious of the problems of the present situation and capable of generating "cosmopolitan solidarity". It must also be stated that the concepts developed by Postmodernism and Postcolonialism are not easily extricated since they are made up of mutually related ideas and shared traits.

Several of the characteristics common to Postcolonialism and Postmodernism can be identified in Phillips's novels. This is the case of the break with the metanarrative of the Enlightenment as exemplified in *The Nature of Blood* by the distrust in reason as a reliable means to arbitrate in social situations. The same may be said of the rejection of the unitary conception of history and of the belief in linear



progress as symbolized by the general organization of *The Nature of Blood*, with its paradigmatic treatment of a 15<sup>th</sup> century Jewish persecution, Renaissance racial discrimination and the Jewish holocaust in the 20<sup>th</sup> century. A similar disruption of spatial and temporal contiguity characterizes the shape of *A Distant Shore* with the same symbolical significance. The criticism of dogmatism (fixed, inflexible positions which deny difference) is equally present in Postmodernism and Postcolonialism and is exemplified in the novels by Phillips through their concern with giving a voice to alienated minorities. Both Postcolonialism and Postmodernism reject dogmatic positions as well as the principles of a centred historical continuum. *The Nature of Blood* symbolically adheres to these principles through the critical portrayal of the suffering of discriminated social groups (blacks, Jews, women) under the domineering influence of proud, phallogentric and expansive nation-states (15<sup>th</sup> century Venice, 20<sup>th</sup> century Germany and Israel). Similarly, *A Distant Shore* reflects on the life of a black African the disastrous consequences of European intervention on foreign soil with the utter disruption of local cultures leading to corruption and social dissolution together with the tragedy of diaspora. The concept of sovereignty, bound to the idea of territory inevitably gives rise to the inside/outside, belonging/non-belonging dichotomies and their sequel of violence as seen in the detailed descriptions of the vicissitudes underwent by the protagonists of the novels by Caryl Phillips, a writer who has been recurrently preoccupied about “the outsider condition of blacks in Britain” (Muñoz Valdivieso 2008).

Phillips’s adherence to both postcolonial and postmodern postulates places him mid-way between militant postcolonial defence of those who are subjected to abuse under totalitarian regimes and philosophical wonderings on the inevitability of inertia, and the compulsion to repetition. In *the Nature of Blood* the search for new, imaginative

responses to the problem of difference leads to the reality of the Israeli state which is presented as incapable of materializing the dreams of peaceful co-existence and unavoidably repeating the mistakes of previous international experiences. The fate of the characters involved in the different narrative lines does not warrant an optimistic view of the “benefits of cross-cultural potentials” (Ledent 166) of social encounters in exile. Suicide, execution or extermination en masse are their fate with the exception of the character of Stephan who, nonetheless, remains lonely and deprived of love once he settles in the new “home” which he helped to build with so much struggle, suffering and loss. In *A Distant Shore*, on the other hand, the tragic outcome of the central incidents in the plot does not allow for much hope about the future, although it can be interpreted as an indictment of injustice that might help to modify current inhumanly discriminatory practices.

Although both postmodern and postcolonial claims can be discovered in Phillips’s novels, a certain degree of tension is manifested in the relationship between the underlying confidence in the truthfulness of individual accounts of subjectivity (philosophically based on a modern belief in the self as origin of meaning) and the de-centredness, disruption and dispersal of meaning (philosophically based on what Ledent (167) calls the postmodern “metaphysical malaise”) that characterizes Phillips’s narratological approach. This unresolved tension is in fact central to the postmodern movement itself, which is still somehow bound to the modern humanist conception of the subject as the centre and origin of meaning. The opposition of the truthfulness and power of the personal experience of the characters in the novels and the tendency to dispersal of meaning, and ineffectuality of individual action produced by the form of the pieces gives rise to the message that, in spite of much human investment on the part of the individual who would not submit or lose hope in the most extreme situations, there

is still a long way to go in the pursuit of the construction of a socio-political system that allows for the realization of tolerant acceptance and openness to otherness. The tension between hope and despair is particularly felt in *The Nature of Blood* and may account for an ambiguous response on the part of the reader who is both emotionally involved with the fate of the protagonists as well as alienated and confused by the variety of interweaving story lines and times in the reading of this highly complex text. *A Distant Shore* is darker in tone and the few hopeful glimpses in the novel are either quickly disproved or ironically denied by the retrospective quality of the narrative development which makes the outcome available from the first pages of the piece. However, in both novels there is the same irresolution about the opposition between the truthful and heart-rending accounts of oppressed individuals with its implication of certainty about the subject's capacity to originate meaning and the dispersal of signification created by their extremely complex structure that features exceptional discontinuity in time and space.

The tragic tone of *The Nature of Blood* is marked by the choice of the common theme of confrontation as a mode of social interrelation in the different stories recounted by a variety of narrators. The Portobuffole section, in the voice of a heterodiegetic narrator is notorious for its account of the creation of an ideological myth which allows Christians to justify violence against Jews. The section follows the modernist tradition in its respect for the philosophical and narratological assumptions on which the postulates of realism are based as described by Hamon (15):

- The world is rich and varied
- I can transmit intelligible and coherent information on the world
- Language can copy the real
- Language is external to the real
- Language must be transparent

- The signs of the act of communication must disappear
- The reader must believe in the truth of the world I create

Phillips faithfully follows the above postulates creating a verisimilar, objective account through a detailed and coherent presentation of setting, events and characters. Yet, the narratological choice is here especially interesting since it is used to reveal how a reality can be created through language: how characters and events can be transformed and made to fit the needs of those in power. In the story within the Portobuffole section, (second narratological level) the reader is made to perceive that language is not transparent but the ideologically loaded medium that creates a reality. The obvious opposition between method (realistic reflection of events) and content (mythical creation of events) produces irony as a means to reveal the prejudiced attitude of the inhabitants of Portobuffole as well as the devious double discourse of both the Signoria and the Church in their dealings with a different race and religion.

In the creation of the anti-Jewish myth, the uses and customs of the foreign community are compared with those of the Christians which are taken as the norm. In this procedure, the alien Jews are always judged as inadequate or worse. Their behaviour and appearance are qualified as improper, “animal-like and foolish” (*NB* 52), sinful or criminal. The chief Jew Servadio is keenly aware of these unfair circumstances as shown by the narrator’s description of his thoughts when he takes his oath before the trial at Portobuffole: “... here on earth, in the eyes of Christians, he knew it was easy for a Jew to sin. One could sin even without knowing it” (*NB* 98). The narrator of this section of the novel shows how the Christians of Portobuffole contributed to create a discriminatory discourse about their foreign neighbours through the use of

generalizations typically present in the form of relative clauses<sup>3</sup>, as well as with the use of qualifiers such as “common”, “usual”, “general” or “widely known”, all of which constitute linguistic choices paradigmatic of the discourse of common sense. Through these devices the ideologically loaded text seeks to guarantee the authenticity of its discourse on the basis of universal acceptance and adherence. In the same direction, the mythical tale that the Jews used to poison the wells is followed by the narrator’s clarification that the people “provided good evidence” (*NB* 52) of this fact. In the context of the mythical construction, the reader cannot avoid noticing the irony in this phrase. The teller also introduces the belief “that the Jews used fresh Christian blood for anointing rabbis, for circumcision, in stopping menstrual and other bleedings, in removing bodily odours, in making love potions and magical powder, and in painting the bodies of their dead” (*NB* 52) with the introductory phrase “...it was widely known...”. Through these devices, the discourse of common sense achieves the familiarization of belief, imposing a mere pre-conception as certifiable, immutable and communally shared reality.

It is in this generally discriminatory context that the story of the little Christian boy who was believed to be sacrificially killed by the Jews takes shape. In a few lines, the narrator masterfully reveals how the story is built from scraps of isolated facts into the reality that leads to the sacrifice by burning of three innocent people and the sentence of prison and exile for another three.

The innocent beggar child with blond hair and a sack on his shoulder, who had appeared in Portobuffole at this time of Christian and Jewish festivities, was never seen again. Once Easter had passed, those who thought they had seen him began to talk about him. Those who had

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<sup>3</sup> For example: “Initially, the people of the republic accepted the Jews from Colonia with all the mistrust that is common among people who do not know one another” (*NB* 51).

definitely not seen him also began to talk about him, and eventually the details of the stories became less conflicting. There was no doubt that the boy had entered the house of Servadio. Someone had noted an unusual number of Jews gathered in the house, and someone else had distinctly heard the sound of a boy sobbing and then suffocating cries, and yet someone else had seen a Jew walking the streets, dragging a sack behind him, at three in the morning. Nearly everyone remembered seeing smoke coming from the chimney of the house of Moses, but no one could remember the name of the boy. The image of the poor boy was clear, but the name was missing, and then one old woman retrieved his name from the corner of her mind. His name was Sebastian. The Jews had killed a beggar boy named Sebastian, and the precise details of this monstrous crime were on everyone's lips. The Jews had killed an innocent Christian boy named Sebastian New (*NB 59*).

Among the inhabitants of Portobuffole, no one had actually met or spoken to the boy, however, the adjective “innocent “ is used to describe him. This qualifier plus the specification that he was a beggar, contribute to give pathos to the story and to justify the qualification of inhuman applied to the alleged perpetrators of the crime. On these moral grounds, Christians may feel justified to act in such a way that will satisfy their need to find scapegoats for their hatred of the Jews. The reliability of the witnesses to the Portobuffole crime is weakened by the fact that some “*thought*<sup>4</sup> they had seen him [the beggar boy]” while some others could not even sustain they had. The blond beggar boy is no more than a figment of the imagination which comes to fulfil a collective

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<sup>4</sup> Emphasis added.

need. Each so called “witness” contributes with a piece of information out of which a story is woven. Through repetition and adjustment, inconsistencies are erased (“...and eventually the details of the stories became less conflicting.”). The excerpt homologically shows how the process of the creation of myth is achieved through the use of reiteration: the semantically central lexical items “seen” (3)<sup>5</sup>, “remember” (2) and “name” (5) are repeated together with the item “someone” (3), which highlights the anonymous character of the mythical creation. When an important detail is missing, such as that of the protagonist’s name, someone magically “remembers” and the character is baptized.

The next time the beggar boy story is recounted, it appears as part of Andrea Dolfin’s statement delivered to the Council of Ten. Twenty-eight days have passed and the people have had enough time to embroider the tale with new facts<sup>6</sup>. The origin of the incident is traced to the previous year when, according to the account, Servadio and Giacobbe started to plot the way to find a healthy young child for the Jews’ bread. The story, which originally counted with a mere 21 lines and was reduced to a single place and time, is now turned into a full three pages of expanded narrative spanning through a period of six months and including events happening both in Portobuffole and the nearby city of Trevisio. A good number of elements are added to the story such as new events, details about the participation of new characters, the reporting of direct speech by Giacobbe of Colonia (*NB* 100) and the inclusion of grotesque incidents such as the description of the Jews’ reaction: “As the sacrifice bled, the onlookers hissed blasphemies aimed at the Saviour and his mother, calling her a whore and the Saviour ‘the dead one born out of wedlock’. Some went further and struck out their tongues and

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<sup>5</sup> The numbers between brackets refer to the number of times the item is repeated

<sup>6</sup> It is interesting to notice that these accounts are separated by forty-odd pages of narrative that correspond to the Eva section of the novel. This device contributes to create the feeling of the passing of time in the readers’ minds.

exposed their private parts in an attempt to scorn and further disrespect the innocent young Christian victim” (*NB* 102). Such reactions are later proved improbable in characters that the reader sees behaving in the most pious of manners at the most critical of situations as on the occasion of their own execution. The narrator of the incidents, Andrea Dolfin on behalf of the neighbours of Portobuffole, includes details that predispose the readers (the members of the Council of Ten) against the Jews in connotatively loaded lexis. This is the case of the description of the Jews as excited at the thought of coming blood at the moment of the sacrifice. Before the child is killed, we are told that “[h]e was frightened, for the Jews had about them an evil quality which, in their excitement, they found difficult to disguise” (*NB* 102). Soon afterwards they are described as drinking the blood “greedily” and planning how to “dispose” of the body of the child. Thus, the criminality and generally inhuman nature of the act is highlighted. Simultaneously, the second account of the beggar boy story mentions that several witnesses saw the boy apart from the blacksmith who spoke to him.

Other modifications to the original story contribute to give verisimilitude to the incident such as the change from a witness’s vague reference to “...the sound of a boy sobbing and then suffocating cries,” (*NB* 59) to the much more detailed and definite “...the screams of the innocent at the moment of death...” (*NB* 103). The change from the first account to the second quoted is not based on further investigation on the nature of the crime but on further linguistic elaboration and communal consensus. The beggar boy story may include “precise details” (*NB* 59) as the narrator tells us but it is as evidently fictive as the frame in which it is inserted. This is an ideologically built, fatal tale that ends up with the unjustified death or exile of members of a discriminated community. The tracing of the mechanisms by which the story of Sebastian New comes to be shows with clarity and precision the way the narrative act with its inevitable



imposition of a perspective and a mode of organization confers significance on the events recounted.

However, it is not only the common people who may be accused of unfair treatment of their neighbours. Neither the Signoria of Venice nor their representatives of the Christian Church are blind to the ideological character of the beggar boy story. The authorities are portrayed as conscious of the unsound origin of such beliefs but ready to sustain them if this pacifies their restless subjects or if the assumptions on which the story is based come to satisfy their own interests. In spite of the suspicion of false testimony and contradiction in the Portobuffole trial of the accused Jews (*NB* 103-104), the Council of Ten respond to the pressure of social unrest and submit the accused to a second trial.

The behaviour of the local authorities confronted with the accusations of the inhabitants of Portobuffole deserves special attention because of its hypocrisy. Andrea Dolfin, the Doge's representative in the town, insisted that a lawyer should be called to defend the accused and the reader is informed that "The most Serene Republic of Venice not only boasted of its severe justice, but was also proud of its flawless procedure" (*NB* 96). To sustain these high judicial ideals, an inscription found in the Doge's palace in Venice is quoted: "Before everything, always investigate scrupulously to find the truth with justice and clarity. Do not condemn anyone without a sincere and just trial. Do not judge anyone based on suspicion, but research well and in the end find a merciful sentence. And do not do to others what you would not want done to yourself" (*NB* 96-97). In spite of all these proclamations, none of the principles sustained become an actuality in the proceedings that follow. The lawyer appointed to defend the guilty party was not selected by the accused but by state machinery that is prejudiced against them. The professional is described as "...deemed appropriate for people of his

religion...” (NB 97). This qualification implies that his knowledge, experience and expertise at the job were not taken as a priority when he was selected. The whole process does not start with a scrupulous investigation but with a contrived tale woven by the general prejudice against the Jewish community, though Andrea Dolfín qualifies the mystification as overwhelming evidence (NB 193). Far from being just, the trial is based on a confession extracted from the accused by “...excessive use of that dreadful engine of torture, the *strappada*” (NB 150). The state prosecutor uses the judges’ prejudice against the Jews to convince them of the culpability of the accused and “concluded with the assertion that surely it was the devil himself who gave these people the idea to kill innocent Christian children, and now they must die” (NB 150-151). Besides, and to add to the unfairness of the legal proceedings, we learn that the weather conditions were adverse, the “sultry summer weather had become increasingly oppressive” and this fact, together with the length of the proceedings had exhausted all involved. As a consequence, the judges speedily sent the Jews to their horrendous death.

In opposition to the indictment in the Latin inscription in the Doge’s Palace in Venice, Servadio and his friends’ rights are not respected and they do not receive a merciful sentence. Much to the contrary, their execution is turned into a public festivity: “Ambassadors, dukes, poets and many elegant ladies had made themselves available to view this spectacle” and the public showed their disagreement “when they realized that the condemned would not be immediately tortured...” (NB 153). Nothing could be further from the professed principle: “...do not do to others what you would not want done to yourself” (NB 97). The legal procedure that leads to this end may be impeccable in form but what is obvious is that justice is not served. The judiciary system is thus exposed as a hollow sham.

The use of language in this section can be seen as the enactment of Hayden White's postmodern historiographic theory as long as it shows how the imposition of an ideological perspective on the reading of evidence leads to the shaping of facts into a story which has as much of reality as of imagination. Even if we must concede that the perspective is definitely biased and prejudiced in this particular case, all emplotment in narrative will inevitably imply a limited and then partial perspective on events.

The story of the confrontation of Christians and Jews in Venice is mirrored, five centuries later by a much more serious attack on the Jewish community in Germany. In this part of the novel, the zero focalization of the Venetian section is replaced by an internally focalized voice. Another difference between the two sections is that the interest of the story lies mostly on the behaviour of the oppressors in the first case while in the second there is an extreme restriction of view to the victims' perceptions, mostly through the character of Eva Stern. Simultaneously, the juxtaposition of voices in the first narrative leads to the appearance of irony. The voices of the people of Portobuffole are opposed to the behaviour and reactions of the accused Jews in similar fashion as the alleged principles of the Venetian authorities are contrasted to their actions.

The language used in Eva's narrative, on the other hand, is a transparent, thin veil through which deep suffering and utter loneliness are revealed. The style is here stark and bare of ornament, the appropriate medium to reflect the reality of an extremely vulnerable individual whose fate gradually becomes a struggle for sheer survival. This extreme situation is foreshadowed at the beginning of the section through the description of German society as marked by strict barriers in the shape of socio-economic classes. This is a world in which there is no hope in intermingling: "...Mama looked in the direction of Rosa's room and spoke quietly but firmly. 'She married outside of her people'. Mama spoke as though she wished me to understand that this

was the greatest crime that a person could commit” (*NB* 70). Mrs Stern knows what she is speaking about since she herself has committed a similar crime by marrying her husband. Eva’s father is also affected by the psychological dislocation of marrying above him. He is torn between his wife’s affluent and powerful banker family and his own peasant progenitors whom he contributes to discriminate by being ashamed of their humble circumstances. In the same direction, Eva’s family’s opportunity to escape the Jewish holocaust is lost as a result of the misunderstanding between her parents which is little else than a manifestation of the social gap that marked German culture at the time. The class struggle at the social level is mirrored by the family drama in which an imperious woman, the inheritor of a high social position, raises her voice at her husband who interprets this reaction as a form of humiliation in the hands of a “spoilt wife” (*NB* 21). Their daughter Eva is aware of the consequences that discrimination has on her parents’ relationship. In her account of their life together she says of her father that “He knew only too well that his background would always be counted against him, especially by his wife” (*NB* 16). The painful gap that separates Dr Stern from his own parents and from his wife and her family becomes a symbolic token of the insurmountable chasm which will later in the plot line allow humans to hunt one another as animals do. As the doctor tells his daughter before they are separated by the Nazi machinery, “Some among us are behaving like animals. But we are human beings” (*NB* 67). The inconceivable degradation of human behaviour is depicted in a secondary incident once the concentration camp is liberated by British troops.

And then again I hear bullets, and weapons are emptied. The guard tumbles gracelessly into the dirt, in much the same manner as I imagine an animal falls when it has broken a leg. A group of men - former prisoners – run into view with guns in their hands. And then they see the body and

stop. Among them are two English soldiers. And now I understand the nature of this approved slaughter. The group of men begin to walk slowly but purposefully across to the body. They look at it to make sure it is truly dead. Clearly we are not beyond revenge. According to the Holy Scriptures, there should be more dignity than this. That much I remember (NB 25-26).

In the midst of chaos, Eva's words teach a lesson which nobody around is capable of understanding. The experience in the camp has been so devastating that complete recovery appears as unthinkable ("Oh Gerry, my heart is broken. Perhaps you can mend it a little, but it will never be complete" NB 48). The effort to survive has necessarily implied the building of a staunch barrier between Eva and the utter hostility of her surroundings, which the good will of the liberating soldiers will not suffice to erase as we see in the following lines: "Behind me, the soldiers are trying to organize us into groups for processing. Everybody is on the move. Them. Us. People are leaving.... I see a woman whom I remember from the long journey here. She looks at me, her dark eyes momentarily narrowed. I say nothing. I simply turn and walk in the opposite direction, back towards my hut" (NB 34). The use of the signifier in this short excerpt, with the inclusion of two successive, elliptical, one-word utterances "Them. Us.", visually represents before the reader's eyes the tragedy of the insurmountable chasm. The finality of the full stop after the pronouns signals the impossibility of connecting. Eva's extreme isolation does not only obstruct her relations with "Them" but also deprives her of the opportunity of contact within the "Us" as we see in the excerpt above when she cannot approach this other woman who has gone through the same suffering as herself.

Eva's capacity to build links in the creation of social cohesion has been seriously damaged in the extermination camp experience. The devastating feeling of utter loss has

utterly deprived her of her capacity for empathy. When she meets Gerry she thinks: “There is something about this man that I like. But he can never understand somebody like me. None of them can” (*NB* 43). There is dramatic irony in this utterance since later events will show that she is right. Deep down, she understands that they cannot come together. Neither can overcome the chasm created by the extreme process of dehumanisation that the camp experience implies. The use of the verbal form “processing” in Eva’s account transcribed above (*NB* 34), with its implication of being subjected to a process of manufacture, painfully enacts the character’s feeling of de-personalization. De-humanization has reached a bottomless pit. Life in the camp implies the erasure of the most basic assumptions of personal identity such as those of belonging to a past, a home, a gender or even having a name. After long months of such treatment, Eva’s capacity to re-insert herself in society is seriously damaged. Already after liberation, she cannot avoid but choosing to remain in the camp hut recreating a prison in her isolation. As she confesses to herself, “I am suddenly appalled to realize that I am comfortable being confined” (*NB* 22). However, she admires the “communal flight” of the birds and dreams of a similar feat: “Just when I think I am going to fall, I flap my wings” (*NB* 35). This imaginary flight remains an illusion, though. When Eva is again confronted with life in the city, she cannot make sense of the everyday world around her: the hassle, the movement, and the people’s certainty, “I cannot recognize this world any more” (*NB* 46). Furthermore, the last vestiges of hope for a meaningful life are tragically extinguished when she realizes that Gerry has betrayed her. Unable to survive, being abandoned once more by someone she loves, she finds a definite way out in suicide.

While the Portobuffole narrative retains temporal contiguity although it is interrupted thrice by Eva’s and Othello’s sections, the Stern family plot line is highly

experimental. Starting in *media res* at the time of liberation, it is divided into eight parts with repeated analepses to recover the past as well as relapses into the time of liberation. The protagonist's death is prefigured in the voice of a doctor a few pages before the section finishes inside Eva's own mind. The narrative is further disrupted by the inclusion of dictionary definitions, objective descriptions of holocaust extermination methods in the voice of an unidentified heterodiegetic narrator, comments in the voice of a doctor specialized in holocaust victim syndrome, as well as by dreams and hallucinations in Eva's deracinated mind. No introductory explanations ease the transition between the eight different parts which mix times and locations. To these devices must be added the choice of narrative mood and voice, which, though retaining the perspective of internal focalization, repeatedly changes the voice from homodiegetic to heterodiegetic or even sustains the co-existence of both forms simultaneously. The confusion created by the latter choice comes to mirror the identity conflict that disrupts the personality of the protagonist while the preference for internal focalization mirrors the extreme limitation in the central character's scope of experience. The technique used for Eva Stern's narrative is homological with the nature of the experience it reflects and introduces the reader into a nightmarish structure. On the other hand, the language used is simple in syntax and lexis in order to represent both the nature of the mind of a young girl and a life stripped of all its trappings and reduced to the bare essentials of survival. Simultaneously, the linguistic choices faithfully portray the efforts of a devastated psychological structure to cope with the imposed conditions in captivity and later to achieve some kind of re-adaptation to ordinary life in society. In spite of its simplicity, the prose style can reach a highly lyrical quality in the presentation of deep suffering as in Eva's description of her feelings and sensations: "He laughs as he says this. He doesn't know that, should I attempt to smile, my face would break clean in two" (*NB* 24) or in her

reactions to life in captivity: “Camp life. The scream that deafens with its terror, the terror of deafening silence. The rigidity of motion, heavy stones weighing on everybody’s hearts. Travelling daily beyond the frontiers of life with an obscene selfishness as one’s sole companion” (*NB* 32).

By breaking with the expected norms of spatial, temporal and logical contiguity, Eva Stern’s narrative enacts in the reader’s mind the horror of utter irrationality. Like the characters, the readers are lost in a world they cannot recognize or understand. In consonance with Mrs Stern, they wonder: “In this world, you do not shoot people without a reason. There has to be a reason. How is it possible to be so angry with people who have done you no wrong?” (*NB* 93). The paradoxical implication of the experience of the reader of this narrative is that he/she knows that the underlying principles that have led to the historical situation in which the characters find themselves have been the application of instrumental rationality to its ultimate consequences in the politics of the German state.

The effect of verisimilitude that results from the application of the techniques described above is very high, thus sustaining an intimate confidence in the modern reliability of the subject as originator of meaning. The naturalistic effect in every one of the stories that intertwine in *The Nature of Blood* is also obtained through the immersion of characters in a well-documented historical period. As Muñoz Valdivieso (2007:201) sustains, this is a characteristic in Phillips’s fiction since he tends to place his characters “within the huge tide of history”. These devices are pointedly antagonistic to the postmodern dispersal of meaning sustained by other narratological choices in the novel such as the metaphorical creation of a good number of parallel worlds.



Like all other sections in *The Nature of Blood*, the Othello<sup>7</sup> narrative deals with discrimination, though this time in the figure of a black character whose fate echoes that of the Jews. In opposition to the extensive character and very complex organization of the section previously analysed, this narrative is noticeably shorter and simpler though equally memorable. The presence of Shakespeare's play in Phillips's mind may have influenced his choice for an account that is equally quick in pace and rich in suggestiveness. The story begins on Othello and Desdemona's wedding night and is followed by a long analepsis that recovers the whole of the previous events to finally retake the initial scene with Othello observing his wife in bed. This comparatively more conventional use of time contributes to the unity of the section as well as to the creation of suspense. The story ends with the voice of the Yoruba people passing judgement on Othello's actions and warning him of his fate ahead. Othello like other victims of history in the novel is subjected to the forces of social injustice.

The fact that the narrative should pivot around a scene with Desdemona in bed is highly suggestive both of the central theme of transgressive, interracial union and of the pre-figured end of the plot line according to the hypotext. Phillips offers us a new version of the classical story, planting all the seeds of Shakespeare's tragedy but avoiding the violent closure. However, the portrayal of the protagonist follows the Shakespearean model so faithfully that the ending is forcefully determined by the hypotext. Besides, the author contributes to condition the reader's mind to a tragic end through the introduction of ominous signs on the date of Othello's marriage such as his view of his journey to the monastery where the ceremony was to be conducted as taking on "an aspect of finality that lowered [his] spirits" (NB 147) or the description of the light of the moon on that occasion as "bizarre and macabre light" or of the setting as

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<sup>7</sup> Although the protagonist of this section is not given a name, it will be called Othello in the present work owing to the obvious intertextual relations to the homonymous character in Shakespeare's tragedy.

“gloomy moonlit evening” (*NB* 148). The tragic ending is also prefigured by the fact that the flow of the narrative is interrupted for the first and most significant time to introduce the sequence of the trial and execution of the Jews of Portobuffole. The ominous future of Othello and Desdemona is thus suggested together with the comparison of the tragic destinies of the black and the Jew. Both ethnic groups appear as dependant on the white, physically (in the Jews’ confinement to the ghetto) and psychologically through the many discriminatory practices they are submitted to. The fact that Othello, in a moment of crisis and after a sleepless night, should resort to the help of a friendly Jew scholar to help him read and then answer Desdemona’s letter comes as a sign of their common predicament. It is also symbolically significant that it should be a Jew (a race recognized for their intellectual contribution) who should be available to assist him with writing, a skill that pertains to the highly sophisticated Venetians in opposition to the orality that marks African culture. The Jew, with longer years of acculturation, helps the black to bridge the gap. The situation, though, will prove provisional since we know the end of the story, thus enacting the implausibility of successful race intermingling.

From the first lines of the Othello narrative (*NB* 106) we recognize the seeds of the future tragedy in the protagonist’s trend of thought as he gazes on his sleeping wife. His lack of self-assurance is revealed in his recognition of the fact that his wife has not made an advantageous choice in marrying him (“No longer a secure station in life, underscored by the most powerful of traditions”), in his misgivings about other men’s desires towards her (“All will now imagine her easy prey for their lascivious thoughts”), as well as in his ignorance of Venetian ways and customs and his consequent suspicions of her and her peers’ true intentions (“...is there some sport to this lady’s actions”; “Has some plot been hatched about me?”).

By the time Othello marries Desdemona, the clash of cultures and the racialization of skin colour have produced their effects on the male protagonist: “Some among these people, both high and low, were teaching me to think of myself as a man less worthy than the person I knew myself to be” (*NB* 119). The recognition that he is looked upon and considered first as a black man and then inferior and only secondarily as the person he is has devastating effects on his personality: he starts considering himself more as the former slave than as the heir of royal blood as shown by the use of the word “master” (*NB* 145) to refer to the Venetian citizen who is appointed to help him adapt to his new circumstances. On arrival in Venice he fails to receive the official welcome he has expected, and he is later looked upon “with the curiosity that one would associate with a child” (*NB* 119). In the context of the colonial gaze, the native is often represented as an immature being that needs the control and guidance of the mature, civilized white. This view is openly expressed by Sir Garnett Wolseley in reference to his experience in colonial Africa (in Gilroy 2004: 47):

The more one associates with the African Negro, the stronger becomes the impression that he is no more suited to stand alone than a white child would be. Until he learns to do voluntarily his share of daily work in this great domain which God has ordered man to till and cultivate, it is in my opinion better for the Negro and for the world that he should learn discipline under an enlightened but very strict master.

The superior gaze of the white race is also noticed in their consideration of Othello as a source of entertainment (“I was to be the chief amusement of this evening” *NB* 125) or as a valuable object (“...my invitation to dine at his home had provided those close to him with an opportunity to judge his prize acquisition” *NB* 128). As Césaire claims (as quoted by Loomba 22) colonization equates “thingification”. The inevitable

depersonalisation that this treatment implies is semiotically reflected in the fact that the character is deprived of the attribute of a name. The theme of reputation, central to Shakespeare's play and here present in the character's concern about the preservation of public appraisal develops around the symbol of the personal name. The character is denied a name and his self regard suffers under the repeated rebuffs of the white imperial centre. Finally, and to add to his personal debasement, the man who has confided in his capacity and introduced him to be appointed as the Doge's general accuses him of treachery because he cannot tolerate that a black man should mix his blood with that of his beloved daughter. Simultaneously, the protagonist is despised by his own man servant. This last detail is particularly significant because of the circumstances which lead to a change of attitude on the part of the former gondolier. As a consequence of Othello's intercourse with a local white prostitute, the man servant shows his strong disapproval and since then, he will never again have a kind word or look towards his master. Such a strong reaction can only be ascribed to the close link between racial purity and sexuality. By engaging the services of a white prostitute, Othello has transgressed a mythical border and impinged upon the necessary barrier between races. This is a crime that the racist servant is not ready to condone.

Subjected to such a derogatory treatment for a considerable lapse of time in the foreign land, the general loses his self-esteem in the same way as he loses his way in the maze-like city of Venice: "Indeed, it appeared somewhat shameful to me that a man who had endured many wars and faced much danger should panic on finding himself in unfamiliar streets in an admittedly civilized environment" (*NB* 132). The feelings of shame and fear are symptomatic reactions to the personal and cultural debasement he suffers within a society that makes discrimination a natural form of response. This is the treatment to which a self-called superior civilization subjects those under its dominance.

The centre makes use of the resources, human or other, that the imperial borders have to offer without measuring the cost in human life and welfare. The Venetian government keeps Othello at a distance. He is accepted as an inevitable contingency in similar fashion as the Jews are tolerated because the Republic depends on their capital for its expansion. As Fanon sustains, this is the "... Europe where they never stopped proclaiming that they were only anxious for the welfare of Man: today we know with what suffering humanity has paid for every one of their triumphs of the mind" (in Brah 1996: 120).

Far from generating an active response, such attacks on Othello's dignity, elicit a subservient attitude on his part. This is shown in his patient compliance with the inquisitorial demands of the Senator or his son on subsequent encounters, in the care he takes "to cause no offence" (*NB* 133) when phrasing the letter to the Doge or in his anxiety to please Desdemona's father on occasion of a visit to the Doge's palace: "I quickly scrutinized my host's face for any sign of displeasure, but, being able to spy none, my body let out what I feared might have been an audible sigh of relief" (*NB* 13). In the same direction, the first time that the Doge addresses him as his general, his breast swells in pride (*NB* 158). His attitude also shows an attempt at imitating his "superiors" in garment and manner which reminds of Bhabha's (86) concept of mimicry of imperial ways on the part of the colonized as "an ironic compromise" with difference. As Loomba (145) claims, "the black person attempts to cope by adopting white masks that will somehow make the fact of his blackness vanish". However, the hegemonic source of such behaviour, the result of both coercion and consent, produces deep suffering in the target of regulatory power, a feeling that is here reflected in the protagonist's description of his dark hand as a "stain" on Desdemona's "marble skin" (*NB* 147). The doubleness that his diasporic condition imposes leads him to tortured

wonderings on how to mitigate the “ill-feeling to which his natural state seemed to give rise” (*NB* 120).

His situation also inspires self-deceit in reference to his belonging to the new locality as seen in the “proprietary glee” (*NB* 121) with which he gazes on the city of Venice, significantly personified as a sleeping babe. The latter literary device cannot fail to relate in the reader’s mind to Othello’s silent gaze on his sleeping wife and his thought, “I now possess an object of beauty and danger...” (*NB* 148). Here again, Othello mirrors the white man’s subconscious connection between the conquest of land and the possession of women in the colonial context. The contested space, on which he stands, however, does not allow for comfortable dreams of belonging and in moments of greater understanding he arrives at different conclusions: “I realized that this city was betraying me, and I was betraying myself” (*NB* 118). The experience of diaspora implies the trauma of disorientation: balancing between two, often contradictory positions, the subject wonders (to use Brah’s words) “Where is home? On the one hand, ‘home’ is a mythic place of desire in the diasporic imagination. 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’. On the other hand, home is also the lived experience of a locality” (1996: 192). Othello is torn between the warm embrace of Desdemona’s “creamy arms” (*NB* 183), the prized token of the enchanting Venice and the distant voices of the Yoruba people which still echo in his head.

The fact that Othello is torn between conflicting cultural backgrounds is shown by the organization of this section which starts with Othello and Desdemona in his Venetian house and ends with the voice of the Yoruba calling the general back home. There is a very strong appeal for a return to the roots, a violent thrust that shatters the frail crystal of Othello’s grand dreams: “O strong man, O strong arm, O valiant soldier,

O weak man. You are lost, a sad black man, first on a long line of so-called achievers who are too weak to yoke their past with their present; too naive to insist on both; too foolish to realize that to supplant one with the other can only lead to catastrophe” (*NB* 181-182). Leaving the final lines of this narrative to a contestant African voice contributes to undermining the protagonist’s hopes of a successful marriage of his “own customs with their Venetian refinement” (*NB* 120).

If the Stern family plot line claims for the rejection of instrumental rationality as a modern flaw and the recovery of humane values within which reason can regain its original enlightening influence, Othello’s section claims for the pre-eminence of emotion over reason as a possible individual life course and an alternative to discriminatory rationalistic practices. According to Senghor (in Chrisman et al. 18) black culture offers a new dialectics to transcend traditional dichotomies and propound the unity of the universe. Black people interpret the material universe as signs of a deeper, spiritual reality which constitutes itself as a web of energy of which both the human being and God participate. In similar fashion, Frantz Fanon (in Chrisman et al. 26) recognizes the opposition between European and African cultures as a counterpoint between age and youth, reasoning and lyricism, as well as ceremony as contrasted to liberty and luxuriance. Such contrasts can be perceived in the Othello narrative through a number of technical devices. Such is the case of the description of the setting through the eyes of the protagonist who is enchanted<sup>8</sup> by the aging beauty and sophistication of the majestic and powerful Venetian city-state. Although Othello is not a youngster, he is full of the vigour, sensuality and romantic tendencies of youth and his African background provides him with a less restricted, regulated mode of reaction than the sophistication and ceremony of a central Renaissance state allowed. This opposition is

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<sup>8</sup> This lexical choice appears repeatedly in the course of the narrative to describe the protagonist’s feelings.

shown in the narrative in the character's efforts to comply with the rules of ceremony in Venice through his careful choice of garment and manner in his appearances before the local authorities. At the same time, to the Doge's rational and opportunistic attitude in hiring the services of a foreign general to "prevent the development of Venetian-born military dictatorships" (*NB* 117), we can oppose the sensuous and emotional response of Othello to his new life.

From his first encounter with the city, Othello shows his sensitiveness to the setting in detailed descriptions that arouse a multi-sensory response in the reader. Visual, auditory and tactile sensory perceptions give testimony of his positive emotional response and his capacity to luxuriate in the alluring beauty of the splendid city. The impressionistic descriptions that appear repeatedly in the course of the piece constitute an undercurrent of meaning that accompanies the mood of the protagonist in this homodiegetic narrative. When he first enters the "fabled city" (*NB* 107) the "splendour of the canals" "overwhelmed [his] senses". The account of this experience in his own voice mirrors his response in its easy flow through the predominance of coordination, the choice of short subordinated constructions and the insistence on the lateral sound which recreates the musicality of the waters. The pleasant atmosphere is, however, punctuated by the presence of an "oncoming storm" visible in the distant horizon. The storm will eventually break to show, as in Shakespeare's play *Othello*, that the natural elements reflect the human predicament. The initial serenity of the protagonist's mood as he comes into contact with Venice will be modified as Othello's circumstances gradually become more complex. The storm that reflects these developments results in the "opening of the heavens", "a shrill whine of wind [that] stung [his] ears" and the "lashing and blinding rain began to cascade" (*NB* 118). The character's passionate



emotional response, as reflected in the descriptions of the setting, is equally powerful in his quiet as in his more troubled moods.

The general's response to Desdemona is also expressed in terms of the celestial bodies: "When this lady moved, it was as though the universe moved with her, and what light there was in the room was wholly swallowed up by her eyes. I felt as though, against my will, some part of my soul had been captured" (*NB* 129). Luxuriant imagery gives rise to a vibrant lyricism that often takes shape, as in the above example, through the representation of light and shadow and the pleasure of the gaze. Equally marvelled by Venice and by his lady, Othello indulges in caressing them with his eyes as he ponders on his predicament. The device of the homodiegetic narrator contributes to give the reader a much more reflective character than Shakespeare's impulsive and obfuscated Othello. Through internal focalisation, the reader shares Othello's perspective in one long monologue in his voice to counterbalance Iago's soliloquies in Shakespeare's play. These narratological choices modify the final effect: while the play enacts the ethnocentric view of blackness as alien wilderness, the novel inspires empathy with the protagonist's plight. At the same time, while in the play Iago's evil and domineering influence is predominant in Othello's downfall, the relative dimness of the former character in the novel leaves the reader with no devil to blame. The centrality of Iago in the play is not equalled by the role of the servant in the novel although his attitude and behaviour strongly contribute to Othello's loss of self-confidence. It is by this means that the protagonist's weaknesses are highlighted: naïveté, self-deception, self-abasement. Even in the most emotionally charged moments of the section where a lyrical tone prevails, there is a melancholic anticipation of darker scenes to come: Othello is doomed to succumb to the onslaughts of discriminatory racial practices. All elements in the organization of the section respond to the imposition of the marks of

tragedy: from the creation of a hostile environment in the description of setting, and the tight connection between character portrayal and action, to the distribution of information in the text to suggest an ominous end and the close reliance on the tragic hypotext.

In the context of the novel, the presence of the character of Othello with his luxuriant sensuality and rich emotional response to reality comes to represent an alternative mode of human involvement with the world and with other human beings to contest the application of instrumental rationality, which so much suffering has been seen to inflict upon discriminated members of society. However, the character's fated doom does not speak in favour of a hopeful future on the basis of such an alternative mode of being.

Although the experience of diaspora is present in all the plot lines, it is in the story of Stephan Stern that this theme is most clearly presented. This particular section significantly opens and closes the book relating all other plot lines to a more contemporary scene. While his brother rejected a transcultural experience, Stephan made a life choice for the opportunity of a new departure. To judge by the results, since he is alive at the end of the novel while his brother's family was exterminated by the inhumanity of the Nazi regime, we could conclude that his was the right choice. The answer that the novel proposes, however, is not so simple or lineal. Displacement as a result of the journey away from home creates personal and social conflicts which the characters find very difficult to overcome. More than ten years after his decision on exile, Stephan still longs for the sense of "home" he experienced in the land of his ancestors. His personality is marked by loneliness, melancholy and guilt. If as Brah (1996: 182) theorizes, "...diasporic journeys are essentially about settling down, about

putting roots ‘elsewhere’”, Stephan does not seem to have been able to make a home for himself in the new land.

Similarly, Malka, a black Jew uprooted from her native Africa and transported with many others of her own cultural group to the state of Israel finds her journey disconcerting and the process of adaptation to the new surroundings disempowering. The strong, hegemonic influence of the local culture has an unsettling effect on the immigrant people who, lacking the support of their community, see how their own customs and language are erased and supplanted by alternative cultural modes and values. Malka’s family life is disrupted by the process. This fact is so disturbing psychologically that all the advantages of a more technologically advanced society (access to food, health care, education) cannot compensate for the loss and the character feels the anguish of displacement. Her position is especially paradigmatic of victimization since in the distribution of qualities, she has been allotted those which are systematically on the wrong side of the scales. The Enlightenment components of the discourse of colonialism organize reality along the line of hierarchical binary oppositions: Gentile/Jew, Male/Female, White/Black. Malka belongs to those whose historical destiny has been to suffer sociological manipulation and ideological domination. The most poignant example of such treatment is to be found in the fact that “the mayor of the town in which [Malka and her fellows] were first placed complained. He had requested that he be sent only those who could sing and dance, so that he might form a folklore group for tourists” (*NB* 208). The new arrivals are dealt with coldly and judged for their market value in similar fashion as slaves of old. A few words of welcome or of good intentions are insufficient to compensate for the feeling of being objectified, dealt with as merchandise that can be disposed of or returned if not functional (the manager of the club where Malka and Stephan meet, tells her that she

will not be allowed in again unless someone invites her to dance this time). The sense of debasement and inadequacy that such dealings provoke hinder adaptation to the new situation and favour isolation and despair. The fact that she was “plucked” from one century, made to “cross two more” and then “placed ... in this time” (*NB* 209) inflicts a sense of disorientation: she is lost in 20<sup>th</sup> century Israel.

However, the text seems to leave a door open for future possibilities in the relationship between these two lonely and conflicted people. Stephan understands that “people are not made to live alone, neither when things are good nor when they are bad” (*NB* 212) and he recognizes the positive quality of their “private adventure” after their night together. With “his arms outstretched, reaching across the years”, (*NB* 213) Stephan tries to build a bridge between his past and his future.

In its uneasy wavering between centredness and de-centredness, between confidence in the individual self as origin of assertive meaning and reliance on language and culture as conveyors of a sense that evades subjective control and disrupts individual intentions, *The Nature of Blood* is a good example of the workings of postmodern art as defined by Linda Hutcheon. According to the Canadian theorist, Postmodernism “...at once inscribes and subverts the conventions and ideologies of the dominant cultural and social forces of the twentieth-century western world” (Hutcheon 11). In the same way as the modern is inscribed in the postmodern, postmodern art confronts us with modern ideological constructs with the aim of exploring and questioning their validity. The modern view of the individual as central, unique and autonomous is inscribed in Phillips’s novel in its frequent reliance on the device of mimetic realism with its effect of verisimilitude. However, and as formalist theorists have so well explained, reality in artistic texts is not a referent but one more element with which the artist works in the process of creation. The mimetic representation of a

unique, universal, and uncontested reality is here subverted by the simultaneous presence of multiple voices internal or external to the action, subjective or objective in their perspective and coming from a variety of generic discourses. In this way, complicity does not ally itself with compromise and the work of art both enacts and contests the search of authenticity in autonomous, individual expression.

Although recurrently dealing with historical circumstances, the novel avoids the imposition of a central, sterilised historical line to contribute with a number of individual de-centralized sources of meaning with the purpose of a better understanding of the present and the possible construction of a fairer future. The creation of characters whose lives suffer the onslaughts of discrimination and whose feelings and thoughts are intimately recorded, contributes to the possibility of imagining what it is like to fill such social positions and to understand that “racial difference obstructs empathy and makes ethnocentrism inescapable” (Gilroy 2004: 70). *The Nature of Blood*, with its traditional confessional aspects and its more contemporary extreme narratological experimentation exposes the totalitarian strategies of imperialism so that readers can recognize their belated effects in their own present-day world while at the same time it expresses a pronounced lack of hope in a better near future.

If confrontation can be seen as the common theme to the different narrative lines in *The Nature of Blood*, alienation can be identified as the thematic thread that connects the stories of the two protagonists of *A Distant Shore*. While Gabriel/Solomon is alienated by enforced exile, diaspora and racism, Dorothy, although native to the soil she inhabits and surrounded by her kind, has failed to establish deep and truthful human links to sustain her and give meaning to her life. Originating in broadly different sources, the social unease that the characters feel mark their lives both in the choices they make and through other peoples’ reactions to them. Although the novel pivots

around the lives of two protagonists, the title gives pre-eminence to Gabriel since it refers to his dream of reaching the distant British Isles, the haven where he hopes to be able to re-start a life away from the horrors of his native land. The situation in which he finds himself is a particularly poignant example of the tragedy of displacement arising from internal strife in postcolonial African countries. Widespread violence and chaos as the result of utter dissolution of political and social institutions in the homeland force Gabriel and many of his fellow countrymen to flee and seek refuge in UK, a nation with whom they place their hopes of survival and of a peaceful future life. Like many other immigrants, political refugees have flooded the UK since the aftermath of the Empire.

Asylum policy in the European Union follows the same ideological lines as that of the nation-states that constitute it and with the same consequences as to the building of borders that define the refugee as “the ‘other’, or as a problem of ‘us versus them’” (Dijkstra et al. 69). The concept of identity that this policy sustains is essentialist; it mistakenly conceives of territory and culture as a contiguous and natural link. To this frame of mind migration is an anomaly. The narrative that this ideology sustains runs as follows:

In the receiving country, refugees are... in a strange world, while they felt at home in their own community; if people must flee, it is therefore best to have them stay as close as possible to their original place, or, if this is impossible, at least return to their own place as soon as it is safe again. There they can pick up their old way of life, so that the situation becomes normalized. (70)

The story of Gabriel/Solomon disproves the statements above. Although our protagonist finds disorienting features in the British culture, he can speak the language well and this allows him to put his ideas across easily. If he suffers from culture shock,

this is due to inhuman treatment by local authorities and not to difficulties to adjust. At the same time, there is no doubt that he did not feel at home in his own country and that he has no wish to return to a place where nothing he used to value has been preserved. He has left behind no possessions, friends or relatives that might act as enticements to return. Even if he decided to return once open violence abated in his African country, nothing would be as it was before the civil war. The concept of home as home country can have no meaning for the protagonist of *A Distant Shore*. Every one of the statements in the above quotation, which emerge from basic assumptions within the conception of identity as an essence, is disclaimed by Dijkstra et al. The postulates on which the statements are based are proved to be wrong. Identity is not a fixed and stable essence but a permanent social process which is not restricted to the connection to the homeland, especially in our globalized world. On the contrary, identity today is rather characterized by transnationalism and evolves anywhere the individual finds him/herself. Government policy considers identity as homogeneous within a national group while in fact the processes of identity formation are “dissimilar, heterogeneous and unpredictable” (71). For a society to be able to live with difference, both individual citizens and the state have to value and respect diversity. The “homogeneous groups metaphor” makes it very “difficult to value difference without seeing other groups of individuals as totally different and excluded from specific rights” (76). Although refugees have suffered hardships, many of them are strong and able individuals who can make a contribution to the host country. When the system classes them as victims, their dignity is lost. This also happens as a consequence of the difficulties they encounter to find good jobs: refugees are often unemployed or underpaid. As Dijkstra et al sustain, as a result of this situation, “[a]s the number of refugees grows, so grows the image of a

burden too heavy for society to bear” (72). There is a short distance between this idea and popular animosity against refugees identified with the image of the parasite.

Globalization has exerted extreme pressure on affluent European countries now constituted in eligible sites of welfare for people arriving from less privileged parts of the world. Intense subjection to global population flows seems to result in local efforts to sustain existing borders and to build new ones at the threat of what is felt as a form of “foreign invasion” that endangers the inner links that keep a nation-state together. In this situation the local population establishes clear divisions between those who belong to the soil/culture/nation and those who do not, between the citizens and the foreigners. This potentially conflicting situation becomes more complex when the immigrant is racialized on the basis of colour. Racism is one of the evil consequences of imperial domination, which, with its ideological constructions, still exercises powerful influence round the world. Its dominance in the people’s imaginary originates in colonial assimilation of the white Western man as representative of humanity in opposition to the colonized who was conceived “as below the boundary of the human, as beast, as animal, as savage”. To question this statement implies to destabilize the “meaning that has been given to humanity” (Cornell 423). The devaluation or the utter denial of the culture of the colonized justified the brutality with which they were treated by the colonizer. On the basis of this original source, present-day diasporic situations are suffused by the ghostly presence of threat. The immigrant, often a former colonized and differentiated by colour is a threat to the central nation-state and constitutes a problem discussed in terms of “black criminality” and the figures of the “settler” and the “parasite” (Axel 240). In this model the immigrant is demonized, segregated as an Other who “is a consumer of the benefits of the nation-state”, turned into the enemy who sustains the “production of a national fantasy of integration and singularity” (249). The



latter essentialist conception of a homogeneous culture corresponds to a nationalism that equates ethnicity with territory with the consequent belief that “those who came later, such as immigrants, [have] no right at all to live on that territory”, they are described as “intruders” and are a threat to “the national fabric from within” (Van Leewen 165-166). This ideological conception of nationalism can shape itself into “an almost religious ecstasy that can ultimately lead to genocide” (167). In this context, the immigrant is easily accused of competition in the labour market and in the struggle to satisfy basic needs among the lower classes of society especially “if there is a perception that large groups of illegal immigrants are entering the country unchecked”. This situation can hardly favour ethnic interaction and hybridity (164).

Simultaneously, the position of the immigrant is also weakened by the devaluation of his ethnic identity, a relational structure that is felt as a life force, the source of stability, and self-assurance. The effect of conflict with the local culture at this level is particularly dangerous for the migrant since it implies the social and the individual inscription of the subject. Ethnic identity is here conceived with Kim (285) as “a sociological or demographic classification as well as an individual’s psychological identification with, or sense of belonging to, a particular ethnic group. The psychological and sociological meanings of ethnic identity are regarded as two inseparable correlates of the same phenomenon”. When an individual is threatened at this level, his/her very life is at stake and although racial stereotypes constitute perverted or distorted forms of perception, their conscious and subconscious influences are powerfully effective. According to Appiah (1996:105), racial labels affect people socially and psychologically, defining their actions and life-plans. Even if I can choose “how central my identification with [the label] may be” or as to “how much I will organize my life around that identity” (108), “racial identification is harder to resist than

ethnic identification” because “racial ascription is more socially salient” and because “race is taken by ...people to be the basis to treating people differentially” (109). In racism the other is conceived as not having “the same moral status” and as a consequence “fundamental rights do not apply to them” (Van Leewen 154). “Social strangeness” arises as the result of boundaries erected on the ground of “skin colour, birth or nationality” and does not necessarily imply racism. In the latter case, the odd trait “involves expulsion...from the moral community and, as a consequence, dehumanization” (155).

When a socio-cultural group adheres too strongly to ethnic ascriptions to sustain its internal cohesion (for example whiteness), this can lead to the reinforcement of internal ties in detriment of interaction with other groups or individuals who do not share such ascriptions. This kind of reaction is seldom controlled by reason since

[t]he way people experience ethnic identity is essentially emotionally driven. This further means that, when it comes to our relationships to out-groups in competition or conflict, we are less than likely to be fair and objective and more likely to be irrational, defensive, and self-serving, favouring our in-group and discriminating against the out-group that threatens our in-group. The identity boundaries are seen as something everyone is, and must be, reluctant to compromise. (Kim 289)

However, in today’s multicultural societies individuals confront situations in which transformation and adaptation become mandatory if they are to succeed in establishing interethnic relations. Both the immigrants and the local citizens are challenged to “accommodate, understand, cooperate” so as to manage to “develop relationships with people of different ethnic identities”. This process is slow and often painful and requires “[p]lasticity, the ability to learn and change through new experiences”. The individual

has to change the habitual response that answers to custom and tradition and has to make conscious and deliberate choices; he must try out innovative answers (291). The level of difficulty involved depends on

the degree of “ethnic distance” (or “ethnic proximity”) that needs to be bridged, coupled with the uncertainty and unfamiliarity stemming from such cultural and linguistic difference, as well as the “intergroup posturing” of attitudes and actions based on “us-and-them” group-based perceptions. Moments of intense stress can reverse the process of identity transformation at any time; individuals may regress toward reidentifying with their origins, having found the alienation and malaise involved in maintaining a new identity too much of a strain. (Kim 292)

Much of the tension issues from challenges to subconscious assumptions about what is normal, acceptable and good that constitute the core of the concept of “common sense” on which we depend in our day-to-day lives. This body of knowledge, beliefs and perspectives is “a horizon of communal, unproblematic convictions that provide a certain background consensus” (Van Leeuwen 151). Being the result of early upbringing in a common culture, these ideas are taken for granted and go unchallenged. Much prejudice responds to this psychological construction. When common-sense is challenged, the individual feels threatened since what has always been judged as true, universal and timeless is suddenly perceived as the result of a limited perspective and the absence of shared beliefs corrode the common ground on which understanding is built. In the encounter with the other, human beings long for confirmation of commonality but “[t]he cultural other does not immediately meet this longing”; “it resists a dialectic appropriation into our own horizon of thinking and evaluation”. He constitutes itself in “an externality” that resists assimilation. Mitigations for this

situation allow for eventual overcoming of difference. Alienation “never involves ‘the other’ or another culture in its *totality*, but only certain aspects, such as strange rites that make no sense at all” (Van Leewen 152). Confronted with such situations, the individual reacts by activating certain “defence mechanisms” to avoid the effects of flux and regain internal balance such as “self-deception, denial, avoidance, and withdrawal” (Kim 292). Although stress may trigger these mechanisms contrary to adaptation, it is this very state that stimulates the process of change effected as the result of external challenge. As Kim sustains, “[i]n this process an identity is transformed, gradually and imperceptibly, from an ‘ascribed’ to a newly ‘achieved’ identity”. The result is a more resourceful individual, one better equipped to manage in an interethnic environment (292) since binarism is avoided in this process of integration of contraries and identification of similarities between different ethnic groups becomes more accessible to the mind. This outcome is more easily reached by the local citizen since opposition is offered by the minority. However, “if the deviation from the norm is too massive, if all recognizable forms seem to disappear, then the disorientation can be far-reaching and can assume the form of a shock”. This is the situation of “the migrant, the minority, the other (or the ‘backward one’)” who confronts “a culturally unfamiliar environment” and is then “unable to understand or predict the behaviour of others”. The culture shock that results is characterized by “confusion, uncertainty, depression, anguish and interpersonal discomfort” (Van Leewen 153). The result is often isolation of the individual who feels that the difference is unbridgeable. The unfamiliarity of the environment is coupled with a feeling of rejection of one’s own identity: “[t]he environment excludes and rejects the individual – the opposite of the reassuring experience of a shared reason. In such a case, the stranger faces a brutal world, with no

familiar logic or meaning” (154) and he/she experiments the uncanny, the terror of an “acute threat to [his/her] (1) psychological, (2) vital, and/or (3) national integrity” (163).

The story of the male protagonist of *A Distant Shore* fits the above picture to the detail in its sociological and psychological implications. We first become acquainted with Gabriel in Part II of the novel where we find him confined in a jail in the UK unjustly accused of abusing a young white girl. The situations described in crude, naturalistic detail from the restricted perspective of the protagonist give a shocking account of utter subjection to inhuman treatment. From the start, “[t]he procedure at the police station was... disrespectful” (*DS* 167). He is locked in a cell with another stranger (Said, a refugee from Iraq) who is seriously ill and begs for his help. Although Gabriel insistently tries to get the warden’s attention so that basic assistance is provided for him, this is consistently denied until his mate eventually dies. As there is shortage of ambulances, the body is left in the cell with Gabriel who falls under a fit of hysterics at the prospect of spending the night locked up in a cell with a corpse. The doctor and the warden force him to lie on his bunk to which he is fastened and a tranquilizer is injected to keep him quiet. Said’s tragic story told during the few days they share in that cell makes a great impact on Gabriel’s mind. He learns that Said has spent all he had to have the opportunity to escape his country. He has travelled “like... an animal... in a small space under a truck” (69) to reach England, the land of promise. There, he is confronted by the discriminatory attitude of a couple of English citizens who unfairly accuse him of theft as the result of which he is confined to jail and roughly treated. Despair, illness and brutal treatment soon lead to his death. Said’s past experiences, except for his illness, are very similar to Gabriel’s own. This may account for his deep sympathy for this stranger. At the same time, Gabriel’s future, with which the reader is already acquainted, reserves further horrors for him and promises an equally violent end.

Although after Said's death Gabriel is in an acutely distressful situation himself, he makes repeated, though vain efforts to comply with his mate's last wish to inform his family back at home of his circumstances. In spite of Gabriel's shocking situation, he manages to survive to all kinds of inequities such as extreme thirst and hunger plus verbal abuse by both the wardens and another man who is locked in the cell next to his. Out of pure racial prejudice, this man, whom Gabriel can only hear from his confinement, calls him "fucking, noisy cannibal" and advises the warden to send him to eat Said's body (*DS* 73). Later, when the warden brings in Gabriel's meagre tray, the neighbour proffers: "You fucking animal. I don't know why they bother to feed you" (*DS* 85), or on the same lines when Gabriel begs the warden for water, he shouts: "Drink your own piss. Isn't that what your lot do in the jungle?" and then he "laughs at his own humour" (*DS* 86). Although the warden refrains from addressing Gabriel using such violent epithets, he shows his hostility by openly ignoring Gabriel's and Said's urgent needs for basic human assistance (food, drink, medicine) on the grounds that he wants to watch television in peace. His behaviour is equally aggressive when "[h]e looks at Gabriel as though studying an animal in a Zoo" (*DS* 96) from behind the cell bars. He also abuses his power repeatedly. First, when he purposely delays the announcement that he has a visitor (the legal assistant and his lawyer) so that he has little opportunity to be helped and also with the purpose of making the occasion coincide with eating time so that he has to choose between the food and drink he so dearly needs and the official assistance his freedom depends on (*DS* 96). And later when Gabriel desperately asks about the fate of Said, the warden answers: "You think you have any right to know anything after what you've done?" (*DS* 97). Apart from the fact that every human being deserves a minimum of respect and consideration, as a

representative of the law, the warden should know that Gabriel is innocent until he is proved otherwise.

The abuse of power on the part of the warden, supposedly an official in charge of preserving the rights of the individual and with the force of the law on his side, exposes the extreme vulnerability of those under his care. The suspicion of miscegenation is enough for the warden to consider Gabriel as belonging to a subhuman category of being who should be denied the basic right to survive, let alone the right of fair treatment and trial. As to Gabriel's fellow prisoner his brutality reaches basic levels of human aggressiveness which paradoxically mark him as belonging to the savage race he accuses the fragile Gabriel of representing. These hostile characters show a totally irrational attitude towards Gabriel based on racial prejudice: he is seen as sub-human and then he is easily demonized and linked to criminality. For them, there is no possible identification or recognition of common humanity with the black Gabriel. The reaction of other officials such as the doctor and the lawyer, though less basic in its antagonism, is equally distant. They show little or no disposition to help though this is actually their function in the legal system. The only character who shows consideration and truly fulfils her role is Katherine, the employee of an immigration law firm, who goes out of her way to give him a hand and send him on his way to the North where she hopes he can start life anew. At this stage in the development of Gabriel's story she is the only character who justifies the qualifier "civilized" as applied to the white race and specifically the British culture.

In this brutally hostile environment, Gabriel manages to preserve enough mental balance in his treatment of Said to show human values utterly absent from his assailants. With the minimum resources at his disposal he helps and consoles his fellow inmate and tries to comply with his last wish even giving this priority over concentration on his

own urgently pressing situation. Later on in the development of the plot, the reader learns that this form of warm response to the weak and needy is a trait of his character as shown by his protective attitude towards the young Amma and her baby on their hazardous journey to the U.K. However, and in spite of his capacity for survival, his nerve fails him whenever he has to broach the subject of his accusation: his mind goes blank and he offers little collaboration to the lawyer in charge of his defence. Culture shock can be considered to be the cause of this unfavourable reaction that blocks his capacity for interpersonal communication. Gabriel draws on gender and ethnic categories to build his identity and tell his life story. To his mind manliness implies strength, resourcefulness and reliability, qualities that mark men as independent and capable of initiative and agency while the paradigmatic female traits imply modesty and a willingness to accept male assistance. As soon as he sets foot on British soil, he meets Denise, a local school girl who hides her serious personal and family problems behind a mask of bold defiance. Gabriel is shocked by what he considers insolent and unfeminine behaviour in the girl's manners and use of language as well as in her reactions towards him. Later on, he expresses a similar judgement of Carla, Dorothy's young music student. Gabriel observes and ponders on how to assess these girls' immodest attitudes to him as an adult man and is disoriented by the difference with his own standards of femininity:

Gabriel looks at the girl standing before him in her school uniform, imagining that she is already a woman. He reminds himself that in his country many girls of her age already have babies and responsibilities, and they do not swear, and they are not abusive about their parents, and they would never sit alone with a man in this way. (*DS* 163)



Equally worrying to him is women's use of "foul and abusive language in the streets" (DS 253) and the public display of women in underwear in the media. He finds such flouting of basic feminine attitudes utterly confusing and he regrets that his sense of propriety does not allow him to clarify his doubts with his benefactor Mrs Anderson. He is especially shocked by young British girls' behaviour since this does not conform to his expectations. In the case of the Denise incident, to this cultural confusion we must add his emotional involvement with the girl in a moment of mutual sympathy rooted on their common vulnerability that briefly brings them together, probably the only instance of the collapse of barriers between humans in Gabriel's life in the last few months. From this very brief interlude of empathy between the black and the white, the female and the male, the young and the grown-up, Gabriel is awoken to unaccountable physical violence followed by the brutality of accusation, imprisonment and inhuman treatment during his internment. Rejected and excluded by a viciously hostile environment he can make no sense of his surroundings to establish a minimum common ground for communication. He cannot defend himself against a crime he has not committed or utter a coherent account of the incident in which he finds himself involved.

Although the reader learns about Gabriel's life in Part 2 of *A Distant Shore*, his death is recounted in Part 1 through the autodiegetic account of Dorothy Jones, the retired music teacher with whom he has started what seems a promising friendship. The plot starts at the end and slowly unravels the past through a series of analepses that account for the tragic end of the two protagonists. Racial aggression is a constant in Gabriel's life from the moment he sets foot in the U.K. as seen in the incidents analysed above and culminating with his extermination in the hands of a youth gang whose actions are probably not aimed at such a drastic finale but at liberating the racial tensions that are common to the community at large. The good-will and sympathetic

understanding of a few characters (Katherine, Mike and the Andersons) are finally ineffective to counteract the general malice that his mere presence provokes and which eventually leads to his death. Gabriel's encounter with Mike on the road to the North in search of a new life under a new name (Solomon) seems to promise a different future. In Gabriel's own words, "like a Good Samaritan" (*DS* 260), Mike appears in the midst of a dark stormy night to rescue and guide him to security in the home of the Andersons. However, his initial experiences on British soil having been so brutal, he distrusts Mike at first as shown by his reaction when Mike pulls up at a roadside café for refreshments. Solomon is afraid, does not recognize the kind of place he is in ("an area that was brightly lit in the manner of a small city" *DS* 243) and does not know what to expect from Mike in spite of his friendly manner: "What was this man going to do to me? What did he want?" (*DS* 244). He also feels threatened by the British people sitting at tables nearby:

Those sitting at neighbouring tables stared at me with great fascination, and even though I looked away I could feel the weight of their eyes, I prepared myself. Should there be trouble then I would fight, and I wondered if perhaps Mike would join me. He was a large man, although somewhat overweight, but he would make a strong ally. (*DS* 244)

His disorientation at the unfamiliarity of his surroundings plus the unaccounted brutality of past experiences with British culture produces the feeling of terror of risk to his integrity. His mind is in a state of extreme alert and he is ready to respond to unexpected and what he experiences as irrational attacks. Everything around him is new and disconnected from his own previous experience from the taste of food to the surprisingly unending "supply of cold and hot water" (*DS* 244) in the toilet. His experiences are a mixture of threat (at the unknown) and wonder at the abundance of

facilities with which he is unacquainted. He feels lost and miserable, a leaf in the wind, without clear aim or destination: “[t]his was shameful, for I was not a man who was used to being dependent upon other people. This pitiful situation made me feel quite miserable” (*DS* 245). However, he is soon to learn that he has landed with people who truly want to help. The Andersons’ hospitality, together with the provision of governmental immigrant help allows Solomon to recover and to show signs of acculturation as he makes efforts to adapt to his new circumstances in the foreign country: “England had changed me, but was this not the very reason that I had come to England? I desired change” (*DS* 245). Mrs Anderson, who treats Mike and Gabriel as the sons she has never had, helps Gabriel acquire legal status and her husband, the manager of a building firm, introduces him to working skills in that industry and teaches him how to drive. Gabriel cannot believe his luck after the many hardships suffered and shows his respect and gratitude to his benefactors by calling Mrs Anderson “Mum”. As to Mike, he considers him his friend and is grateful for his affability, generous benevolence and fairness and for having given him “a new home. In England” (*DS* 264). Knowing what his fate is to be in the hands of British citizens, the reader cannot fail to find this statement deeply moving and a powerful indictment against the brutality of discrimination. The same effect is obtained by the phrase “English people are good” (*DS* 70) uttered by Said in his conversation with Solomon in prison. The refugee from Iraq, even in the extreme circumstances in which he has been placed by British intolerance is still ready to trust the people in the host country.

Although Solomon has a family with the Andersons, he still feels lonely and recognizes that “only one half of [him] was alive and functioning” (*DS* 259). He tries to make contact with other immigrants (West Indians, Indians or Pakistanis) in the hope to be able to share common experiences of diaspora but finds them openly unreceptive.

Unfortunately this hostility is quite general and the Andersons start to suffer intimidating expressions of racism as a consequence of the presence of Solomon in their home. Mr Anderson tries to clarify the causes of such reactions by explaining that the British social system is suffering from the burden of too much immigration. The local people are resentful of this situation and feel that they are invaded by foreigners who are unwilling to work for a living (*DS* 256-258). Mr Anderson recognizes that the metaphorical representation of the immigrant as the intruder and the parasite are quite general among British people and he observes that what makes cohabitation difficult from the local perspective is the great ethnic gap that separates the immigrants and the locals. He specifically mentions the Indian peasants who, according to his view, should be introduced to British ways and customs to bridge the gap and avoid excessive strain upon the local population (*DS* 258). He also makes a clear difference between the common immigrant and the political refugee to whom he confers a different status and recognizes as deserving respect and aid. The Andersons express their unease and profound grief at being forced to forgo the ideals of interethnic understanding which they have sustained with their attitudes and actions in the course of their life. In the circumstances, they decide to move to Scotland sending Solomon to the village of Weston where they find him a job in the new building development of Stoneleigh where they expect he will be able to settle and make a home for himself. Once again Solomon is rejected by the host community and forced to make a move, on the first occasion, this means a trip to the North, away from London and now he is pushed back South in search for shelter from the hostile racist gaze.

After a year in the protected haven of the Andersons' home, he has achieved the desired legal status in Britain; "England was becoming less of a mystery" (*DS* 252). He is also a more resourceful individual, equipped with the necessary skills to make a

living in the foreign country. However, in this anti-climatic novel, the reader knows from the start that he will never be able to find a home in Britain. During his first weeks as a night warden at Stoneleigh, his expectations are so humble that he is satisfied that the neighbours return his greeting as they cross his path: "...this is enough. It is a beginning" (*DS* 259). Then he manages enough courage to offer his services as a driver to take passengers to and from the local medical centre. The first experience, however, shows him that he is not well accepted in that role either. His passenger refuses to make eye contact, feels resentful, offers no thanks, and slams the door of the car as he gets out as a means to show his disapproval. Solomon connects this incident with the many aggressive letters he receives at home with the implicit or explicit message that he is not wanted in the neighbourhood and urging him to go away. To this must be added the envelope that treacherously hides razor blades inside and the dog mess shovelled through his letter box, all expressive of the feeling that his neighbours regard him as their enemy (*DS* 266). These letters are the prelude of more direct action by a group of young bullies who, according to Carla, the girlfriend of one of them, with the purpose of "hav[ing] some fun" kidnap him, and drive him to a solitary open place. In Carla's account "when they opened the back of the van to let him out...he'd undone the ropes and he started to attack them like a madman" (*DS* 47). The gang grab him and stone him until he stops moving. Then they push him into the canal to pretend it was an accident. According to the girl they just wanted to frighten him but they were surprised by his uncontrolled response, surely the result of extreme tension arising from panic. Having suffered the pressure of threat to his integrity for more than a year, his mind gave way and he could no longer control his reaction to the uncanny.

Some time earlier, in a premonitory scene, Solomon confronts the hostility of the same group as he takes a stroll near the canal. Although they block his way, insult him,

spit at his back, and laugh at him, he manages to evade them and he arrives safely back home. Meanwhile the reader shares his thoughts and learns that “if one among them should attempt to bruise me, then the situation will become very unpleasant”. He thinks of his dignity back at home, as the son of “an elder, a man who decided disputes and punished crimes” on the basis of which he becomes determined to defend himself: “I am a man who has survived, and I would rather die like a free man than suffer my blood to be drawn like a slave’s” (*DS* 251) On his second encounter with the gang, the attack is more frontal, he is actually deprived of his freedom, and driven at the back of a van with his limbs tied with unknown destination. Given his determination to defend his dignity and his freedom as expressed in the quotation above, it is no wonder that on this dangerous occasion his mind should have snapped. He responds instinctively to defend his life against the assault with the tragic consequence of his death. At this point in the story the alienation between the opposing groups has its maximum expression: it is Us against Them and no recognition of common human ground on which to stand and negotiate. Although at certain moments in the story-line it seems as if the distance between antagonistic groups could be bridged, the prominence given to this shattering incident by its presence both in the first and last pages of the novel leave no doubts as to the final message.

The theme of racial discrimination and its concomitant violence is fundamental to the novel and appears not only in the central plot line but also in the lives of secondary characters with the result that we have the feeling that this is a predominant characteristic of British society with the exception of a few isolated cases whose influence is overpowered by the majority. Dorothy’s entourage reflects this ominous atmosphere. Her parents often give vent to their discriminatory feelings which she

summarizes by saying that they “disliked coloureds”. She identifies the same attitude in her teachers:

Dad told me that he regarded coloureds as a challenge to our English identity. He believed that the Welsh were full of sentimental stupidity, that the Scots were helplessly mean and mopish and they should keep to their own side of Hadrian’s Wall, and that the Irish were violent, Catholic drunks. For him, being English was more important than being British, and being English meant no coloureds. He would no more listen to me than would the teachers at school, who also hated coloureds. When people were around they’d go on about them not really adapting well to our school system, but in private they were always “cheeky little niggers”. (*DS* 37)

Dorothy’s father’s extreme intolerance is reflected in the above quotation: according to him anybody who happens to differ even if slightly from the inner group does not deserve to share the same soil. To this mode of thought to be different implies being inferior and unworthy. The natural consequence of this perspective is the conviction that frontiers should be kept sealed against infiltration of the other. The concept of identity that corresponds is that of a constant and immovable shape that is indissolubly tied to a certain locality and that once acquired remains for ever unchanged. As this conception is not scientifically or morally sustainable, it comes under the guise of social and pedagogical arguments that hypocritically hide the true intentions below.

The fact that teachers should sustain such discriminatory assumptions is particularly noxious since integration projects can hardly succeed under their direction. In an informal conversation with Dorothy, her school colleague Geoff Waverly, significantly associates blackness with criminality: “‘But these kids were not black.’ He

gestures out of the window. ‘They were not out to mug anyone’” (*DS* 196). His interlocutor takes the statement as natural, a fact that shows that this kind of association is not alien to her mind. We have to assume that in this respect, the novel sustains that nothing much has changed at schools for two generations. These contemporary teachers are as prejudiced as their predecessors. Apart from the situation quoted above, the character of Dorothy betrays biased reactions in her inbred fear and rejection of the other in the figure of the gypsies and the Asians. She thinks of the Indian robber who assaulted her sister in terms of a “savage” who is “[t]wo steps removed from the jungle” (*DS* 233). Such epithets make patent her concept of civilization as a prerogative of the white. As to the gypsies, Dorothy explains the origin of her negative reaction: “Sheila and I have always been scared of gypsies and Mum had told us to run away if any of them ever spoke to us. They are nasty and they like to take away people’s children, everybody knows as much” (*DS* 57). Dorothy can never free herself from such generalised assumptions used to naturalize ideological constructions. Although her parents are both dead by the time the novel starts, she still depends on their opinions about matters concerning her private life. When her interest focuses on Solomon, she pays a visit to her parents’ tomb to “talk” to them about him and get their agreement to a relationship with him. She goes through an imaginary argument with them in which both her Mum and her Dad let her know their downright disagreement with her intentions of developing a relationship with a black man. Her mother wonders what people will think when they see her with a coloured man especially one as dark as Solomon and adds that “She’d not brought [her] up to be that kind of girl” and appeals to her sense of guilt by adding that she does not understand why she would want to do something like that to her parents (*DS* 56). Her father is described as using the term “slag” to refer to her and as refusing to look at her or to speak to her again (*DS* 57).



Apart from the fact that this imagined conversation comes to show Dorothy's disturbed mind, it also manifests her struggle with ingrained modes of thought which limit her freedom to judge situations from her own adult perspective. Like a small girl she still depends on her parents' moral judgement on her decision on who to relate to socially.

The only member of the Jones family who seems to have escaped this pervading influence is Sheila who is described as sustaining the Labour Party and as refusing to press charges against her Indian assailant on the grounds that she fears the police will submit the man to illegal pressure:

...what's going to happen to him when you lot get hold of him? Accidentally fall over and bang his head in the cell, will he? Or by some mysterious process will his belt find its way around his neck? I know what happens to young blacks in police cells. You just can't wait, can you? (*DS* 223)

Immediately afterwards, Sheila ironically comments that this is the way the police use "to teach them to respect the law" (*DS* 224). Sheila's words inevitably connect in the reader's mind with the inhuman treatment that Gabriel and Said receive in prison and corresponds with another incident in which a policeman is involved. Once Gabriel is released, Katherine (with the best intentions) asks a policeman she knows "pretty well" (*DS* 148) to give him a drive to the next town to escape the attention of the journalists. During that short way the man treats Gabriel roughly, speaks to him as if he were guilty of the crime of which he had been suspected and in general terms subjects him to such handling that Gabriel becomes convinced "that the man intended to beat him, or take him to a place where a group of his friends would be waiting to kill him" (*DS* 149). Fortunately, Gabriel is wrong about the man's intentions although there is no justification for the policeman's behaviour except for racial prejudice.

Another secondary line of plot that confirms the general atmosphere of discrimination of difference is offered by incidents in the life of Mahmood, Dorothy's Indian lover who, in spite of his initiative and willingness to work hard, finds that prejudice and intolerance makes life in England very difficult. His first independent business is a restaurant where he suffers the disrespectful treatment of his customers:

The sight of fat-bellied Englishmen and their slatterns rolling into The Khyber Pass after the pubs had closed, calling him Ranjit or Baboo or Swamp Boy, and using poppadoms as Frisbees, and demanding lager, and vomiting in his sinks, and threatening him with his own knives and their beery breath, and bellowing for mini-cabs and food that they were too drunk to see had already arrived on the table in front of them, was causing Mahmood to turn prematurely grey. (*DS* 179-180)

Although on the advice of his wife he eventually decides to leave the restaurant business to set up a newsagent's shop, he is soon to discover that the situation is not any better in this activity:

I have been thinking that I should take my chance and drive a mini-cab rather than suffer all this newsagent business by myself. In fact, this England is crazy. I go in the streets and after all these years in this country they tell me, 'You're mother fucks dogs.' Why does my mother fuck dogs? They do not know my mother. In my home there is problems. Out on the street there is problems. (*DS* 228)

Mahmood's situation as an immigrant, the same as Solomon's, is very hard since he can neither find a place in the new land where he will be accepted on equal terms or go back to his own place of origin and re-insert himself.

While racial discrimination makes of the foreigner Gabriel/Solomon an utter, irreducible other within the British community, Dorothy, a native to the islands, and of the same colour as her neighbours, feels as isolated and cut off from them as her friend the stranger. The figure of Dorothy fulfils a discursive function in *A Distant Shore* as a counterpart to that of Solomon and is probably the strongest assertion in the novel against a patriarchal and racist society since her destiny signals that the ideological components of the society in which the characters are immersed lead to the destruction not only of the strangers but also of those who belong to its inner circle. As a British middle-class citizen who enjoys the privileged status of an intellectual, we would expect her to be well adjusted and a full member of her society. However, she is as isolated and alienated as her counterpart, a new-comer from the depths of black Africa. The inevitable comparison between the two characters, equally alienated although for different reasons and socio-historical circumstances and similarly destined to a tragic end shows the depth and broadness of the evil personal consequences to which the weakest members of such perverse systems are exposed.

Dorothy Jones, as well as her sister Sheila, is the victim of a racist and patriarchal environment well represented by the figure of their parents. Both father and mother share discriminatory beliefs which they hand down to Dorothy and which Sheila resists in her characteristic rebellious way to the extreme of refusing to press charges against a black assailant on the grounds of police brutality (*DS* 226). Sheila is ready to defend the robber who has attacked her to save him from police discrimination. The father is a bully, a man who believes he has all the answers and is always in the right. As Dorothy says, toning down the implications of her statement: “Dad wasn’t the type to take kindly to disagreement” (*DS* 9). This fact together with his misogynist attitude, which he expresses openly (“...he didn’t believe in good women, only women who

lived under the influence of good men” *DS* 23) make home life difficult. He resents having two daughters and no son (*DS* 9), the opinion of his wife counts for little and his daughters feel that he behaves as if he owned them (*DS* 31). The girls are slighted to the point of objectification, an attitude that becomes so extreme as to lead the father to molest his daughter Sheila sexually. When the girl reacts by leaving home and breaking all connection with both her parents, they feel forsaken and insulted. They can tolerate no degree of independence from their daughters. Although the mother sides with Sheila (the novel leaves the character of the mother in the shadow and gives no clue about the extent to which she is aware of her husband’s behaviour towards her daughter), she is not strong enough to impose herself and eventually retreats into solitude and silence (*DS* 9, 10, 23). Although Dorothy escapes her mother’s destiny of life submission to a brutally domineering husband, the relentlessly patriarchal society to which she belongs slowly pushes her to the verge until she falls into the abyss of alienation.

Parts 1, 3 and 5 of the novel, narrated from Dorothy Jones’s perspective recount repeated instances of personal isolation in circumstances of social interaction. In Part 1, although she has moved to Stoneleigh with the hope to start a new life as a retired teacher in peaceful surroundings, she feels an “interloper” (*DS* 25) who comes to disturb a pattern in the traditional society of Weston. She feels that the inhabitants of Stoneleigh do not belong in Weston: “Those of us from Stoneleigh, the small group of extras who live up the hill, have yet to be given our parts. We’re still strangers to each other, let alone to the other villagers” (*DS* 12). She also knows, through Carla’s mother (*DS* 21) that people see her as alien and talk about her the same as they do about her black friend Solomon (*DS* 35). As the local pub landlord tells her about some former local dwellers, the villagers will not accept a person who keeps to herself: “you know what it’s like, you’ve got to make an effort”. Dorothy’s thoughts as a response to this

comment show her inclination to isolation and her fear of exposure: “I’m glad that I live in a cul-de-sac. There’s something safe about a cul-de-sac” (*DS* 9). A similar situation arises with Sally, the young Head of English at Dorothy’s school who makes the comment that other teachers criticize Dorothy on account of her tendency to isolation: “It’s just that I know you’ve never been much of a mixer, but these days you seem to keep yourself to yourself. As if you’re too grand for everybody, but I know that’s not how you really feel. It’s just what some people are saying” (*DS* 201). Sally is concerned about her and is trying to help by becoming more intimate with Dorothy. However, the older woman is not ready to drop her defences and accept the offer of friendship with the corresponding compromise. She prefers detachment as shown by her refusal to become a member of the leisure centre and her choice of a “temporary arrangement” (*DS* 200). The building of barriers to keep others at a distance becomes a constant in Dorothy and we see the effects of this behaviour by the end of the story (which in the peculiar temporal arrangement of this piece of narrative coincides with the beginning of the novel) when Mrs Lawson (*DS* 19-21) comes to speak to her about Carla’s piano lessons. Although Carla’s mother, probably urged by the lack of time, is perhaps too straightforward about her observation that Dorothy needs help because of her lack of concentration and generally strange behaviour, there is little doubt that she intends to help. Dorothy, scarcely aware of her own mental state, is outraged by Mrs Lawson’s words. The reader, however, will later read that her mental dispersion has already been noticed by her class at school (*DS* 188).

At this stage in the development of the plot, we learn that she is so isolated that she can spend weeks without having a real conversation with anybody (*DS* 50), that she fabulates about her sister Sheila being alive although she has been dead for some time, and that her psychological troubles also include elements of paranoia. As she strolls in

Weston with the purpose of becoming acquainted with the village, she feels accosted by unfriendliness: "People stared at me like I had the mark of Cain on my forehead" (*DS* 6). Her difficulty to make contact with others causes social awkwardness and general unease around her. Surprisingly, she seems conscious of this weakness when she observes it in others as is well illustrated by her thoughts about Solomon: "I want to tell him that in England you have to become a part of the neighbourhood. Say hello to people. Go to church. Introduce kids to their new school. You can't just turn up and start washing your car. People will consider you to be ignorant and stand-offish" (*DS* 14-15). This comment reveals her understanding of the commonality of their experience in spite of the difference in personal and social situation. The two protagonists share a common destiny; they are the scapegoats of a hostile environment, intolerant of the weak and different. The above quotation also shows Dorothy's inadequacy to confront a problem she recognizes as her own. In opposition we observe Solomon's flexibility and courage as long as he makes greater efforts to overcome his isolation. The fact that he is willing to socialize is evident from his attempts to make contact with her as soon as he can surmise that he will not be bluntly rejected. Dorothy, on her part, is generally suspicious of other people's intentions towards her and avoids personal contact keeping relations at the formal level both with casual acquaintances and with those closer to her with whom she could have established affective contact.

The origin of Dorothy's difficulty to establish valuable and durable emotional commitments can be traced back to her miserable childhood. Her mother, unhappy in her own marriage, fails to express her love and to care about her daughters. There is a distance between the members of the family, which can be noticed in Dorothy's relationship with her sister. Sheila is perceived as her father's favourite (*DS* 61- 62) and this may have led to Dorothy's initial estrangement out of jealousy. When later on as a

young woman Sheila comes to her in search of understanding with the revelation that she has been sexually harassed by their father, her reaction is cold and detached and she shows no empathy: “I knew I should have made more effort to help her instead of just staring at her, but it wasn’t easy to hear what she had to say. I kept trying to get the conversation back onto more pleasant things...” (DS 61). Already at this early stage in her life (she is a young student at university), she shows signs of failure in her emotional development as well as a pathetically misdirected interpretation of her father’s attention to Sheila. Instead of sympathising with the horrible circumstances which her sister has undergone, and feeling relief at having been spared, she wonders whether her father loved her sister more than her since he had chosen to give Sheila special attention. This kind of reaction can only result from a totally distorted conception of the significance of the notion of love. This incident in the life of the sisters can be taken as the major sign of the malign effect of Dorothy’s upbringing in her emotional life since what we learn about her relations with other human beings from this moment on is marked by her incapacity to develop true love connections. When Sheila falls ill and is betrayed and forsaken by her lesbian lover, Dorothy stays with her and looks after her but they never come close to each other, never speak about anything that truly matters to them or give expression to their deep and troubling feelings. In general terms, coldness and detachment characterize the narrative sections focalized through the character of the female protagonist of the novel.

Part 3 of *A Distant Shore* includes the story of her relation with her husband Brian, which is described as “a liaison” she “endured” (DS 183) with a man “whom she had never truly loved” (DS 185). In a brief account of the breakage of her marriage, Dorothy reflects on what can be interpreted as her incapacity to make an emotional impact on the men in her life:

She quickly learned that Brian had absolutely no interest in her opinions, but by not answering back she allowed him to look through and beyond her, until he finally convinced himself that she did not exist. When Brian walked away, she too was convinced that he was walking away from nothing, and it hurt. (*DS* 177)

Brian's attitude towards Dorothy shows the typical situation of the woman within patriarchal systems. The absolute supremacy of the masculine position leads first to diminishing the role of the woman and then to the critical level of discounting any significant contribution from the devalued female figure. As a consequence of being repeatedly subjected to such treatment from very early in life, Dorothy comes to degrade herself to the status of "nothingness". During her marriage

[s]he silently endured too many years of his conversation in the form of monologues about the virtues of architecturally designed patios and breakfast bars, and the superiority of South African whites over French Chardonnay, conversations in which her opinions were never sought. (*DS* 176-177)

The exercise of personal devaluation to such extreme degrees undermines self-esteem and inspires the need to isolate oneself so as to avoid further exposure to suffering.

After being forsaken by her husband, she has liaisons with other men, all equally marked by the hierarchical duality that situates the woman on a secondary plane. In the first case she relates with a former colleague of her husband. In the account Dorothy offers of their short relation, the man is described as adopting a domineering and self-centred attitude (*DS* 175). Later she meets two other men, with whom she initiates a sexual connection as a way to escape the suffocating loneliness in which she is submerged: "...the quietness intensified and threatened to overwhelm her until she



noticed Mahmood". Once she spots him, she gives some thought to how to attract his attention: "All things considered, she planned her assault quite well" (*DS* 174). The lexical choices in the above utterances point to the spirit with which she embarks on these adventures. Her emotional deprivation is extreme and she feels the peremptory need to provide some variety to her otherwise tediously wearisome life. In fact when exchanging information with Mahmood about their past lives she realizes "that both stories seem unconcerned with the word 'love'" (*DS* 180). At first Dorothy makes an effort to include surprises and treats when her lover comes over to her house but soon their exchanges turn into a fixed routine in which pleasure and enjoyment do not seem to play a part as shown by the matter-of fact manner in which the narrative reflects their encounters: "These days their bodies separate with indifference and Mahmood is quick to give her his back" (*DS* 176) or "When he finishes, Mahmood rolls out of bed and steps quickly into his clothes" (*DS* 186). Her efforts to please and to establish an emotional relation that might save her from the pain of estrangement are unsuccessful and the sensation of being a depersonalized object of the other's desire becomes more acute: "Today she bore his weight and coquettishly wrapped one leg around him as though she wished to pull him deeper. But she did not; it was all show. A gesture to prevent her from feeling as though she was merely an object speared" (*DS* 176). The brutality of the expression that closes the above quotation reflects the utter objectification of the woman in the hands of man. When her lover eventually tires of her and turns his attention to his wife and his newly-born child, loneliness returns to overcome her:

Even when he went at her without any intimacy, she felt connected to something that existed beyond the narrow scope of her own predictable world. There was a stimulating confusion in her life which, with the

slamming of a phone, has once more become as unsatisfactory as an unopened suitcase on a single bed. (*DS* 192-193)

The barrenness of these relations degrades Dorothy; these occasional lovers come to fulfil the important function of stimulants to which she is becoming addicted. With Geoff Waverly, as with Mahmood, she acts with premeditation with the purpose of building and sustaining a relation. Instead of reacting spontaneously, she controls every move for a desired effect, still another sign of emotional alienation. This is observed in a scene where Geoff expresses his despair at a crisis in his marriage: “As much as she wants to go to him and slip an arm around his shoulders, she knows that she cannot. This is his misery. By respecting this she hopes that she will, of course, make herself necessary” (*DS* 206). Dorothy has never been treated with love. Coldness and detachment have been the traits of the atmosphere in which she has been brought up and educated, and the treatment she has received from her male adult partners in later life does not contribute to help her overcome her early love deprivation. As a result she has never learnt how to build warm affective links, how to nurse and sustain them. At the same time, the injury to her self-esteem that results from the patriarchal environment in which she has been raised and the discriminatory attitude of the men around her in adult life, lead her to feel that she is not worthy of love. As a consequence, she makes pathetic efforts first to gain the attention and then to retain connections with the men she encounters as a means to assuage the pain of failing to establish intimacy with them. This situation can be recognized in Dorothy’s response when Waverly tells her that he wants her out of his life: “...there is something comforting about hearing that they are finished, implying as it does that they were actually started” (*DS* 208). Through these words Dorothy is painfully showing her lack of confidence in her own capacity to be valued, cherished and loved. Equally telling are her pathetic attempts to retain her lovers

through phone calls, notes or personal visits, which persist even after the men express their wish to put an end to the relationship. The Indian Mahmood is more tolerant of her intrusions, probably because this was a way to impose himself responding to his ethnic chauvinism: “You can come back in whenever you like. I can control my wife. I am the man of this house” (*DS* 229). However, Geoff reacts differently; he is outraged and accuses her of harassment to the school authorities. This move ends up with an offer of early retirement as a way to avoid further confrontations especially since Waverly, a formerly supply teacher, will now become part of the school regular staff. Here the school authorities act out of selfishness and convenience and easily adapt to the general chauvinistic tendency of English society. They need a Geography teacher and can dispose of a music teacher. They then use the excuse of Waverly’s accusation to offer her early retirement. They do not truly give her the opportunity to defend her own case and they take Waverly’s accusations for granted.

Patriarchal cultures involve unjust dealings and mark immigrants and women as sharing the lot of the dispossessed. Devalued and rejected, they engross the numbers of the outcasts of society. The result of the school authorities’ move is to reinforce Dorothy’s tendency to isolation by estranging her from work and institutional life. Similarly to Solomon, rejected by his neighbours who do not want him as a caretaker at Stoneleigh, Dorothy is expelled by her fellows at school (*DS* 207). Both Solomon and Dorothy suffer consistent ill-treatment with the result that their capacity to judge external situations and other people’s intentions become compromised. It can be surmised that if Solomon had not been so consistently subjected to abuse, he would not have panicked as he did when accosted by the gang who eventually caused his death. As to Dorothy, the damage inflicted to her self-image and the cold and abusive treatment

suffered since childhood and through adulthood in a patriarchal environment lead to her alienation and eventual hospitalization.

At the end of the novel we find the female protagonist in a psychiatric clinic as a consequence of her incapacity to cope with ordinary, everyday life after an incident in the street where her reaction to a homeless leads to violence. Her alienation is mostly expressed by her inability to communicate, her unexpected reactions and the feeling of general purposelessness. We see her as incapable of making contact with people: neither her doctor nor her nurse or her former husband who comes on a visit. Objects and humans acquire similar status in her mind: “I won’t meet the eyes of the nurse. I prefer the flowers...” (*DS* 271) and looking at Brian she thinks that “He’s well past his sell-by date” (*DS* 275). When the doctor asks her: “So, Dorothy, tell me how things are?” with the obvious purpose of enquiring about her feelings and state of mind, she cannot think of anything personal to answer. However, as she knows she is expected to provide some response, she considers “...telling him that there’s a room near here where some of them play table tennis” (*DS* 272). Lovelessness marks all human contacts in her daily life: “we have to sit and eat off our trays, looking at each other and deciding whether or not we have anything to say to the person opposite who’s watching us gulp our food” (*DS* 273). Looking at her former husband she thinks “...that love has never stirred any kind of disorder in poor Brian’s lumpish heart”. The reader cannot fail to perceive the irony of this utterance which certainly reflects Dorothy’s own situation. While Brian pities her, she pities Brian (*DS* 275) and the reader pities both. During Brian’s visit, her silence is punctuated by sudden outbursts of laughter which frighten and disorient both him and the nurse until Dorothy becomes angry, reacts violently and has to be restrained.

Dorothy and Solomon are lonely people who stir their neighbours' antagonism. They live in a loveless world bereft of hope. Significantly, the church in the suburb of London where Dorothy goes in search of Sheila's assailant has been transformed into a disco (*DS* 233). Dorothy has always known that she cannot expect to find an answer in the beyond: she "had never looked for God, and now it was too late" (*DS* 214). As to Solomon, though he is inspired by a strict moral code and his two names bring biblical reminiscences, he does not rely on God but on his own resources, which in the context of the novel are pathetically limited. The few times that hope arises in their miserable lives, either because conditions improve or because optimistic plans come to mind the reader knows in anticipation that the situation cannot last or the projects cannot materialize. This is the case with Solomon's protected life with the kind Andersons or with Dorothy's dream of a new life of mutual understanding with her sister on the coast. The same may be said of the protagonists' hopes of starting a new life together. Solomon thinks that Dorothy is the woman to whom he might tell his story and then regain and redeem his past to become a whole man again (*DS* 266). Dorothy on her part imagines that she understands him (*DS* 237) and has a similar feeling about her new acquaintance: "I had a feeling that Solomon understood me" (*DS* 277). However, her limited experience of emotion, the result of her thwarted affective development leads her to make a fatal mistake. At the point when she finally finds someone who treats her with respect (*DS* 56) and wants to help her to understand what has happened to her (*DS* 29), she takes the wrong decision to go away out of fear that he might become a problem in her life (*DS* 40). With the excuse that she "just wanted to take up a bit more time so that Solomon would miss [her] even more" (*DS* 63), she packs and leaves for the coast. One might surmise that her presence in Stoneleigh could have prevented the gang's deadly intervention in Solomon's life but she misses this last chance of

producing a change in her dull, anesthetized routine. In spite of her alienation, there are brief moments in which she realizes she is “running away” and wonders whether she is not “going in the wrong direction” (*DS* 40). She can also truly and hopefully assess him as “my knight in shining armour with his polished chariot” (*DS* 17) and as “a man who could have made me happy” (*DS* 56). The verb tense used in the last quotation, appearing at a point in the story before Solomon’s demise dramatically points to the inevitable tragic end.

Simultaneously, and showing greater self-assurance than Dorothy in spite of his own weaknesses, Solomon is intent on seizing the opportunity to take a positive turn in his life; comparing himself to Mike, the Good Samaritan, he expresses his determination to make a plunge: “...I now know that whatever the price I will rescue this woman”. Unfortunately, circumstances do not allow him to fulfil his professed intentions. By the end of this tragic novel, one of the protagonist’s has been murdered and the other is submerged in madness as a way to deny the circumstances that surround her. What at the beginning of the novel can be seen as a tendency to isolation in the character of Dorothy turns into stark alienation by the end. Her life has never been easy but by the end of *A Distant Shore* the breach between her environment and herself has broadened to the point that acceptance and adaptation become impossible to attain. As she ponders on the opening lines of the novel: “England has changed. These days it’s difficult to tell who’s from around here and who’s not. Who belongs and who’s a stranger. It’s disturbing. It doesn’t feel right” (*DS* 3). Dorothy is lost: the world around her has changed so much that it has become almost unrecognizable. Although by the time Solomon is murdered, Dorothy is already mentally disturbed, his demise is a shock that shatters all possible hopes she might have held. This fact is shown by her decision to polish Solomon’s car at his door after his death (*DS* 55). With this moving reaction

she exposes herself in front of her neighbours, showing the typical lack of self-awareness which results from madness. Equally revealing is the hallucinatory scene that follows in which she holds a conversation with her parents at their tomb about her relationship with Solomon (*DS* 56).

The presence of two protagonists with stories that echo each other brings to mind T. S. Eliot's concept of "the objective correlative". According to the 20<sup>th</sup> Century poet and critic, this literary device is "[t]he only way of expressing emotion in the form of art". He defines the "objective correlative" as "a set of objects, a situation, a chain of events which shall be the formula of that *particular* emotion; such that when the external facts, which must terminate in sensory experience, are given, the emotion is immediately evoked" (92). In *A Distant Shore*, the cumulative recurrence of sensory perceptions that portray the despondency and sense of unease experienced by each of the protagonists creates a tragic atmosphere that pervades the whole producing the desired sense of verisimilitude. Simultaneously the echoes produced reverberate and multiply endlessly suggesting vastness and inclusiveness. The socio-cultural context in which the protagonists live offers countless opportunities for the evil effects of racism and patriarchy to manifest themselves and affect the life of the weakest.

*A Distant Shore* is a highly disrupted novel in its treatment of time. The use of autodiegetic narration in Part 1 focalized by the female protagonist favours temporal discontinuity as the story is unravelled following the character's mental associations. The section starts before the incident of Solomon's murder, pivots around it and ends after the same event. In the meantime, Dorothy's disturbed mind rambles about the present and the past with logical gaps and instances of incoherence that mirror the state of the character's mind. At the same time, some incidents are repeated with the addition of vital information to suggest the character's attempt at self-deception or avoidance of

confrontation with what causes pain. This is the procedure used by the narrative to give an account of Sheila's revelation that their father has abused her as a young girl. The first time Dorothy remembers the circumstances of their encounter in Manchester, she fails to mention this vital piece of information which is disclosed later in the novel. Part 2 is recounted by a heterodiegetic narrator focalized by a male character whom the reader does not recognize as the protagonist of Part 1 until the end of this part on page 170 when Gabriel renames himself Solomon on the verge of his new life in the North. This part is divided into subsections marked by blank spaces starting from Gabriel's days in jail and alternating with other subsections devoted to his past in Africa and his hazardous escape and journey to the English coast. Neither of these lines of plot exactly respects chronology as exemplified by the fact that it is not until subsection 10 that the reader learns of the circumstances of Gabriel's arrest. Part 3 retains the heterodiegetic narrator and is more coherent in its temporal arrangement retrieving Dorothy's past from her marriage to Sheila's death, her settlement in Stoneleigh and her first glimpse of Solomon. The focalization is now realized through Dorothy and the tone changes to introduce irony. This fact allows the necessary distance for the reader to hold doubts about the character's assessment of her own actions. Dorothy's slow process of alienation becomes clear in this way through the coexistence of a dual perspective. In comparison, Solomon's victimization becomes more potent, being expressed in powerful straightforward narrative pieces where the reader is a witness of his subjection to debasing discriminatory practices. In turn, the indictment of the chauvinistic trend in English society becomes more subtle, less direct in its treatment although the results are equally tragic in both instances of socio-cultural injustice.

In Part 4 of *A Distant Shore* the narrative returns to Solomon. Here we become acquainted with a late episode of his life in the North. From then on the piece



alternatively retrieves aspects of that past and narrates his present circumstances in Stoneleigh in a series of parallel subsections in his own voice. No irony is used in the parts devoted to the male protagonist with the corresponding effect of singleness of meaning and truthfulness, thus enhancing the effectiveness of the novel's exposure of British racism. The fourth subsection in this part is particularly significant in its capacity to resume central thematic aspects of the novel within its general frame of alternation of past and present. The piece is skilfully and poetically organized round pairs of opposites such as day/night, sunshine/rain, happiness/sadness, hope/despair and good/evil which metaphorically allude to the grounding confrontation between harmonious coexistence of difference and the violent banishment of the alien other. The next and last subsection of Part 4 metonymically refers to the optimistic anticipation of a better future in its description of a hopeful Solomon knocking on Dorothy's door. The image is infused with melancholy since the reader knows of the tragic end from the first pages in the novel. Part 5 is the last in the book and it is in the voice of an alienated Dorothy. It is constituted by a chronological account of her stay at the recovery clinic in three subsections separated by ellipses. Dorothy gives up trying to understand the world. Her senses and her mind are active but she refuses to communicate her meanings, an attitude that marks her as alienated since those around her fail to interpret her reactions. The recognition of her lack of confidence in the reliability of her environment is expressed by the last words in the novel: "I will ease myself out of this bed and proceed to put on my day face" (*DS* 277). At this point we know that Dorothy has lost all hope of establishing genuine, trustful connections with her environment. The way the story is told (with the use of gaps between scenes and abrupt, unaccounted changes) seems to act as an index of the tragic nature of human affairs due to the

impossibility of bridging gaps to avoid isolation and alienation, two central and recurrent themes in the novel that mark most of the human relations described.

The settings that constitute the background for the action in *A Distant Shore* are predominantly bleak, dark, poor or unkempt, thus contributing to the general feeling of depressive desolation. From the conditions in Solomon's country of origin and in the prison cell in London, to the presentation of the London sky "darkened like a bruise" (*DS* 156) in Part 2, to the details highlighted by Dorothy's gaze in the unwelcoming Weston (*DS* 7-193-198-235) and in London (*DS* 233) in the sections focalized by her, they all contribute to the creation of a particular atmosphere that corresponds to the heart-rending character of the whole. The novel is relentlessly tragic and marked by a gloomy determinism which imprisons its characters in an inescapable end. Phillips's use of time in *A Distant Shore* with its anticipation of the dreadful end does not allow the reader to sustain any hope of a different future: a more hopeful finale is unimaginable. This effect is enhanced by the exploitation of dramatic irony at several points in the development of the plot. Most prominent are the incidents in which first Dorothy and then Solomon are described as strolling by the canal where the male protagonist will eventually find his death. In Part 4 (in Solomon's voice), the protagonist is exercising by the canal: "I discover this water to be a most harmonious place, and it gives me pleasure to notice how the trees bend over the path so that the ground is striped with thin fingers of sunlight. But I know this vision cannot last for much longer..." (*DS* 250). By this time the reader already knows that this is the setting for the character's end. This fact makes the words especially significant and poignant since the character is right about his view of the future but in much deeper and tragic ways than he can surmise. The other instance in which the same setting is exploited is not properly a case of dramatic irony but of anticipation. When the novel starts Dorothy, just settled in her

new house in Stoneleigh, goes for a stroll along the canal. The lexis used to describe the place, the details highlighted and the general atmosphere of the incident anticipates the tragic end that will be introduced 35 pages later in the same part of the novel. Phrases including adjectives with negative connotation: “dank canal”, “murky strip of stagnant water”; details with deathly associations: “skeletal remains of a few barges”, “second dead fish floated by”, “bloated stomach gracelessly breaching the surface”; plus the feeling of threat experienced by the character: “people stared at me like I had the mark of Cain on my forehead” (*DS* 6) cannot fail to produce an effect on the reader so that the scene is later remembered in connection with Solomon’s murder.

The protagonists’ destiny is the ultimate result of the practices of a patriarchal society on its most vulnerable members. Women and immigrants, not belonging to the category of the centre in a society organized round hierarchical binary opposites, are prone to suffer the fate of innocent victims. The tragic development of events conveys the final message that such cultural systems leave profound and indelible marks on its members, prevents their normal emotional development and presents insurmountable barriers to adaptation for those who coming from alternative backgrounds choose to settle in its midst. Dorothy and Solomon are two solitary beings harrowed by memories of a sorrowful past and confronted with a bleak present of loneliness in a hostile environment. Solomon, the more self-aware of the two protagonists thinks: “I am a one-year-old man who walks with heavy steps. I am a man burdened with hidden history” (*DS* 266). Neither of the central characters can find the appropriate conditions to elaborate the heavy burden of the past. Both the semantic content of the novel and its form with its exploitation of the resources of the “plot of predestination” (Todorov 65) coincide in the presentation of the protagonists as submitted to an inescapable fate. This form of presentation with its close tying of the links between cause and effect and the

sense of inevitability that it provokes reflects an adherence to the modern perspective. The same may be said of the straightforward and truthful presentation of Gabriel/Solomon narrative which sustains the realist contract with its observance of mimesis in the portrayal of character and situations. Simultaneously, the extremely disjointed quality of the use of time and space in the novel corresponds to the postmodern perspective with its dissolution of the necessary links for internal coherence and its disruption of the linearity of history.

Like *The Nature of Blood*, the present novel simultaneously sustains and disrupts the modern view in a true postmodern twist. Concurrently, the lack of a centralized, objective perspective avoids concentration on a singular progressive line of plot, which can be equated to the univocity of modern history with its reliance on the view of the imperial victors. The voice of the oppressed is heard once more in a different continent and in a new century to show that the drama of discrimination persists, still claiming victims. The critique of the conception of identity as fixed and determined by territory with its implications of permanent marks of recognition that signal the other as forever alien allows for the classification of the novel as belonging to the postcolonial tradition. However, the message of the novel reaches further to develop a powerful indictment of patriarchy and a plea for a change in the conception of identity to avoid the risk of dehumanization in the form of misogyny and racism with their inevitable hatred and expulsion from the community of those who are classed as different. It is significant that *A Distant Shore* should condemn such practices in the field of education since cultural institutions are central in the process of avoiding discriminatory labels and their emotional influence on both the in-group and the out-group to favour tolerance in interethnic and inter-sexual relations within a global community. The political significance of novels such as *The Nature of Blood* and *A Distant Shore* lies in the fact

that voices like Eva's and Othello's or like Dorothy's and Solomon's can turn into powerful influences that might change the minds and hearts of those who sustain the impracticability of understanding in today's mixed societies and simultaneously help to redress the tragic destiny of women affected by the violence of patriarchy.

In both novels by Phillips we can identify parallel plot lines which serve both a thematic and a structural purpose. The characters and actions described deploy an underlying equation between patriarchy and racism as hegemonic situations which, although having a different origin, give rise to similarly negative reactions. In *The Nature of Blood* the interlacing of tragic stories of blacks and Jews highlights interconnections between their respective historical circumstances in the context of European ethnocentric practices and the story of Malka appears as the ground on which all the threads interlock. This is the way through which this fictional piece as an open-ended novel exposes the triple victimization the character is prone to suffer as Jew, female and black. In *A Distant Shore* only two of the parallel lines described above are dramatized through the stories of Solomon/Gabriel and Dorothy as symbolical representations of racial and gender discrimination. Although these different cases cannot and shouldn't be all classed under the same label since this would obliterate differences and avoid identification and specific treatment with the purpose of improving the conditions of the victims, Phillips's purpose seems to be to call attention to the similarity of their destiny and to the evil quality of all such prejudiced attitudes that lead to the negative evaluation of large groups of people in the context of Europe. The writer's interest in underprivileged minority groups and his exposure of the fact that "Western society" is "not a level playing field" (Phillips in Vinuesa) comes to show the commitment of postmodern fiction to fundamental issues that concern the global communities of today's world.

### 3.1.2. David Dabydeen's *Our Lady of Demerara*

Phillips's *The Nature of Blood* and *A Distant Shore* and Dabydeen's *Our Lady of Demerara* show common traits stemming from a shared ancestry and an aesthetic and ideological tradition in postcolonial and postmodern thought. The three novels evince a rejection of Enlightenment tenets such as a dualistic mode of thought and a tendency to sustain hierarchical classifications. They share a criticism of dogmatism and an indictment of the iniquities of imperial policies and they expose the ineffectiveness or limited capacity of hybridity as a path to tolerance.

A consistent thematic line that recognizes the existence of a strong ideological link between the Enlightenment philosophy, the principles of Newtonian science, imperial policies and the postulates of the realist construct underlies the extremely complicated and surreal structure of *Our Lady of Demerara*. Descartes' conception of a dual world in which the rational mind stands supreme over the materiality of the self and the world and enhances intellectual powers over other components of the psychic structure constitutes the fundamental basis on which the above ideological constructions are built. This idealistic position underscores the scientific mind and sustains the edifice of modern science on the basis of the application of the strict laws of deductive logic and the preservation of objectivity by policing the encroachment of emotional components. In the course of the 19<sup>th</sup> century, the same clarity of mind that guaranteed the truth of the discoveries of science and sustained the advancement of those nations that were ruled by its dictates was invoked to justify ethnocentric viewpoints. The argument ran that imperial governments had the moral duty to assist other, less privileged nations to achieve progress under their enlightened guidance. This line of argument, with its underlying assumption of a universal human nature, inevitably led to

unjustifiable discriminatory and exploitative practices under the surveillance of imperial superiority. The narrative of imperial history sustained a coherent, linear logic of human development from wilderness to civilization which partook of the assumptions of Newtonian science. Underlying both ideological constructions there was a will to classify and build hierarchies to sustain borders and divisions that resulted in discriminatory practices. Imperial policies relied on the superiority of the white race basing their arguments on the developments of science. At the end of the 18<sup>th</sup> century, the German biologist J.F. Blumenbach identified twenty eight types of humans derived from the biblical Adam as the white male Caucasian (he coined the descriptor) from which in the course of time other races degenerated through a process of miscegenation (Young 64-65).

The realist construct is not alien to the ideas expounded above. The rise and expansion of European empires diachronically coincides with those of the novel as a literary genre and both historical developments respond to a rational mentality. In terms of the exercise of power in human relations, these phenomena are connected since in both the subject manifests its drive to control and dominate. Mastery is as much the rule of Empire as it is of the realist writer. This allows Vera Kutzinski to affirm, interpreting William Harris's thought, that "struggles for narrative control are part of [the] foundational violence" of civilization. In the same way that dominant, conquering states strove to impose their cultural view of reality on their subjects as well as their interpretation of events in the narrative of a unique history, realist writers impose order on a naturally chaotic reality and sustain the univocality of omniscience with its totalitarian assumptions on their own narrative worlds. The ideological substratum of realist forms is a common-place of theory since Roland Barthes' (1957, 1964, and 1970) extensive treatment of the subject. Given these assumptions, Dabydeen, in consonance

with Wilson Harris (a strong influence in his work as he himself recognizes in the subtitle to Part I of *Our Lady of Demerara*), equates the conceptions of science and empire to that of literary realism. The attitudes and values underlying these ideological constructions are contested in Dabydeen's novel as much in its thematic content as through stylistic and structural features.

*Our Lady of Demerara* subverts the realist contract and its ideological presuppositions both at the level of semantics and in the narratological choices the novel proposes. In the semantics, there is disruption of the linearity of contiguity (in space, time and logic) since the setting alternates between Coventry, Guiana and Ireland and the plot lines are often retrospective, a fact that distorts historical linearity. In narrative style, the homogeneity of the single voice is avoided in preference for a highly unconventional form that defies easy de-codification. The novel is woven of a large number of stories of numerous characters inserted in the frame of four main pieces in the voice of homodiegetic narrators who take the word alternatively. Through its highly dialogic character, *Our Lady of Demerara* proposes to debunk the unitary, totalitarian view of realist omniscience and sustains the alternative value of the proliferation of limited perspectives with equal standing in a heterogeneous world. The four narrators introduced are interconnected by friendship or marriage but are pointedly different in cultural, social, religious and ethnic background: Lance (a thirty-year-old English journalist of low class origins), his wife (an amateur actress from a well-to-do environment and mixed Indian ancestry), Samaroo, (a Hindoo, a former soldier and present-day antique dealer who inspires Lance to initiate his quest journey to Guiana) and an unnamed Irish Catholic Priest (Lance's former school mate). This framing structure opens multiple analogical relations. Elizabeth's, Lance's and Samaroo's stories echo one another offering contrasting views of the same incidents and situations.



In this way, the limitations of the characters' perceptions are made evident while the absence of a centralized perspective allows for ambiguity and the dispersal of meaning. Samaroo sees Lance's quest in Guyana as a religious experience: "Lance had crawled out of the crevices of his old self to reveal a person struggling for wholeness and transfiguration" (*OLD* 112). Elizabeth's account strikes a remarkable contrast with this interpretation: "Lance's run off with some whore in Demerara"... "The letters strive after purity but beneath all the poetical flourishes there's only filth" (*OLD* 98); or in a more sober mood: "Such vindictiveness made me doubt the veracity of his description of Guyana" (*OLD* 96). As to Lance himself, before departure he thinks of his journey as having an "idealistic motive" (*OLD* 72) as aiming at removing him "from the scene of the grime" and at following the Priest on "his quest for a purified faith" (*OLD* 73). Later, and as if this counterpoint of voices were not diverse enough, Lance himself adds a comment which can awaken doubts in the reader's mind about the validity of his search: "You may say that I am suffering from sunstroke or gone mad with jungle fever" (*OLD* 98). Similarly, after his excursion in the Arawak village and encounter with Father Jenkins's tomb, Lance expresses his disbelief in his own capacity for redemption: "I would slink away from the Cross and grave as soon as I could, greeding for a whore and a corrupted mother" (*OLD* 110). In this way and from the opening pages of the novel, the text introduces the reader to multiple and simultaneous perspectives, a strategy which will be sustained throughout.

The absence of a unifying, judgemental point of view corresponds to a refusal to adhere to any hierarchical patterning of reality as well as to a denial of instrumental reason as a valid means to reveal the mysteries of life. Coincidentally, the plot line rejects the rule of legibility and coherence that would reflect similar qualities in the represented world. Consequently, the reader is left with many unanswered questions

among which two related issues appear as outstanding: the mystery of Corinne/Rohini's murder and the meaning of her unexplained re-appearance later in the novel under a different guise to die again, now of venereal disease. The presence of a variety of voices at different narrative levels, the multiple story lines marked by frequent analepses and outstanding loose ends mark the novel as highly disjointed. Although the lives of the different narrators are interconnected, certainty and closure are avoided as illusory and hence as unacceptable values in this postmodern fictional universe.

A certain semantic coherence is achieved in this otherwise sprawling piece by the insistent treatment of the theme of discrimination and the ensuing aggression that connects the numerous narratives and metanarratives. The novel rejects modern culture as manifested in its philosophy, its science and in its expressive- realist literature (Belsey 7), and asserts that such a conception of civilization reinforces the embodiment of violent behaviour. The discrimination of individuals as a disruptive form of social behaviour is traced back to the nineteenth century biological frame of mind. In the effort to encompass the whole of the natural world in its classificatory grid, the scientific impulse categorized and established hierarchies that went far beyond the domain of plants and animals to include the field of anthropology. Through the labelling and categorization of human beings, ethnology contributed to obliterate common humanity. Such a frame of mind played a central part in the institution of the Other as alien and/or dangerous and hence as liable to become the object of violent treatment.

In *Our Lady of Demerara* discriminatory violence is identified as underlying the Enlightenment inheritance in its scientific guise and simultaneously traced back to ancient Judeo-Christian traditions. In Father Harris's view, Father Wilson's scientific mentality finds its origins in the Jewish tradition of separation of the clean from the unclean as an extension of the dichotomy Jew/Gentile:

He [Father Harris] railed against the idea of ‘Chosen People’ and the separation of things into opposites. “Saved: Dammed. Jews: Gentiles. We: Them. Birds: Insects. Man: Fish. Every living creature divided from every other. I’d rather be a Hindoo than take on Father Wilson’s way of thinking. Deep down he’s a Semite, a versus man.” (*OLD* 229)

The above quotation brings echoes of Bauman’s (1987:120) <sup>9</sup>description of the attitude of the modern legislator. In both cases, the urge to classify and judge, with its tendency to discriminate through hierarchies, is recognized as a characteristic of the enlightened scientific mind. In Father Harris’s words, this position is further identified as the inheritance of the Jewish concept of the “Chosen People”. Still the same logic is recognized by Lance in the teachings of the Church as he envisages the Priest’s proceedings among the Arawak people: “He would have attempted to introduce them to the principles of Reason, explaining that there was only one God who had a definite plan for the universe and all that lived within it. Man/God. Son/Father. Whore/Virgin. Flesh/Word. Earth/Heaven. Sin/Salvation” (*OLD* 106). This mentality, with its reliance on binary oppositions and the creation of barriers and staunch defences between groups, has proved inimical to sympathetic understanding, a tolerant attitude and the acceptance of alternative modes of organizing experience.

The novel identifies a similar discriminatory attitude in the social violence exercised upon those who are marked as different and therefore inferior in poignant examples of the subjection of colonials, women and children. The helplessness of infancy is portrayed in the incident of Elizabeth’s abortion (“The baby would have been a hindrance, I was glad I had it killed” *OLD* 44) as well as in the Church’s interpretation

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<sup>9</sup> See page 13 in the present work.

of child malformation as signs of the devil (*OLD* 156) exemplified by the violent treatment the Idiot boy receives from his neighbours and from the priests in the Irish convent. As to gender violence, this appears as most significant in Rohini's murder: the young girl is ferociously beaten, raped and drowned. This shocking criminal act remains unaccounted for and reverberates in the reader's mind as a cry in the dark. Gender abuse is also present in the story of Corinne who expresses the indignity of her situation in the hands of men with the image of animal branding: "I used to lie there with the question howling within me, like a calf he had pressed to the ground, trussed up its legs and burned with hot iron" (*OLD* 269). The situation of women and colonial subjects has often been shown as parallel by contemporary theorists (Ashcroft 31-32; Loomba 151-172). Both social groups are placed at a disadvantage and suffer the consequences of unequal distribution of power. This relation can be identified in *Our Lady of Demerara* in the story of Corinne and her mother, both of whom are submitted to the abuse of a Marquess whose fortune derives from a colonial slave plantation. Under cover of his sex and superior social and economic standing, he subjects both female characters to coercion and rape and robs Corinne's father of all honour eventually causing his death.

The critique of imperialism is also patent in Lance's experience in Guyana. Here the character learns about the history of the place and expresses his disapproval of imperial practices which, in their violence and expropriation, can be assimilated to an act of rape. The imperial thirst for mastery and conquest found no limit in human sacrifice:

The English had shipped over Africans as slaves and worked them to the bone in their plantations. Then, short of labour, the English had imported countless coolies from India. The planters set Africans against Indian, Indian against African, the English excelling at the training of

fighting dogs....The jungle was as unruly as it was vast, hundreds of thousands had to be sacrificed in the effort to tame it. Only a murderous heart and a mechanical will could bring success to such an enterprise. And the bush would muffle the sounds of the killings, making them more bearable. (*OLD* 82)

However, Lance's position is not as straightforward as this section of his narrative seems to show. In spite of his apparent open-mindedness, he discriminates his wife on her ancestry: Elizabeth's great-grandmother was Indian, one of the many to be shipped by the British "from India to Demerara, to work in the canefields" (*OLD* 9). This detail points in the direction of calling attention on English people's discriminatory tendencies. The latter are also made manifest in the treatment Samaroo receives in England. Although both he and his father have served as loyal subjects of the British Empire, Samaroo is discriminated on account of his religion and his ethnic origins. It should also be added that discriminatory practices are not the sole prerogative of English characters, on the contrary it seems to be a widespread attitude among the characters in the novel: the Guianese/Indian Manu calls the black who haunt his shop "savages" and "niggers" (*OLD* 83) and treats them accordingly; Father Harris shows his prejudices against both Jews and Germans and the priests in the Catholic convent in Ireland use the white/black dichotomy to represent good and evil in their iconography in a semiotic gesture that symbolizes their negative response to "colour".

Either open violence or lovelessness features as central thematic motif in the narrative lines in *Our Lady of Demerara*. The hybrid quality of the world the protagonists inhabit, with the presence of Pakistani, black African, Jewish, Guyanese, English, Irish and mixed inheritance characters, does not favour a capacity for acceptance of difference as exemplified by the tone of the relations that mark the

fictional environment. Neither Lance nor Elizabeth or Samaroo shows a capacity for love. The relations they establish are mostly marked by convenience or self-interest. The marriage of Lance and Elizabeth, for example, is based on mutual sexual satisfaction rather than on any durable emotional bond. Elizabeth refers to its failure with the words: “My marriage to Lance was bogus and fated to come to a rapid end” (*OLD* 55). As to Lance, he dismisses her from his life equally perfunctorily with a few unremarkable lines followed by a description of the way in which he accommodates to his new situation by resuming his habit of touring the red light district of Coventry, now that Beth is no longer around. The only exception to this emotional aridity is to be found in the Priest. Patience, charity, empathy and a wish to learn from his mentor mark the personality of this young man who is not graced with a name in the novel. At the service of others, he avoids centrality to the point of receiving no patronymic as form of identification. A life of deprivation and discipline in an environment bereft of love, however, has not embittered him. He is affected by others (his grandfather, Lance, Father Harris, Corinne) and responds generously to their needs. The difference between Lance and the Priest as to emotional investment in human relations is shown by their respective reactions to each other in later life. Lance was a strong influence during the Priest’s childhood and later on in his youth, the former remains a presence in his mind (back from Guyana, it is his image that inspires the Priest to start writing the account of his life with Father Harris). Lance, on the other hand, seems to have no memory of his ex-friend to judge by his complete absence from Lance’s own account in his section of the novel. Not even his absorption in the careful study of the Priest’s documents triggers the memory of his childhood friend. This fact may be a semiotic gesture pointing at his self-centred nature. Restricted perceptiveness could also account for the wrong

inference that the Priest had “doubted the depth of his Christian faith” (*OLD* 109) during his journey to Guiana, a fact which is not validated by the Priest’s own story.

The opposition between thematic fields pointing to the violence implied by the forceful imposition of absolute truths on the one hand and to the possibility of reconciliation and connectivity on the other is echoed in paratextual relations that contribute to a multiplicity of lines of signification. The front page to the first part of the novel is semiotically and semantically significant. The title “Abortions (The Old Testament)” is followed by the subtitle “‘The Infinite Rehearsal’ (Wilson Harris)” and accompanied by two epigraphs. The negative connotations of the title refer not only to the actual abortion of Elizabeth’s and Lance’s child but also to the several failed attempts to redeem the past as seen in Samaroo’s failure to help Rohini emerge from her childhood of wretchedness and brutality and in Lance’s doubtful success in redeeming himself through his exploration of the Priest’s mission in Guiana. The efforts to understand the past and to redeem its wrongs from an empathetic stand remain unfulfilled as suggested by their outcome and by the simultaneous presence of contradictory interpretations by the characters involved and by those around them. The subtitle brings in the intertext of Wilson Harris’s novels as well as his conception of the universe. In consonance with *Dabydeen*, Harris equates literary realism and the imperial perspective. At the same time, the subtitle “Infinite Rehearsal” is an allusion to Harris’s novel of the same title where he expresses his belief in the need to re-read and re-create ancient classical myths and to combine them with Amerindian equivalents to overcome the limitations of Cartesian logic by drawing cross-cultural parallels in the search for answers to the mystery of life. The re-interpretation of ancient myths leads to the conclusion that there is always another answer, a different possibility. Harris sustains that history is not static or permanent; there is always the prospect of discovering a

different angle or point of view (Camboni and Fazzini 57-58). Harris's concerns are present in Dabydeen's novel in the inclusion of multiple cultural perspectives (Christian, Hindu, and Arawak) with their peculiar answers to fundamental existential questions. However, the superposition of diverse perspectives does not result in Harrison's expected broadness of vision. Except for a feeling of curiosity and surprise at their alien habits, Lance's encounter with the Arawaks does not contribute to broaden his mind. The natives' cleanliness, industry, orderly social organization and capacity for peaceful co-existence shame the dirty, slothful, lawless and corrupt existence in Rajah's supposedly "civilized" outpost in the jungle. The history of Mariella Settlement is clear evidence of the brutality of supposedly "civilized" cultures. Back in time the outpost was a "thriving" Arawak village which was "set upon by a gang of Spanish explorers and burnt to the ground". After persecution and extermination of the few Arawaks who managed to escape, "the Spaniards...made [the village] into a base camp from which to launch raids upon other Amerindian communities along the river" (OLD 80). Although Lance acknowledged that Rajah's conception of the natives as "sleepy and slothful" (OLD 104) was mistaken, he still judged them as superstitious and wild. Lance was unaware of the irony that underlay his account of his experience in Guyana. He empathized with the Priest's shock at "the horror" (OLD 109) of Father Jenkins's murder by the Arawaks without taking into account the vivid image in the reader's mind of so many atrocities mentioned in the novel as perpetuated by the "Enlightened Europeans" both in the historical past and in the present of the narrative. Apart from the above-mentioned Spanish raids, the text refers to the English, French and Dutch responsibility for the slave trade (OLD 95), to the British repression of Malayan insurgents (OLD 51) as well as to the massacre produced by the "savage war" (OLD 109) that raged in Europe simultaneous with the development of Part 2 of *Our Lady of*



*Demerara*. Lance's perspective remains biased by ethnocentrism in spite of evidence that disproves the superiority of his European ancestry.

Retaking our analysis of the paratextual relations between the title and the subtitle of the first part of *Our Lady of Demerara*, we can observe that the formal parallelism between the utterances "The Old Testament" and "Wilson Harris" is a sign of semantic analogy: positional similarity highlights their contrary meanings; the former points to the origin of the foundational myth for the Judeo-Christian civilization, while the latter indicates a revisionary perspective which aims at wholeness through the transformative encounter of opposites. Even if the old testament (inscribed in larger font) is still predominant, Harris's quantum fiction, in its attempt at re-living the historical past from a present-day perspective can offer a viable alternative to readers alert to transtextual allusions in spite of Lance's narrowness of vision.

The epigraphs chosen as a sequel to the titles of Part 1 reinforce their implications as well as those of the content of the section. Edward Jenkins and Benjamin Rogers, two representatives of the imperial power in America are called forth to contribute with their views.

Amerindian and Hindoo Beliefs in the sudden abduction/disappearance of people, and their reincarnations in apparently different and unconnected forms and personalities, challenge our Christian expectations of the linear, the stable, the steady and reasonable development of plot and character, the logic of Divine Plan which is the sure journeying to death and salvation/damnation.

Edward Jenkins, social reformer in British Guiana, c.1869

Amerindians! Don't mention those crazy people to me! You ask them something and they start to tell you, then they break off in the middle and tell you something else. The second thing they tell you is meant to have some connection to the first thing, but to my ears it is completely different.

Benjamin Rogers, English missionary, c.1895, in a letter to his wife in London, shortly before being killed and cannibalised by Amerindians.

(*OLD 2*)

The ideas expressed by Jenkins and Rogers, two representatives of the imperial frame of mind, betray the writers' ethnocentric positions. They both delineate a dualistic outlook in which the European takes pre-eminence over the Amerindian in the oppositions Saved/Damned, Reasonable/Mad. Their inflexibility in the approach to difference marks them as incapable to bridge gaps and build connections between apparent incompatibilities to achieve a hybrid common ground. The writers remain entrenched in a position of absolute certainty which can only build insurmountable barriers. Apart from attitudinal aspects, the authors of the epigraphs establish a further dialogical connection in their staunch defence of Aristotelian logic. Jenkins (whose surname inevitably brings to mind Father Jenkins, one of the many echoes the novel proposes) elaborates further on the discrepancies between cultures by ascribing a Christian origin to linear logic. Once again, the opposition refers to alternative modes of making sense of existential tenets. Together with respect for contiguities in space and time as a way to conceive of one's life, Christianity upholds stability in its conception of identity on the grounds of its belief in an immortal soul. The latter principle results in trust in a solid identity, which is denied by "Amerindian and Hindoo Beliefs" (*OLD 2*). In clear antagonism to the 19<sup>th</sup> century opinions expressed by the epigraphs, the novel presents

us with puzzling characterization, which offers an alternative conception of identity as unstable, changeable and unaccountable. The same unaccountability we face in the Corinne/Rohini story is to be noticed in the presentation of a good number of other characters in the novel, most notably Lance, one of the protagonists and narrators. Although there are many mysteries in his life (one of the most potent probably being the novel's ambiguity as to his possible responsibility in Rohini's murder), the central puzzle is how to assess his moral standing and the outcome of his experience in Guyana. The use of different perspectives, of blanks in the plot line and of unstable irony, does not allow the reader to stand on firm ground in the judgment of this character's attitudes and actions. Samaroo's confused reaction to Lance can be equated to the reader's perplexity:

So where does that leave Lance, if I can put it so crassly? A Tile Hill man gone native, a born again pagan ending his days among Demerara madonnas and Arawak whores? One of the hundreds of thousands of white adventurers and lost souls from Walter Raleigh onward, whose bones were destined for the mandibles of jungle insects? Or a man of his word, a man of His Word, at the beginning of his life of cleansed flesh? (*OLD* 112)

Equally mysterious are the lives of the two Alices (why the same name? the same person? A mirror image?): Beth's servant and Father Harris's protégé turned into housekeeper and secretary. The women are equally generous, efficient and loyal and share a tendency to silence (one is dumb, the other speaks very little) which contributes to the mystery of their past and present lives. Other characters in the text (mirroring the position of the reader) find it impossible to make sense of their personalities or of their behaviour, most obviously of their sudden disappearances and re-appearances. The

characters' lives do not respond to a stable essence but are the result of chance and inscrutable personal choices.

Paratextual relations also offer their contribution to general meaning in Part 2 of the novel. The title to this section is "Reincarnations (The New Testament)". Once again, the device of structural parallelism allows us to draw a line of oppositions between the titles of both parts in which "abortions" can be opposed to "reincarnations" and "old testament" to "new testament". In Part 2, Dabydeen is directing the reader's interpretation towards a more positive outcome, a new hopeful birth with the presence of Jesus and his promise of forgiveness. Correspondingly, the epigraph in the voice of Robert Southey sounds a hopeful note: "Go, little Brook; in faith I send thee forth" (*OLD* 115). The presence of the word faith in this context should not stand unnoticed: it marks a metonymic relation with the section it precedes in the voice of the pious priest and a metaphorical relation of opposition to the heavy insistence on reason and reasonableness in the epigraphs that accompany Part 1. Apart from the above semantic aspects, other gestures semiotically point in a similar direction. The Priest's narrative is the only one that stands alone and that establishes no relations of counter-validation with the other homodiegetic accounts in the novel. This particular use of multi-vocality confers greater credibility and authority on his account. Like dogma or the scriptures, this section is self-validating and stands on faith. In spite of these faint hints of a more positive attitude, the Priest's section is as sombre as Part 1 of the novel featuring innumerable instances of profound suffering and damaging violence.

Within the Priest's narrative, there is still another semantic element that highlights the novel's indictment of the modes of thought of the Enlightenment inheritance, simultaneously standing as an index of a possible alternative. Father Harris instructs his pupil in a hermeneutics that breaks with the classical tradition: "we have to

learn to read and write in new ways”, he tells him, and presses him into “reading the Bible bizarrely, seeking connections between arbitrary passages marked by the beginning and finale of worm-holes. Of course nothing made sense, but that was the point according to Father Harris” (*OLD* 225-226). His method is based on inspiration and creativity rather than on the application of logic and the respect for the rules of language (“Write *disobediently* he commanded” *OLD* 225). He attempted a different mode to unravel the infinite mystery of God’s creation in which “All are bound together in *one* process of living, immeasurably various as it is” (*OLD* 216). Father Harris’s message of oneness in the midst of diversity to be achieved through myth, faith and imagination sounds a very different note from the writings of the 19th century British social reformers and missionaries (Edward Jenkins and Benjamin Rogers) and from Lance’s interpretation of the Priest’s proselytising of the local inhabitants of Guiana. An alternative form of knowledge is proposed that stands in clear contrast to that of the rational inheritance that underlies the realist contract. According to Barthes (in White 1992:54) the realist narrative is the main instrument through which society models a narcissistic conscience into a form of subjectivity capable of assuming social responsibility. Realist narrative teaches orderly behaviour governed by laws as well as notions of development in time and of subjective integrity. This is a learning process that creates the illusion of a conscience capable of seeing the world, apprehending its structure and processes and representing them as being endowed with the formal coherence that characterizes narrative itself. The hall of mirrors thus created is the trap of ideology, the same ideological construct that marks the policies of dominance in science and empire. Dabydeen’s novel breaks with these false images by shattering the rules of realism through time and space dislocation, the presence of non-sequiturs, and open structures and the superposition of narrators and narrative lines. The numerous

fractures thus produced invite the readers to follow Father Harrison's advice to read in response to personal inspiration creating one's own worm's path through the text. The rejection of canonical forms of representation fosters diversity of reaction as well as of criteria to judge the validity of diverse modes of thought and behaviour.

Multivocality also underlies the figure of the mysterious palimpsest originating in the Priest, re-inscribed by Lance and read by Samaroo and Elizabeth. Affected by the unquenchable thirst of a soul lost in the desert of spiritual and emotional emptiness, Lance launches on a backward-looking, archaeological search in pursuit of humanistic values irredeemably lost. Samaroo's gift of the Priest's manuscript becomes the perfect excuse to fly to Guiana, the scene of the Priest's and Father Jenkins's past life and to re-live their experience and transform himself in the process with the aim to recover the lost purity of soul ("... I... would subject myself to the alchemy of writing, hoping for some means of renewal, some fulfilment of potential or else a complete transformation of self" *OLD* 94). This transformation would be achieved through the magic of the word. Although Samaroo seems convinced, after reading Lance's novel/autobiography, of the success of his transfiguration, Elizabeth remains sceptical. On the other hand, the reader, who has access to very few lines of Lance's manuscript through Elizabeth's reading, is provided with no clues of this transformation. On the contrary, there are signs of his incapacity to shun the base instincts which spur his guilt as we see in the recurrent insertion of the phrase, "I could tell from the way her dress clung to her body that she wore no undergarment" (*OLD* 103, 110). Given the fact that he claimed to have travelled to Guiana to clean himself of dirty sex, and that he had found in the Arawak woman his "guide and spirit and intuition" (*OLD* 98), the repeated reference to her flesh below the dress is a sign of his obsession. The doubtful nature of Lance's achievement is one more of the many failures that mark both the main plot and the innumerable

stories inserted in the major argumentative line. *Our Lady of Demerara* is a definitely dark and sombre novel, looking back on past evil and expressing pessimism about future achievement as a consequence of the dismemberment of the enlightened subject. Hopelessness at humanity's capacity to establish a fruitful hybrid culture with the contribution of varied ethnic and religious strands is another of the recurrent messages that the novel manifests.

Although both Phillips and Dabydeen offer hints of alternative modes of perception and organization of reality to canonical responses, their main concern lies in the indictment of ancient modes of thought that are foundational to Western civilization and have proved to have exhausted their usefulness as univocal tools to achieve social welfare. Their usability is now determined by our acceptance of the restriction of their application. In Dominic Dubois's words that sum up Wilson Harris's position, Western Man needs to "free himself from the shackles of realism, from the sovereignty of violence, from the vanity of conquest..." (202).

### 3.1.3. Fred D'Aguiar's *Bethany Bettany*

“...la magia es la coronación o la pesadilla de lo causal, no su contradicción...”

Jorge Luis Borges “El arte narrativo y la magia”(269).

Fred D'Aguiar's *Bethany Bettany*, as much as Phillips's *The Nature of Blood*, *A Distant Shore* and Dabydeen's *Our Lady of Demerara*, is a novel that can be framed as postcolonial writing and whose epistemological assumptions refer to the postulates of postmodernist fiction. However, and in opposition to the novels of his contemporaries Dabydeen and Phillips, D'Aguiar chooses to align his work to the principles of magical realism. This movement can be associated to poststructuralist tenets although it has a different origin and history. In consonance with Postcolonialism and Postmodernism, magical realism opposes imperialism as a policy that philosophically sustains dogmatic forms of knowledge and binary thinking. Latin American writers such as Alejo Carpentier and Gabriel García Márquez found in magical realism a form of expression that was amenable to the rejection of ideas originating in the Enlightenment philosophy. However, and in spite of its geopolitical origin, magical realism has become globalized because of its basic epistemological assimilation to contemporary modes of thought. In a comprehensive summary, Anne Legerfeldt (2000:2) traces the history of this contemporary style:

Hailed as Latin America's “authentic expression” (Flores 1955:192), the mode was for a long time treated as an exclusively Latin American phenomenon, engendered directly by the continent's “marvellous” nature, history and culture.

This “Americanist” interpretation of magic realism, amply criticized as “territorialization of the imaginary” (Chanady 1995:131) and



a “geopolitical fallacy” (Wilson 1995:223), was in time expanded to what might be called the “postcolonialist” interpretation, according to which the mode’s characteristic fusion of realistic and fantastic elements originates in the material reality not only of Latin America, but of the postcolonial situation *per se*, which is likewise characterized by the co-existence of irreconcilable opposites, i.e. a dominant rational-scientific “Western” and a marginalized mythical “native” world view.

Although the essentialist position sustained by Alejo Carpentier (104) who ascertains that the marvellous real “is encountered in its raw state, latent and omnipresent, in all that is Latin America” is generally rejected today, it is true that the mode accurately expresses the exuberance and the vitality of the continent and that it has been often seen as a manifestation of Latin American struggles for cultural affirmation. The postcolonial connotations of magical realism stem from its hybrid quality since it aims at portraying a complex locale which comprises as much the conquerors as the conquered with their respective cultural forms. This comprehensive multiplicity and its interest in detailed descriptions of specific socio-geographic settings emphasize rather than obliterate the localization of the narrative in specific historical circumstances. This fact, together with the interest in tracing genealogies and mythologies has led to the consideration of this mode as a new form of historical fiction. These novels use the overall background of real places and historical situations to ground their narratives on the real as a way to anchor the reader in the external world: “magic realist fiction characteristically hitches itself to a megastory to give itself a realistic veneer” (Hegerfeldt 2005: 74).

*Bethany Bettany* recreates aspects of the atmosphere of Guyana in the after-independence period and although the novel is purposely vague about political issues, the characters are involved in tumultuous public affairs which suggest historical events.

In 1968 a coalition government headed by Prime Minister Forbes Burnham, with the support of foreign powers successfully rigged elections to remain in power and keep their political opponent, Marxist Cheddi Jagan out of government (<http://www.guyana.org>). The widespread corruption generated by this incident together with the strong feelings of dissent that arose between different factions and their respective adherents within the general population are reflected in the novel in the episode in which the male members of the Abrahams family burn the school to show their disagreement with the Headmaster's political ideas. Simultaneously, political dissidence causes a split in the family as the child-protagonist's (hereafter identified as BB) mother and grandfather choose to participate actively in a faction the rest of the Abrahams oppose. Other historical circumstances that find their reflection in D'Aguiar's novel are the numerous frontier conflicts that Guyana has confronted in the course of its young life to the point that Cedric L. Joseph considers foreign encroachment to be "a persistent threat" even today. Friction with neighbouring countries has long beset the country: from colonial times with Suriname and since the second half of the 19<sup>th</sup> century with Venezuela. In *Bethany Bettany*, a boundary issue leads the imaginary Caribbean nation to take arms against a neighbouring country. Within the framework of such allusions which connect the fictional world with historical reality, however, magical realism offers inexplicable events, which cannot be easily dismissed as fantasies, hallucinations or dreams and which form part of the plot or the description of the characters. This fact is interpreted as a subversive gesture, a way to contest the scientific rationality that governs the modus operandi of the centres of power and which led to the disparagement of local cultures as imperfect because alien and other in the opposition civilization/barbarism.

Magical realism, however, is not reduced to the development of postcolonial issues. The widespread popularity of the postcolonial theme in literary writing has contributed to the equally widespread application of magic realism as a form of representation in contemporary fiction since its basic postulates are shared by broader postmodern interests. By this means the form has become central to many contemporary fictional works round the world. Magical realist and postmodern fiction share a prominent feature: a general questioning of traditional historiography and of the realist paradigm as heirs to the Enlightenment mentality. The challenge to mimesis, shared by both “post” views, is here expressed in the inclusion of alternative modes of understanding reality. The irresolvable opposition between rational and mythical modes of thought has beset human philosophical enquiries through the centuries but became more evident and poignant in the dramatic encounter of civilizations that the imperial enterprise represented. Linguists and philosophers have attempted interpretations of these two basic modes of making sense of the world. Roman Jakobson interprets them in terms of the different rationale of the rhetorical figures of metaphor and metonymy as paradigmatic discursive practices and considers the opposition so central that he ascertains that “the dichotomy ... appears to be of primal significance and consequence for all verbal behaviour and for human behaviour in general” (Jakobson 59). From the field of philosophy, Charles Taylor in his essay “Language and Human Nature” traces the opposition as unavoidable human mechanisms by which we make sense of the world. He differentiates between expressive and designative modes of meaning and signals their different conceptions of language as the central issue that places them on opposite sides of a divide. Coinciding with Jakobson’s metonymic mode, the designative position is identified as the heir to the Enlightenment philosophy with its reliance on logical thought and clarity of expression. For the designative view, language

is an instrument that allows us to name and point to what exists avoiding ambiguity and vagueness that obscure meaning. One- to- one correspondence between signifier and signified and between sign and referent must be preserved while objectivity stands as a primary quality. The language of science (history included) tends towards the achievement of these aims and stands as the paradigmatic form of designative meaning. Simultaneously, and in agreement with Jakobson's definition of the logic of metonymy, the equivalent in the field of literature is the work of the realist who philosophically partakes of the preoccupations of the scientist. The expressivist mode, on the other hand, implies the manifestation of meaning in the sense of making something obvious, available for all to see. Taylor describes this form as less direct, more partial, fragmentary and enigmatic than the designative and as a form of meaning more arduous to define since it eschews the application of traditional logic. For those who sustain the designative theory meaning is unpuzzling, a simple vehicle or instrument of expression. For the expressivist, on the other hand, language remains mysterious since it is not possible to separate the thing expressed from the means to express it. We cannot break this kind of message into parts and attribute meaning to each as we do with words in their designative use. Meaning is here illusive and suggestive, ambiguous and uncertain as corresponds to metaphor or the logic of analogy in Jakobson's theory. At the same time, while the designative attitude implies objectivity, subjectivity is unavoidable for the expressivist: "Expression is the power of a subject; and expressions *manifest* things, and hence essentially refer us to subjects for whom these things can be manifest" (107). Jakobson and Taylor, from different, though closely allied sciences (Linguistics or Stylistics and the Philosophy of Language) arrive at similar conclusions. Both study culture, language, and ultimately also the operations of the mind in relation to a dichotomy that is central to the human spirit. Taylor explains that the war between

expressivists and designators can lead to no resolution since he recognizes in human nature the coexistence of two opposing and “contradictory metaphysical demands: for the clarity and control offered by an objective account of ourselves and our world, on the one hand, and towards a recognition of the intrinsic, irreducible nature of expression on the other” (130). We are preys to the contradictory demands exercised by the modern (enlightened) and the postmodern inheritance and we struggle in Taylor’s terms “with polemical fervor into opposing parties”. The issue is of absolute centrality since it concerns according to Taylor “the nature of man, or what it is to be human” (131).

In the framework of this discussion, magical realism can make a significant contribution since it comes to enact the co-existence of both, apparently contradictory and inalienable forms frequently expressed within the vast arena of the postmodern debate in terms of the oppositions Western/non-Western, history/fiction, realism/myth, and reason/faith. Without completely flouting the rational frame that marked the Enlightened West, magical realism subverts it from within by including other forms of grasping reality and striving for meaningful expression. A preoccupation with ways of meaning-making inevitably leads to probing in the field of acquisition of knowledge. The issue is central to contemporary theorization of alternative apprehensions of the world in gender studies (Feminist, Gay and Lesbian Theory), postcolonial studies (alternative conceptions of the world by locals or natives) and postmodern studies (alternatives to modern empiricist-rational knowledge). In consonance with the above, magical realism relativizes the significance of hegemonic approaches by sustaining that no single mode can by itself cover the multiplicity and the intrinsic mystery of human experience. In this respect, magical realism brings echoes of modern physics since the latter introduces answers as to the way the world works which are alien to our everyday, common-sense perception of physical phenomena. If the world is as strange as

Einstein suggests, we can equally accept the proposals of these narrative accounts that contradict our learnt forms of understanding experience. The coexistence of two forms of knowledge (empiricist-rationalist and mythical) which have traditionally been assessed as exclusive and irreconcilable creates an inevitable tension in magical realist texts. This fact is clearly manifested in the oxymoron that the very name of the movement represents. By subverting the realist paradigm from within, the novels in this tradition come to express the postmodern questioning of the realist paradigm as normative; alternatively ascertaining that it is historically contingent and culture-based; as Warner (14) says: “The truth claims of causality are seen as contingent on consensus, founded on language, and driven by discourse about reality rather than reality itself”.

In its simultaneous presentation of mythical and realist-historical situations as equally valid, magical realism highlights the constructedness of all meaning and debunks the opposition *mythos/logos* as one more mythical and hence ideological position. Both literary realism and traditional historiography with its belief in facts and transcendent objectivity come to be questioned as defective projects because of their objectionable adherence to unaccounted ideological origins. In this direction, magical realism makes a further contribution to the criticism of the Enlightenment tenets through the exposure of its ethical failings as expressed by the unspeakable aftermath of the Holocaust. The mode has been related to this historical issue because in both cases we can identify the material realization of the “unthinkable”. The sense of experiencing a fantastic reality, of “living in a chaotic, merciless, and inhumanly cruel place” (Hegerfeldt 2005:60) is as much a characteristic of the above-mentioned historical event as of the fictional reality described by many novels in the magical realist mode. In both, reality is altogether disproportionate and ungraspable. In the fictional universe, however, “the reader knows quite well – or at least suspects – that these apparently so

incredible elements or events actually correspond to (historical) events in the extratextual world, or easily could” (Hegerfeldt 2000:77).

D’Aguiar’s *Bethany Bettany* can be read within the theoretical postulates described above in terms of its juxtaposition of heterogeneous discourses and its refusal to propose a hierarchy between them. The novel offers magical, fairy-tale aspects which remain baffling in terms of rational or psychological explanations (such as the central character’s extraordinary capacity to heal or her ability to flatten her body and slip under doors or to become invisible) side by side with extremely realistic sections. The conventions of naturalism, understood as a revised form of realism, become patent in the novel. The French Naturalists, writing at the end of the nineteenth century worked on the basis of realistic fiction. Their aim was to clean the realist novel of all vestiges of romanticism by sustaining a rigorously objective perspective and by feeling free to include in their narratives the most brutal and seedy aspects of life. A similar attitude can be ascribed to D’Aguiar in his treatment of specific aspects of this novel. There is a refusal to fall into sentimentality, a readiness to deal openly with the sordid and the rough, and an almost scientific accuracy in the approach to description. The child-protagonist, whose double name gives its title to the novel, is repeatedly submitted to physical punishment by the members of the Abrahams family, and occasionally by the school Headmaster. These incidents are portrayed in minute detail and naturalistic style as to highlight verisimilitude. Equally realistic is the account of the abuse the girl suffers in the hands of her aunts and the priest when Aunt the Slap summons him to “beat the devil in her” (*BB* 138). The child is submitted to the ignominy of being forced to show her private body parts for inspection in search of signs of the presence of the devil. She feels sick, irredeemably damaged and doomed. In her fright, her bladder opens and she sits in her urine to her further humiliation (*BB* 143). Such descriptions

serve the double purpose of highlighting the heroine's victimization, and of intensifying the sensation of extreme vividness. The latter is the case in the nearly three-page long description of the girl's bike race holding on to a speeding truck while she strives to eat the fruit she keeps in her pocket. To achieve this feat she alternatively uses his leg to steer the wheel while using her hand to retrieve the food. Every single movement she performs to achieve her purpose is minutely recorded with the precision of a scientific experiment until by the fraction of a second she fails to hold on to the truck and the vehicle escapes her grasp. The report does not seem to be justified unless it is there to magnify the opposition between the vividness and accuracy of realism and the sense of a wonderful, other-world atmosphere of the alternative magical touches found in the narrative.

As Hegerfeldt (2005: 51) sustains, magical realism shows a preference for "exaggeration and excess, a 'baroque' or 'generally extravagant, carnivalesque style'". These traits are found in the legendary character of the grandfather's disappearance as well as in his wife's self-imposed and unremitting seclusion after that event. Both episodes are hyperbolic and disproportioned in their absolute relentlessness especially if one thinks that, as BB's bike adventure later shows, the elder Abrahams was to be found not so far away in the nearby jungle border. The older Abrahams, though, are not the only mythical characters. The general atmosphere of the novel is evocative of the fairy tale. Like Cinderella the central character is a parentless girl, reared in a hostile environment, deprived of love, proper feeding and clothing, forced to work in the house beyond the strength of her age, and regularly and unaccountably punished. Hungry and dressed in rags, she is also denied all the treats that her cousins, like all normal children enjoy. Her daily life becomes a nightmare from the moment her parents' marriage starts to drift towards its end. Like so many other parentless children in traditional fairy tales,



our protagonist is for practical purposes an orphan. After her father's death her mother leaves her under the care of aunts and uncles on her father's side and she becomes the scapegoat of their hatred towards her mother whom they consider responsible for their brother's death. She is isolated, persecuted and systematically discriminated in the midst of her many cousins who mirror their parents' hostile behaviour towards her. Her situation is best expressed by the character's own description in the first chapter of the novel: "My mother drops me off here like a parcel and continues on her journey. She leaves me with her eucalyptus smell. No-one wants me" (*BB* 4). The fact that she looks like her mother becomes an ineradicable and tragic mark: "The sign I carry by virtue of the arrangement of my skin, flesh and bones, all replicas of my mother's, says REPRISALS HERE and the adults in the house oblige" (*BB* 5-6). The fairy-like element is present here in the extremity of the situations depicted and the unremitting cruelty exercised upon the central character. Simultaneously and on another plane, the resemblance with the situation of the Jews under fascist persecution is here made evident: she is equally stigmatized and defenceless and the butt of unspeakable violence. She is trapped and this circumstance is portrayed in her recurrent dream (*BB* 55- 74- 159- 220) where she is after a figure she can identify as protective: her mother, her father or her grandfather who happens to have a letter by her father addressed to her which she trusts will help her understand her tragic destiny. The setting for the first dream is a huge building full of narrow, endless corridors along which she runs to evade a jab, a cutlass, or a spit (all nominalizations of violent actions through which her relatives victimize her). Barriers materialize in front of her and block her way. She has no hope of escape since the doors along the corridors are all locked. No kind presence sustains her and her only relief comes from absence: "And the nothing that greets me helps me to breathe again, and the something or someone that did not meet me makes

me tense for the next twist in the corridor” (BB 55). Any type of human presence implies a threat of extreme danger. Waking up, however, does not imply escape or safety as shown by the incident that follows this dream. What happens to her that morning comes only to confirm the fact that her waking life partakes of the quality of her dream. As she feels hungry when she wakes up, she runs to a nearby bakery that gives out a delicious smell and where her cousins often get the benefit of “free samples” (BB 67). Her illusions of a delicious treat, however, are shattered by the derisive laughter of the baker who sets his ferocious dogs against her. Her dress is torn to rags and her skin barely escapes their teeth. Generally persecuted and now hunted down by dogs she expresses her despair: “No hiding place for me, no refuge, exists for me” (BB 59) and later “Dogs bark my name” (BB 60). Her confining situation is evoked by the lexical choices in this chapter: the word “*corridors*” features on the first line as a remaining figment of the previous night’s dream. Then BB describes the action of getting up: “I *unfurl* my bones *folded* all night in the *closet*”<sup>10</sup>. The limitations of her life are both psychological (no love or support) and physical (no bed and little food). The restraint and denial of a generally hostile environment are also marked by the prominent repetition of the lexemes “door”, “gate” “fence” and “razor grass” and by the image of the child hopefully standing at the entrance of the bakery, symbolically waiting to be finally accepted: “With years behind me of being told I do not belong to the household I stand at the threshold of gaining an independent witness who will by his recognition of me and my name corroborate my birthright” (BB 59). But the advantage of belonging to the Abrahams family will be, once again, denied to her. The logic of analogy plays an important role in the similarities and dissimilarities that can be drawn between these two

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<sup>10</sup> Emphasis added.

successive chapters that correspondingly represent the workings of imagination and the experience of the senses, dream and wakefulness, nightmare and cruel actuality.

The most notable of such analogical relations of opposition in *Bethany Bettany* is to be found between the shockingly naturalist accounts of the cruel punishment inflicted on the protagonist and the fantastic incidents that follow each of such occurrences. The central character has a peculiar ability that allows her to flatten herself and slip under doors in a state of invisibility to observe her victimizers in their most intimate moments. This experience has the power to heal her wounds and help her survive the innumerable beatings she suffers. This phenomenon, which has no logical explanation, is neither denied nor confirmed by the narrative. Authorial reticence, through avoidance of heterodiegesis produces hesitation and irresolvable ambiguity. The story is recounted by a counterpoint of voices: all the characters in the fictional world have at least one chapter focalized through its perspective giving priority to BB and to her mother (38 chapters from the child's perspective - 26 as Bettany, 8 as Bethany, 4 as Bethany Bettany - and 8 chapters from Mother's perspective). While the Headmaster voices his disbelief of the child's assertion that she is victimized by her relatives on the evidence that she shows no signs of mistreatment on her body, his view is the only one in this direction. The absence of objective authorial assessment leaves the situation unresolved and as a consequence, there is no means to decide upon the epistemological uncertainty in reference to the choice between magical and logical modes of approach to reality. Although the novel presents a multiplicity of perspectives, there is a preference for the voice of the central character. The protagonist is a particularly good choice to represent the magical mode since according to Piaget as read by Hegerfeld (2000:72) children have a form of thought that accepts the fantastic as part of everyday reality. Simultaneously, it is a characteristic of magical realism that it opts

for “a marginalized, peripheral or “‘ex-centric’ point of view” (Hegerfeldt 2000:70) as a way to symbolize the outlook of the oppressed. In this way the mode stands as an alternative to central, hegemonic rational perspectives. There is no doubt that as an abused child, BB very well represents the perspective of the oppressed. Furthermore, being the central character not only a child but specifically a girl, there is a further contribution to the voice of the margins in the symbolical figure of women as excluded others. The parallel activation of alternative modes of thought that characterizes magical realism can be easily equated to Dale Spender’s conceptualization of women’s capacity to operate within two epistemological positions concurrently. According to this feminist theorist, men have traditionally focused reality through the narrow perspective of “tunnel vision” (97). Women, on the other hand, though reared and educated in this hegemonic way, have separately developed their own, more flexible approach, less restricted by the application of logic and more adaptable to the acceptance of contradiction. Their view of reality is described as “multidimensional” since they can simultaneously activate both outlooks on reality. This situation may be compared to the position in which BB stands: she is educated within scientific rationalism but her own personal response to experience shows awareness of an alternative that compensates for the one-sidedness of the rational. In consonance with the proposals of magical realism, the character of the protagonist can adhere at the same time to the logic of metaphor and to that of metonymy (Jakobson) or to the expressive and the designative (Taylor) without establishing hierarchies between them. The pattern elevated to the position of supreme by the Enlightenment philosophy is thus contested by alternative modes of knowing reality posed as equally valid such as narrative or myth as suggested by Lyotard and Wilshire. There is an incident in the novel that clearly exemplifies the classical philosophical dilemma about opposite conceptions of “reality”: is reality built

of solid materiality that can be perceived and subjected to proof or does it partake of the quality of a mental construction? This question is posed by the novel in a variety of ways but most potently in a chapter narrated by the child-protagonist (*BB* 108-112). In her state of invisibility, the girl discovers her Kind Aunt's husband committing adultery with one of his sisters-in-law. A moment later, back into her normal child's body, BB sees her Kind Aunt on the point of opening her bedroom door and finding out the act of infidelity. To protect her, the protagonist shouts that there is a scorpion in a corner. Her aunt follows her, sees the scorpion, feels it drop towards her face, and avoids it with a quick movement. In the meantime, the man is alerted and the girl's stratagem is successful in protecting her pregnant aunt from unveiling a liaison she vaguely suspects. BB's thought "I wonder how I made her see that scorpion" (*BB* 112) very simply summarizes a question that idealists and realists have debated through the centuries. The fact that magical realism shows an interest in issues of knowledge leads Legerfeldt (2000:73) to see this style as "a quasi anthropological or sociological inquiry into the workings of the human mind".

While the central character in *Bethany Bettany* represents the position of a hybrid response to knowledge, the Headmaster adheres to the rational alternative. According to Hegerfeldt (2000: 74-75) this is one of the methods used by magical realism to represent scientific thought and discourse: "in the form of characters who rely on a rational-scientific world view". The Headmaster of the school the protagonist attends shows a certain inclination to resort to local forms of knowledge as when he uses a creation aborigine myth to make an impact on his pupils' mind (*BB* 48). However, the influence of his British classical education has instilled the ideals of the rational mind as seen in his arguments expressed in the first chapter of the novel narrated in his voice: "My school...brought the idea of reason into the countryside in an

attempt to replace an ingrained superstition that governed all practices and impeded progress” (*BB* 20). One can hardly fail to recognize the voice of the Empire in the Headmaster’s words: the illuminated mind from the centre of power coming to supplant local backward ways. The same may be said of his assessment of Guyana as “less a country and more a shared jungle” (*BB* 21) where we can perceive the downgrading of the local wilderness conceived of as barbarity and observed from the heights of civilization and culture. Similarly, his reaction to the Abrahams children’s mischievous squabble (*BB* 166-167) shows his discriminatory view in the use of the epithets “barbarians, cave dwellers” and “primates” to describe his pupils while his lengthy argument in defence of physical punishment based on Western historical and biblical tradition confirms him in a mode of thought which is alien to flexibility, empathy and mutual understanding. If it was wrong of the children to resort to violence to settle an argument, it is equally noxious to resort to the same means and in such a disproportionate manner to “educate” those in the wrong. Rather than a form of education, his reaction implies the enforced subjection of the other who is not recognized as equally human and capable of rational thought:

...as the lashes sting the child and the arms of the adult tire there is this passing of knowledge between the two souls involved. This lightning and thunder exchange, between enlightened and knowing adult and unenlightened and unknowing child, saves the child from adult doom and despair. The only drawback may be that the child cannot see the exchange happens for his own good. But is this not a symptom of ignorance and blindness? The blindness of being uninitiated, the kind of blindness where the scales over the eyes need to be removed to result in true sight. (*BB* 172)

The repeated use of lexical items in the semantic field of “enlightenment” cannot be overlooked as a random choice in this context. The Headmaster’s words bring to mind similar pieces within the discourse of Empire where the colonizer finds justification for inhuman dealings with those under subjection in his high civilizing mission as exemplified by Sir Garnett Wolsey’s lines:

The more one associates with the African Negro, the stronger becomes the impression that he is no more suited to stand alone than a white child would be. Until he learns to do voluntarily his share of daily work in this great domain which God has ordered man to till and cultivate, it is in my opinion better for the Negro and for the world that he should learn discipline under an enlightened but very strict master. (qtd. in Gilroy 2006:47)

Brutality as a means to instil the correct form of behaviour or reaction is equally present in both excerpts and in both situations the other is deprived of the recognition of the rational capacity to understand unless chastised. Intolerance of the other is also noticeable in the Headmaster’s arguments in the exchange with the protagonist before punishment is inflicted on the children. His assertions are marked by absolute certainty: “Of this you can be sure. There is no doubt” (*BB* 174), a form of reaction that typifies bigotry and the incapacity to see the other side of an argument. This is precisely what the Headmaster cannot do in the course of his conversation with the girl (*BB* 168-176) during which the child’s questions and comments tentatively and helplessly point in the direction of contesting the unquestionable rightness and the ethical grounds for violence.

In spite of the fact that the Headmaster proclaims his patriotic intention to help build the nation and that he calls on the young “to dream this country into being” (*BB*

191), his methods do not contribute to imagine a form of being that will mark the new country as different and fairer than the colonized land recently left behind. His philosophical position is well illustrated by the Cartesian phrase “Cogito. Ergo Sum” inscribed above his door in his town dwelling (*BB* 227). The use of disembodied reason as the only valuable means to make sense of reality and its application to interpersonal and intercultural situations shows his adherence to a mode of thought inherited from the so-much resisted imperial policy. Although the reader has no grounds to suspect the legitimacy of the Headmaster’s intentions to contribute to the building of his country’s identity, the novel seems to point in the direction of a criticism of instrumental rationality as restrictive and limited and in need of supplementation. As Warner resumes:

As a postcolonial response to colonialism’s often brutal enforcing of a selectively-conceived modernity, magical realism of this kind seeks to reclaim what has been lost: knowledge, values, traditions, ways of seeing, beliefs. In this model, the horizons of the causal paradigm are extended to include events and possibilities that would ordinarily be circumscribed.

(13)

The Headmaster’s attitude rather than contribute to achieving his proclaimed intention of national reconciliation, reinforces modes of behaviour learnt at the centre of power, the origin of intercultural hostility and imbalance in the application of imperial policies.

In fact, intolerance and strife mark the life of the characters in the novel both in the private and the public sphere in the classical opposition centre/periphery as applied to the binary opposites:

Empire/Former colony

Home Country/Neighbouring Country



White/Black

Man/ woman

Husband/wife

All the above issues manifest themselves in the narrative either openly or as underlying currents of meanings that sustain assumptions. Although the novel does not deal with Guiana's previous connection with the British Empire, the force of the original link is understood in the incipient struggles of the new nation to establish a stable government, in the internal political strife as well as in the precarious economic conditions that beset Guiana now that the country has gained independence. The relation between the nations is also made manifest in the conflicting situations experimented by Lionel Abrahams and his family as immigrants in London. Concurrently, the black/white dichotomy appears both openly in the incident of the racist manifestation in London and covertly in the protagonist's feeling that her aunts tend to reject her rather dark-tinted skin. In this way a weave of relations interconnect the personal lives of the characters and the socio-historical circumstances in which they evolve.

In the private sphere, the marriages described, as shown paradigmatically by BB's parents' own marriage, are marked by disloyalty and betrayal as well as by disunion (overt in the latter case and in the grandparents' marriage and covert in all the others). Mutual passion at the start of the protagonist's parents' married life seemed to promise a harmonious future. However, the experience of diaspora during their residence in London implies a level of fear and uncertainty which contribute to loosen the emotional ties. The encounter with a different culture in the diasporic situation of the immigrant can lead to contradictory reactions according to Van Leeuwen. The subject confronted with difference can feel positively attracted by "unfamiliar worlds

that [he] cannot fully comprehend and manipulate” (149) or, alternatively, the feeling of being excluded and rejected by the majority in the alien environment may lead to the feeling of an acute threat to their integrity (147). In the latter case, “the stranger faces a brutal world, with no familiar logic or meaning” (154). BB’s mother cannot tolerate the feeling of dehumanization created by fascist repulsion of the black community in a manifestation in London. This extreme reaction contributes to alienation from her husband who reads this incident as minor and as destined to no future in a democratic society. Lionel is more integrated in English society and ready to compromise. He assesses the situation as a minor incident which cannot affect their temporary stay in England. He sustains that “the country carried a minority of ignorant people who were afraid of what they knew nothing about and rather than find out about that strange thing they reacted by casting aspersions on it” (*BB* 301). Greater self-confidence on the basis of his reliance on the fact that the British government has summoned him to work on the river Thames, allows him to sustain his self-esteem in adverse circumstances. His wife, however, refuses any argument that might contradict her enraged response to fascism. Disagreement on this level only comes to fuel other more personal misunderstandings that lead to the breakdown of communication within their marriage. BB’s mother shows equally passionate intransigence in her reactions to marital discord. As the girl says, “...my mother... never admitted doing anything wrong in her life” (*BB* 296). Her stubborn righteousness finally leads to the split of the marriage, her husband’s suicide and to psychological wounds in her daughter who struggles with a split personality symbolically present in her double name. The irresolvable hostility between her parents remains within her and is reinforced by the aggressive atmosphere in which she is brought up.

In the public sphere, the protagonist's mother later becomes the leader of a Guyanese insurgent movement who opposes the local government and she takes up a traditional male role in sustaining a war to defend a border which could make no difference whatsoever to the people except in the sense of leading to the death and maiming of the young among whom her daughter's only friend Fly is to be counted. The absurdity of the war is well accounted for by Aunt Ethel:

The idea made me stop eating and look around me and really search the place for a sign of a new country but all I could see was water, pointed hills and green valleys. There was not a shred of evidence of one or other country's border. That was what the two countries were fighting over. And though no politician would ever admit it, the plantain man has in fact lost his powerful legs for a line that no one can see and for water that cannot be divided. (*BB* 212)

Although the protagonist's mother escapes the fate of the woman as secondary to man in the patriarchal order by taking a position of authority, she does so only to confirm strategies that have been traditionally used by the male and proved conducive to an inhuman world of violence and injustice.

Borders as symbolical markers of irreconcilable binary opposites are present in D'Aguiar's novel from its very title: the noun phrase Bethany Bettany marks the confrontation that constitutes the central character as a subject of language. The protagonist's confusion arises from her parents' unresolved conflict: "School make me write my name one way, home another. My mother prefers the school way, so I am told, while my father, the home side. I like both. I belong to both" (*BB* 281). As a little child she feels possessed by her mother as a response to her relatives' identification of mother and child: "This body belongs to a grown woman who killed a powerful man and sent

her young self into the viper's nest to live among his blood relatives" (*BB* 150). Imitating her aunts' and uncles' statements about her, she expresses her dual nature using the alienating third person to speak about herself: "But the child is merely a shell housing an evil woman's spirit" (*BB* 53). The utter debasement of her self leads to lack of self-assurance and to a painful stutter that accompanies her until adolescence. Her "blood is poisoned" (*BB* 205) both by the presence of a darker tint (*BB* 3) and by the imprint of her mother on her. The only aunt that is kinder to her expresses the wish that in the future the part of her father in her will be made manifest (*BB* 54). The influence of her relatives is strong and oppressive and she realizes she has to free herself from it:

I convince myself if I get away from the house then the jumbled pieces of my mother and father associated with it will sort themselves into two neat compartments, one for each of them, and I can approach each and take from it what I will as I do my father's sarcophagus. (*BB* 113)

The strife that splits her into two gives her no respite; she is the spoil of a personal war that has roots in diaspora, immigration and the confrontation of cultures and races. London is the setting of the parents' confrontation. It is here where their dissimilar response to discrimination ignites the flame of personal animosity (*BB* 257-258). *BB* dreams of harmony as she strives to reconcile the contradictory halves in her: "I wish for a pair of wings, with or without powder. And someone to fly with me, preferably my mother or father, ideally both. But not this neither of them near me, this solo way of being me, this always wishing for what I do not have, and the best thing for me, the best I can do is wish, watch and wait" (*BB* 148). As she grows up, her Kind Aunt recognizes her father's courage in her and *BB* feels that: "A man who strikes a few brilliant poses takes up residence in me" (*BB* 158). From then on she identifies herself as an Abrahams and dreams of a reunion with her father (*BB* 220). This period of

alienation from the memory of her mother does not last long since on her first adult adventure, in her encounter with the soldiers in the jungle, she calls on both her parents to sustain her: “I ask the spirits of my mother and my father to set aside their differences and join hands on my behalf and help me with all their adult wisdom and strength” (*BB* 236).

The difficult process of constituting a personal identity is achieved in and through language. The individual resorts to available social models typically expressed in language and adapts them to his/her social situation. The use of language, especially in the form of self-accounts is considered a central way to make sense of oneself as inserted in a particular social situation (Stapleton 46). The protagonist of *Bethany Bettany*, finding no models to shape herself on in the hostile environment that surrounds her, resorts to her memory of her absent parents and develops a sense of herself in personal accounts that make up the bulk of the novel (38 chapters). Education is important for her [the Headmaster recognizes her aptitude and the vastness of her interests (*BB* 99)] and this fact is made patent in her use of school homework as a means to delineate possible answers to the many queries her situation poses (*BB* 195-197). The dictionary, a sacred text in the family, is the first obvious source of knowledge. As the girl works on Part 1 of her homework, the use of the dictionary leads to the term “punishments”, a concept tragically close to her experience, and then evolves into a chain as the words come “in ceaseless waves, endless steps, and proliferating bubbles” (*BB* 195). The 29-line list of words starting with “slap” and ending with “crucify” stand isolated on the page, proximity alone does not imply significance. The words will not cohere into meaning since no syntax will contain and shape them. Equally frustrating is her attempt to make sense of her emotional destitution in Part 2: lack of syntax implies there is no logic to either violence or lovelessness, a point she attempts to make in her

conversation with the Headmaster over the meaning of punishment (*BB* 168-176). Only when in her writing exercise she manages to leave her tragic past behind and tries her hand at imagining a different future can she encode her thoughts in coherent syntax. In poetic language she expresses her wish to escape her constricted environment: "Sweep me away from here. Set me down anywhere else" (*BB* 196). The use of metaphor allows the girl to fuse with her environment, becoming a feather or a raindrop and harmoniously merging with her surroundings as a way to shun divisions, borders and chasms. Being different, the odd one out is her tragic destiny in *Boundary* (a name that symbolically points to the dividing line between the protagonist and her relatives). In her imaginary flight she envisages an alternative situation: "...that's how I want to be – one raindrop like any other drop of rain, part of the crowd and therefore indistinguishable from any other part of it" (*BB* 196). In the last section of her homework, equally prolific in poetic imagery, she rejects suffering and the form of love she has been able to observe around her in her short life, a defective form of expression that brings more pain than pleasure.

The protagonist's passage into adulthood is symbolically marked by this exercise in personal inscription, to which is added first menstruation as the physical break into womanhood and a fit of yellow fever that she experiences as a long feverish night from which she awakens a new being ready to enter the adult world. Following the convention of fairy tales, her stammer disappears, her cousins give her a warm welcome, her aunts and uncles stop beating her and she becomes the centre of admiration and close attention. The end of the novel retains the characteristic blend of realism and fantasy that has been the trait of the whole. In a flash she is initiated into love, sex and death in her encounter with Fly and war. The last chapter is in her voice and leaves the reader in doubt about the *dénouement*. If the fairy tale aspects are taken

as fact, it can be ascertained that her wish of reunion with her mother finally comes true and that the taste of “citrus bestowed by the word love” (*BB* 311) will remain to sweeten BB’s life. However, a good number of hints in the novel seem to predict a different finale. The central character has suffered bombing, she believes she is dying (*BB* 310) and is on an operating table when her eyes close into unconsciousness. The general setting for the scene is war and her lover Fly has been dismembered by the bomb she escaped thanks to his protection. Can we still believe in fairy tales in this environment? Can we expect love to prevail over war? An affirmative answer would result in too easy a response, especially when the novel has consistently insisted on the prevalence of violence in the crude descriptions of inhuman physical and emotional suffering to which the central character has been subjected. Even if she awakens into life “after the doctors have patched [her] up” (*BB* 310) as her mother promises her, will she find that love she has been dreaming of fighting a war next to her mother and grandfather?

When the novel reaches its climax, the intensity of the contradictory emotions that the young protagonist feels are increasingly expressed in the language of analogy (metaphoric or expressive mode) as the character tries to spell the antagonistic experiences of sexual love and war. The latter is perceived in terms of disruption and annihilation of the senses: “In a war the rain burns, not freshens, and the light peels the skin rather than makes it glow”; “I stop smelling the sweet of wild flowers and the dankness of decomposing foliage and can only smell smoke” (*BB* 274); “...I am blind and deaf. I breathe but I cannot smell the forest...” (*BB* 284). When she visits the battle field with Fly, what she sees is a picture of Hell in which disorder is rampant both among men and in nature:

My head fills with that war valley with bodies of soldiers blown apart, picked off by snipers, men locked in hand-to-hand combat but unmoving, fixed in meting out death on each other, corpses lined up by roads waiting for collection, if lucky, and the smell of burning vegetation and the river choked with military debris, and wild animals fleeing the bombardment and flames. (*BB* 277)

When Fly is shelled darkness, as a symbol of absence and emptiness, envelops her: “I see him in a broken mirror, a mirror with pieces missing so that Fly is in pieces and parts of him are missing”; “There is less of the mirror than the blank spaces of its missing parts. I shut my eyes, squeeze my eyelids and the uniform darkness is a perfect mirror” (*BB* 282).

If war implies dismemberment, love is conceived in terms of union and oneness as when she imagines finally meeting her mother “One day my mother will be on a jet and another day my mother and me. We will cross the sky on sheets twisted and knotted together...” (276) or when she looks at her mother’s face and sees herself in it (*BB* 310). With Fly, the same experience of becoming one is described: “Fly? I know we lay in a tent. Maybe the fabric of that tent became skin – our joined skin without our bodies, the two of us clasped inside this new outer skin that we share” (*BB* 288) or “Fly’s tongue on mine makes our two tongues one. This is love’s speech, two tongues in one” (*BB* 307). Still sustaining the opposition between war and love, while one implies blankness and insensitiveness, the other means the intensification of the senses as is well illustrated by the following passage:

Where the sky ends, I imagine stars begin and something like love flowers in starlight. To reach that love I join with those stars and my skin spreads and thins into a sky with the stars and me inside that skin. I line up what



stars I find so that they spell love on my skin, into the unknown, sending their signal to the love hidden in the galaxies with each star as a launching pad for my call beyond my skin outwards into space to join Fly and find my mother. Tentacles of light radiate off my body, sky for skin, sent out to Fly with the stars on my side, from the biggest and brightest and hottest to the faintest and smallest, the firefly I cupped in my hands to see the faint light emitted by it. My elastic sky: light sent out, love let in. (*BB* 306)

Love with its empowering force overruns the limitations of the body to signal towards infinity. Warmth, light and brightness replace the experience of darkness. Poetic language with its reliance on the logic of analogy, with its multiplicity of meanings is the appropriate medium to account for the intensification of the capacity of the senses and the achievement of fusion in love. Metaphor implies the logic of “both and”, of the encounter of parallel worlds, of the coexistence of the paradigm. In the fusion of meanings, oneness is achieved. This poetic world, however, does not seem to be possible except in dreams as the above quotation well exemplifies by the use of the term “imagine” on the first line. The world the novel evokes is a violent world, in which people seldom come together for very long as the paradigmatic example of the encounter of BB and Fly shows: like a lightening flash, the young peoples’ love shines only for a brief instant and loses itself in darkness.

*Bethany Bettany*, as a novel that activates the principles of magical realism places metonymic and metaphoric concepts side by side without prioritizing either and thus questioning the superiority of instrumental rationality as a form favoured by the centres of power in the context of Empire. Simultaneously, there is a questioning of the application of the rational-empiricist paradigm in the field of historiography and literary realism as authoritative modes of building meaning and of constructing knowledge

while emphasis is placed on the ethical failings of all dogmatic forms of thought sustained by binary thinking.

The fact that magical realist forms have been adopted by writers of “central” cultures as much as by peripheral authors comes to offer a further contribution since it seems to “suggest that cultures cannot be neatly divided into rational vs irrational, scientific vs magical, but that certain patterns of meaning making are anthropological constants which will persist even if they are incompatible with the dominant (i.e scientific) world view” (Hegerfeldt 2005: 64). This fact also signals to the artificial nature of all forms of meaning-making and to the need of supplementation of current and hegemonic patterns that may claim universality. Fred D’Aguiar’s position in his deployment of the philosophical issues discussed above seems to be of outright pessimism as to the possibility of sustaining the harmonious co-existence of mind and heart, reason and emotion. The rampant violence and open brutality of many scenes in the novel metonymically refer to a world of confrontation both at the level of individuals and at the level of social/cultural/racial groups. Wherever there are hierarchies in human relations power is exercised with the purpose to subject or even annihilate the other as we see in the Abrahams’ use of punishment with the intention to erase all vestiges of the presence of her mother in the defenceless body of the child protagonist. All relations of power are governed by the same rationale in the novel: those who wield it show no misgivings in exercising it to the most brutal extremes. The Headmaster is utterly merciless to the school children but the Abrahams are equally barbarous in their reaction when they burn down the school with no consideration for those involved, particularly the central character and the rest of the children who are deprived of a valuable means to escape the limitations of ignorance. Marital confrontation between Aunts and Uncles, Father and Mother and Grandfather and

Grandmother show the same pattern of regular disagreement to which the brutality of war is added as another patent example of the intolerance that reigns supreme in *Bethany Bettany*. Even if the inevitable co-existence of opposites should suggest a necessarily tolerant attitude and the acceptance of difference, the present novel is definitely concerned with the exposure of the evil of bigotry over the exhilarating discovery of more positive reactions based on love and understanding. As the detailed analysis developed above illustrates, the events in the novel constitute an index of both individual and group incapacity to find the means to avoid the tragedy of binarism and accept the reality of multiplicity.

### 3.2. The Postmodern World as Comedy or the Persistence of Hope

*“...the present serves now as a prelude to the future rather than as an extension of the past.” (Tronto 2002:121)*

As already developed in the present work following the theory of the historiographer Hayden White, literary genres respond to a specific order governed by rules which correspond to socio-cultural formations and their particular response to the real. External reality, far from being constituted of solid definable facts, is a construct that stands on the unstable border between actuality and interpretation. In this context, representation becomes a problematic affair marked by socio-cultural perspectivism. Female and male subjects show obvious variations in their mode of insertion in the complex web of contemporary global society as evidenced by the development of Feminist Theories and in their articulations with Postmodernism and Postcolonialism. It should be clarified here that in the present work the feminine perspective is neither monolithic nor exclusively related to women in the same way as masculinity is not the absolute prerogative of men. However, even if the category woman cannot be solely identified with Feminism or, for that matter, sexuality with gender, a good number of issues of interest to Feminism can be identified as being common to most women in the present-day European context with allowances made to ethnic and class differences. In the field of literature, postmodern and postcolonial issues can and have been differently approached by individual subjects inserted in various positions and affected by diverse socio-cultural circumstances. While male writers have been influenced by the fall of the metanarrative of patriarchy and struggle to redefine their identity and stance in a new situation of relative disempowerment, female writers appear as adopting a more positive attitude in reference to a panorama which, despite stubborn constrictions, allows them

access to more active and participative positions. Although black and white women do not occupy the same situation in reference to patriarchal dictates, there are points of contact between diverse positions of oppression and resistance, and solidarity and understanding are possible and desirable.

From a cultural perspective, the sharing of a broadly common social, political and economic experience can shape human response in distinctive ways. Such a point of convergence has been theorized by Feminist Theory which, although implying a large variety of different approaches, can be identified as having common allegiance to the postmodern and postcolonial perspectives in their criticism of Enlightenment tenets such as its belief in universality, in the conception of identity as pure essence and in the individual's capacity for self-determination. Feminism has identified a basic contradiction in the Enlightenment as long as this philosophical movement proposed universal conceptualizations which paradoxically excluded one half of humanity: women. Historical situatedness is a value that postmodern Feminism sustains together with alternative conceptions of identity that move away from essentialism. Simultaneously, there is a firm tendency to pose a different view on epistemological issues from the normative modes acknowledged as responding to traditional, masculine conceptions of the creation of knowledge.

The excluded figure of the woman cannot easily sustain the positivist belief in an essence from which the human being expresses himself. Postmodern feminist theories propose that the autonomy of the ego is a modernist mythical construction based on hierarchical binary oppositions that lead to systems of domination and they propound the idea of a de-centred subject defined by its relations to others. Within theories of identity we can identify a conflict between the need to strengthen the ego through separateness and the equally recognized necessity to accept our dependence on others in

the building of the self. Positivist thinking privileged the former while women's social involvement with child rearing inevitably led to favouring the latter: as Patricia Waugh affirms "feminism has always been rooted in women's subjective experience of the conflicting demands of home, family and domestic ties and the wider society" (132). In this sense, the psychological dictum that the child must achieve distance from the mother to reach maturity seems to respond to a desire to disempower the woman who, succinctly put, is seen as a threat to autonomous identity because of her identification with the body, dark impulses and the unknown. According to Waugh, for cultural and psychological reasons, "women's sense of identity is more likely ... to consist of a more diffuse sense of the boundaries of self and their notion of identity understood in relational and intersubjective terms" (135). This general tendency needs to be qualified by specific cases that make of each occasion a particular crossroads of variables affected by race, class and cultural heritage. Diversity and plurality sustain a woman's identity in its articulation with males' and other women's selves. As Teresa de Lauretis ascertains, "the female subject is a site of differences; differences that are not only sexual or only racial, economic, or (sub) cultural, but all of these together, and often enough at odds with one another" (14). Against this slippery background of plural, often contradictory forces, feminine identity can only be conceived as in a state of becoming. In the new ontology, relatedness predominates over substances. As Rossi Braidotti (2008: 47) affirms, "it is crucial ... to see to what an extent processes of becoming are collective, intersubjective and not individual or isolated". This view subverts the traditional dualistic conception of the subject posed by phallogocentrism while it simultaneously incorporates empathy and affect into the picture. A new kind of coherence is thus obtained which avoids "the hierarchically ordained implementation of a moral agency" (53) Although critics of Postmodernism like B n dicte Ledent sustain

that the movement tends to the dissolution of ethical codes, other theorists like Brah and Braidotti confirm the possibility of the coexistence of a de-centred subject and of political action. They affirm that the lack of a stable centre of being such as that conferred by a unique nationality or cultural heritage does not have to lead to dissolution and disempowerment. Braidotti develops the metaphor of the feminine nomad or migrant who has mixed allegiances, lives in-between national and cultural borders without the pressure to choose and can still be defined as a socio-political agent. Her form of Feminism breaks with the position of women as helpless victims to place them in a novel “situatedness which takes the realization of being uprooted as a starting point, without resorting to an idealization of the community of origin” (Davis and Lutz 376). The concept of “situatedness” refers both to a specific socio-cultural and geographical as to a physical condition. The inclusion of the body with its feelings, emotions and sensations together with the cyclical notion of time are central to Braidotti’s idea of a complex, contradictory, affirmative and jubilant (“jubilosa” 2004:67) subjectivity capable of creating a new symbolic system that rejects the negativity and nihilism that characterize “the prophets of death” (160).

Embodiment appears as a powerful strategy to oppose the tendency towards abstraction that underlies the masculine concept of universal individuality. The latter hegemonic inclination is related by Braidotti (41) to Cixous’s theory of the male libidinal economy, which is prominent for its need to possess, a tendency that has led to a history of oppression of those subjects which belong to minorities. To refer to the importance of the body and of the contribution of personal experience and simultaneously avoid confusion with the biologist metaphor, Braidotti writes of “*sujeto incardinado*” (2004:168) and identifies woman as both feminine and female. This conceptualization “starts with the revaluation of the bodily roots of subjectivity,

rejecting any universal, neutral and consequently gender-free understanding of human embodiment” (2003:43).

Another ground of controversy in Feminist Theory with direct links to the ideas above is the field of epistemology. Like various other feminist critics, Donna Wilshire recognizes the existence of difference in the peculiar mode of knowledge favoured by the masculine and the feminine perspectives. This theorist (95-96) offers a long list of items which she sustains describe traditional (male) Western epistemology defined in opposition to the alternative mode which can be recognized as amenable to the female position:

<u>Female</u>	<u>Male</u>
Myth	History
Superstition	Science
Imagination/emotion	Reason
Body	Mind
Earth	God
Chaos	Truth and knowledge <sup>11</sup>

Since its historical origins, Western epistemology has placed the elements on the right column above those on the left producing a negative effect of imbalance<sup>12</sup>. Wilshire

<sup>11</sup> The above is a free version of Wilshire’s table.

<sup>12</sup> Derrida’s ideas, expounded in the theory of deconstruction, identify binary oppositions with Western metaphysics, a system of thought which leads to the imposition of hierarchies that confer value on self-presence and asserts the certainty of truth through a form of knowledge that relies on science as its source. He proposes the concept of *differance* or *supplement* which is at work in every text and which subverts the possibility of stable meanings. As a consequence of the inevitable appearance of this rhetorical mechanism, all statements should be provisional and open to reversal since the explicit intention holds the seed of the opposite principle. His theory debunks the principles of the transcendental ego, Truth and historical reality, thus avoiding closure and totalization. The certainty of truth is seen as politically dangerous since it originates practices which are then authoritatively imposed. Derrida asserts there is complicity between logocentrism and power, an alliance which has been the source of countless atrocities in Western history. The metaphysical system of thought is based on binary oppositions which imply violent hierarchies: “one of the two terms governs the other...or has the upper hand” (Derrida qtd. in Kates 20). The permanent revision of meaning his textual analysis proposes aims at avoiding the entrenchment of hegemonic practices through the deconstruction of dualities and the recognition of the impossibility of conceptual closure. Derrida’s postulates underlie Wilshire’s ideas.



endeavours to redress the imbalance with the purpose of contributing “to make *human* experience whole by reclaiming the value and knowledge in the *human* body, in human emotion and sharing...” (96). The introduction of emotion in the field of knowledge marks a significant break with traditional epistemology which distrusted feelings, sensations and emotions and defined them as inimical to science. Alison Jaggar has also rescued the value of emotion suggesting that “emotions may be helpful and even necessary rather than inimical to the construction of knowledge” (146). Moreover, the alleged objectivity of positivist science is described as mythical or ideological. Detached observation as the initial stage of science is only an ideal situation which defies a truthful description of the human psyche. Jaggar quite rightly sustains that “[j]ust as observation directs, shapes, and partially defines emotion, so too emotion directs, shapes and even partially defines observation” (154). This is so to such an extent that some scientific statements of the 19<sup>th</sup> century are denied authority today after their ideological grounds have been deconstructed and exposed. This is the case of the identification of human races and the attribution of negative traces to the so categorized “black race” in anthropology. It is evident that these “scientific facts” are an ideological construction resulting from “contempt of (and perhaps fear of) people of colour” (156). Jaggar suggests that the acceptance of the fact that emotion partakes of the process of observation and evaluation in the human psyche together with close attention to their interrelation in the practice of science is a necessary step towards a more self-aware and impartial construction of knowledge. This may help avoid the pitfall of the “ideal of the dispassionate investigator” which comes to be in the present situation “a classicist, racist, and especially masculinist myth” (158). In this context, subversive emotion can make a true contribution to confront ingrained ideological formations that respond to the interests of dominant groups. An alternative epistemology can result from the

critical inclusion of emotion in the field of knowledge and from the recognition of the importance of perspective in the making of science. In this sense the contribution of the feminine view can be especially salient since women's historical position of subjection has taught them how to deal with "outlaw emotions" as well as to identify them in themselves and others "because of their social responsibility for caretaking, including emotional nurturance" (164-165). It can be added that the same socio-historical position places woman in an ideal situation to fulfil the role of the intellectual in the postmodern world as envisioned by Bauman (1987). The transformation of the intellectual role of legislator in modernity to the function of interpreter in postmodernity is amenable to members of the human family who have so perfectly accomplished the task of mediators whenever conflicts arose within their sphere of influence.

It is of particular interest to highlight here that both Wilshire and Jaggar attempt to deconstruct the binary oppositions that sustain positivist epistemology. Jaggar explains that the identification and opposition of psychic faculties such as emotion, evaluation, reason, and observation is the result of a process of abstraction which decries of their interrelation and mutual dependency "in a complex process of human activity". Avoidance of hierarchies is at the core of both Jaggar's and Wilshire's arguments. The latter explains that her aim is not to devalue the concepts that identify the masculine mode of knowledge but to propose a "nondualistic *both/and* pattern of utilization, in which items in both columns either cooperate or alternate just as one can alternate one's focus between the field and the ground of a graphic or see both together easily and at will" (96). The logic of "both/and" comes to substitute that of "either/or" instituted by the binary mode of thought introduced by Descartes' idealistic philosophy simultaneously avoiding the hierarchical arrangement that the latter system favoured. In the social field this implies a preference for tolerance and acceptance of difference in

opposition to the imposition of borders and barriers between social, gender and cultural groups that have influenced national policies in the course of history. As Wilshire (97) sustains:

The feminist quest seeks to validate the social, bonding, community experiences; for therein lie the highest human values and the solution of alienation for all of us in this planet. Thus individuality must be seen as properly manifested only within a sharing community, the individual's quest being not to become top dog or ruler over others but rather to acquire wholeness and an ecological balance, an interconnectedness between the fully developed individual self and all other forms of life.

The feminine form of knowledge is associated by Wilshire with the mode of cyclical patterning that characterizes mythical wisdom and with a kind of consciousness that privileges overall perception over focused attention to detail. The unfocused, broader form of attention is associated to mothering, the traditional function of women in human society from which they have acquired the described capacity. Sustaining the logic of “both/and”, both forms of knowledge should be recognized as equally valid to confirm “a nondualistic, cooperative, caring way of being in the world” (105). Such an attitude is particularly valid in the context of today's global society where so many different identity constructions co-exist with the result that flexibility and tolerance become fundamental qualities to make a contribution to high levels of solidarity in multi-ethnic society.

Contemporary Feminisms have strong ideational links with Postcolonial Studies as two different poststructuralist perspectives that share the significant bond of a staunch resistance to oppression. While the former organizes its discourse round the critique of the subjugation of women in history, the latter has been traditionally concerned with the

undue application of power from imperial centres on colonized nations and with the effects produced on those under subjection. Socio-historical changes, however, have produced a corresponding change of focus in postcolonial interests. Owing to the growing process of globalization, the influence of former colonial cultures on the imperial centre has been increasingly recognized as equally strong and lasting. The return of the repressed has redressed the balance of power. The identity configuration of the U.K. can no longer be assessed in the same terms as before the development of the colonial enterprise. As Gunning (2004: 39) sustains, “An understanding of the British nation cannot rely on a model that articulates from some imagined time before immigration and large-scale cultural difference but must concede that these are established characteristics of the population”. The ever increasing acceleration of mobility owing to the new technological developments in transport and electronic means of communication have made of immigration from less favoured regions of the world to more economically advanced areas a feature of the present world. Seen as a land of opportunity, the United Kingdom is chosen by citizens of the Commonwealth as a point of destination. The result is a multi-cultural nation in which the English ethnicity counts as one of the many identity configurations that share a common ground where the challenge is how to find feasible ways to live with difference and where the particular configuration of feminine thought as described above can make a valuable contribution.

The new cultural scenario reformulates the concept of diaspora: the diasporic subject is not only that who has settled down on foreign land but also the subject who “stays put” and receives the influence of the foreign other. Cultural relations in such contexts are seen as “border crossings” which both contribute to subject positions and to de-stabilize reification (209). This is the productive “liminal” space that Bhabha (1994:

2) recognizes as the performative site of identity formation in the context of postcoloniality. The historical process of colonialism and the subsequent decolonization deeply affected and transformed both native and imperial communities at home and abroad. If oceans of ink flew to analyze such influences upon colonial societies, equally abundant has been the opposite tendency since the appearance of the influential and brilliantly entitled *The Empire Writes Back* in 1989. If influence was primarily seen as the result of imperial intervention in foreign lands, the growing impact of former colonial communities on the centre has marked a change of outlook towards a more inclusive perspective that has considered both sides of the issue. Consequently, the traditional identity configuration of once colonizing powers is now conceived as a crossing of multiple cultural paths. As Brah (1996: 209) claims, “[i]n the diaspora space called ‘England’, for example, African-Caribbean, Irish, Asian, Jewish and other diasporas intersect among themselves as well as with the entity constructed as ‘Englishness’, thoroughly re-inscribing it in the process”. The interrelation between the different ethnic groups has given rise to a multi-cultural conglomerate where mutual influence effaces hierarchical positions of dominance. Even if theory (Bhabha 1994, Loomba 2002) has recognized the fallibility of colonialism from its initial stages to sustain the fixity and stability of opposing identities, it has now become obvious that neat binary oppositions are philosophically, psychologically as well as sociologically unsustainable.

In the context described, definitions acquire a relational quality so that Mary Louise Pratt’s term “contact zone” to define the sphere of influence between different ethnic groups comes to make a real contribution. As she explains,

[a] contact perspective emphasizes how subjects are constituted in and by their relations to each other. It treats the relations among colonizer and colonized... not in terms of separateness or apartheid, but in terms of copresence, interaction, interlocking understandings and practices.... (1992: 7)

Pratt identifies this process of mutual exchange of influence with the ethnographic term *transculturation* though she significantly extends the application of the word. Originally applied only to the capacity of the colonized to decide what aspects of the dominant culture were to be assimilated and in what ways, Pratt boldly broadens the definition of the term so that it also refers to the ways in which the dominant culture finds its own cultural representations influenced by the periphery. Through this re-definition Pratt comes to ask questions such as: “How have Europe’s constructions of subordinated others been shaped by those others, by the constructions of themselves and their habitats that they presented to the Europeans?” (6). These theoretical lines of argument help to redress the balance between centre and periphery as well as to think in terms of equality and mutual influence.

In the above context hybridity can be conceived as “...the ongoing condition of all human cultures, which contain no zones of purity because they undergo continuous processes of transculturation (two-way borrowing and lending between cultures)” (Renato Rosaldo in Canclini, 2001: XV). This process has been so swift that the feeling is that there is no possibility of a stable or fixed authentic identity to be spoken of. The flood of immigration has produced “an implosion of the third world in the first” with the result that “the notion of an authentic culture as an autonomous internally coherent universe is no longer sustainable” (Canclini, 2001: 232). The concept of cultural purity

with its concomitant intolerance is thus rendered obsolete and restricted to the most recalcitrant modernist positions for which homogeneity and uniformity are the rule. Hierarchies and binary oppositions are avoided by the postmodern conceptualization which sustains heterogeneity and relativity to beat ritual naturalization of difference. The climate of ideas described favours tolerance since, according to Bauman (2005: 64), socio-cultural heterogeneity fosters the development of abilities and character traits that allow for the acceptance of difference among humans.

The concept of hybridity, originally used in the field of biology in reference to the mixing of animal species, was retaken in the nineteenth century in reference to the racist theories which gave priority to Aryan over non-Aryan populations and acquired negative connotation as a result of the fear of miscegenation. Hybridity as mixture of different human races was seen as a harmful process leading to corruption of an “original” purity. The general nineteenth century belief in organic conceptions of life tended to deny as negative disruption any influence that implied mixture or heterogeneity. This noxious effect became evident as the expansion of capitalist imperial policies was reflected on socio cultural issues both in the colonies and in imperial centres. As a consequence “...a great deal of energy was expended on formulating ways in which to counter those elements that were clearly undermining the cultural stability of a more traditional, apparently organic, now irretrievably lost, society” (Young 4). Many twentieth century modern views still sustained the Manichean oppositions between pure/impure, authentic/ inauthentic which were to be superseded by the postmodern discourse of heterogeneity with the “...relativization of all fundamentalism...and elaboration of a more open way of thinking that includes the interactions and integrations among levels, genres, and forms of collective sensibility” (Renato Rosaldo in García Canclini 2001: 9).

The idea of a stable, coherent core of culture is no longer sustainable in a world of ethnic mixing, rapid urban development, and impregnation in the new cultural technologies. To García Canclini (2007), hybridization is a form of cultural pluralism and is the result of three central processes: “the break up and mixing of the collections that used to organize cultural systems, the deterritorialization of symbolic processes and the expansion of impure genres”. The interactions among members of a culturally mixed society in an urban space closely connected by the media foster all three processes mentioned by García Canclini. Simultaneously, the workings of power in such a cultural medium dissolve traditional dichotomous concepts such as those of dominant/subjected or hegemonic/subaltern as well as conceptualizations in terms of direct confrontation or “vertical actions” in favour of “...the dissemination of the centers, the multipolarity of social initiatives, [and] the plurality of references”. The resulting dissemination of power allows for balanced and reciprocal relations as well as for the “movements of affection and participation in solidarity or complicit activities in which hegemonic and subaltern groups...” operate (García Canclini 259). In such conditions, the concept of hybridity is reformulated and is now conceived as the locus of interrelations of cultural forces recognized as equal in terms of power and influence. The celebration of diversity thus stands in opposition to the appropriation of difference for political reasons. The latter choice, based on an essentialist conception of identity marks “impervious boundaries between groups” (Brah 1996: 91) and should be superseded by a view of identities as processes rather than as “reified artifacts” (92). Brah’s view of identity as changing subject positions allows for greater flexibility so that “coalitions are possible through a politics of identification, as opposed to a ‘politics of identity’ ” (93). Brah visually represents this conception through the figure of the



kaleidoscope whose workings are characterized by the interaction between flux and state. Thus

*...identity may be understood as that very process by which the multiplicity, contradiction, and instability of subjectivity is signified as having coherence, continuity, stability; as having a core – a continually changing core but the sense of a core nonetheless – that at any given moment is enunciated as the 'I'<sup>13</sup>. (123-124)*

As suggested by the ideas expounded above, Feminism and Postcolonialism offer a degree of identification in relation to a critical assessment of the mistaken application of the Enlightenment tenets. Both movements stand in opposition to universalizing tendencies which under the guise of equality serve hegemonic policies. Both object to the idea of identity as essence that supports the construction of fixed binary oppositions leading to hierarchical systems of thought. They also agree on the view of knowledge as cultural construct and sustain the need to resort to flexible positions that uphold empathy as a common denominator that can eventually achieve the puzzled acceptance of paradox in place of the aggressive othering of difference. In this context connectivity and relationality become central concepts that fuel the productive elucidations around the idea of hybridity as ground on which to build interpersonal and interethnic exchanges within the experimental frame of the European Community.

From the field of sociology and Feminism, Brah claims that “[t]here is no *a priori* reason to suppose that cultural encounters will invariably entail conflict. Conflict may or may not ensue and, instead, cultural symbiosis, improvisation, and innovation

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<sup>13</sup> Emphasis in the original.

may emerge as a far more probable scenario” (1996: 41). An equally positive view of cultural encounters in the centres of Western power is propounded by Braidotti who finds that Europe with its multicultural population is the ideal site for the development of new lives and the realization of new possibilities and, although she does not forget women’s history of subjection, she prefers to build into the future rather than look back on the past. In the new global context, all sides have an important, although different role to fulfil:

[the] becoming nomadic is the pattern of subversion, which is open to both the empirical members of the majority (the ‘same’) and to those of the minority (the ‘others’). Both need to relinquish their ties, but they do so in dissymmetrical ways, respecting their specific histories and geo-political locations. As Deleuze and Guattari argue: the centre has to deconstruct its powers and let them lie, while the margins are the motor of active processes of becoming. (2005:174)

The acceptance of responsibility within a specific historical situation is the aim of Braidotti’s view of subjectivity in the present-day European context within which the erasure of both real and imaginary borders must guide political action. Women are here called to make their contribution to broaden hope for the future and to make “a stand against both nostalgia and melancholia”. This position “expresses not only a sense of social responsibility but also an affect. Hanna Arendt used to call it: love for the world” (178).

### 3.2.1. Zadie Smith's *White Teeth*

*[At]...the desire for a return of terror, for the realization of the fantasy to seize reality, the answer is: let us wage war on totality; let us be witnesses to the unrepresentable; let us activate the differences and save the honour of the name. (Lyotard 1979: 82)*

If the fictional worlds created by Caryl Phillips, David Dabydeen and Fred D' Aguiar studied in the present work are all about the creation of borders, the erection of barriers that hinder understanding and about the consequent tragic destiny of their characters, Zadie Smith's *White Teeth* conjures up a magical universe of a very different order. Smith's female view of the postmodern condition reveals the exhilaration of a new freedom in diversity and encodes the present and the immediate past in the genre of comedy. As Hayden White (1999: XXIV) sustains, there is nothing intrinsically tragic or comic in past events: it is the focalizer's perspective that imposes a tone to the narrative. In *White Teeth*, cultural diversity far from being conceptualized in terms of violent encounters as in the male novelists' productions gives rise to a variety of mixings and blends that sustain harmonious co-existence. Set in post-colonial London, the novel dramatizes the relations between culturally and racially different characters who find themselves in a common land as a result of the economic and political circumstances that have originated present-day Britain.

From the very first pages of *White Teeth* the reader is confronted with a multicultural, postcolonial London. One of the protagonists, the English Archie Jones, is rescued from a suicide attempt by the Hindu assistant to a Muslim butcher. Archie has just divorced his Italian wife who has a Spanish home help and the reader is soon to learn that his best friend Samad Iqbal is a Bengali Muslim with whom he regularly plays poker at an Iraqi family's pool house. And this is only the beginning of a complex weave of inter-ethnic connections that make clear-cut, black and white distinctions

difficult to sustain. This is also a world where discriminatory differences exist and affect the lives of the characters that are keenly conscious of the weight of traditional modes of thought and feeling resulting from historical relations of power. Discrimination can be observed in the attitude of some of the English characters. For example, under the influence of English Joyce Chalfen's self-assured discourse of cultural and social superiority, black West-Indian Clara is subconsciously led to affirm that her daughter's intellectual capacity is the result of genes inherited from an English ancestor. The reaction seems so natural in Joyce's presence that it is only later, once Clara has left the English home that she realizes she has betrayed herself and her intimate convictions about the origin of her daughter's intelligence (*WT* 354-355). Both Clara Jones and Alsana Iqbal are aware that, as the latter says "The English are the only people...who want to teach you and steal from you at the same time" (*WT* 356). In recounting Clara's grandmother's love affair with that English ancestor in Jamaica, the narrator ascertains that "...maybe it is just the scenery that is wrong. Maybe nothing that happens upon stolen ground can expect a happy ending" (*WT* 361). Likewise, Shiva, Samad's Hindu friend is conscious of the presence of barriers between different ethnic groups. He advises Samad against attempting a relation with an English woman since he sustains that such liaisons never work: "'Too much history', was Shiva's enigmatic answer, '[t]oo much bloody history'" (*WT* 146). And later on, when he learns the affair has failed, he reaffirms his convictions "'It's all brown man leaving English woman, it's all Nehru saying See-Ya to Madam Britannia... it's all about pride. Ten quid says she wanted you as a servant boy, a wallah peeling the grapes'" (*WT* 202).

Coincidentally, Archie and Samad are conscious of the hierarchical distinction between Indians and Englishmen inherited from the colonial encounter. However, they find ways to negotiate the imposed discrimination and to build a life-long friendship on

the basis of mutual respect and understanding. The valuable human relation established by these characters is paradigmatic of a kind of social encounter that accepts and respects difference and avoids hierarchical discriminations. A good example of this mode of social operation is found in the way Samad and Archie collaborated to find the solution to a difficult situation when they were army comrades in Bulgaria in 1945. As the narrator explains (*WT* 93),

[i]t was awkward, an Indian telling an Englishman what to do – but somehow the quietness of it, the manliness of it, got them over it. It was during this time that Archie learnt the true power of do-it-yourself, how it uses a hammer and nails to replace nouns and adjectives, how it allows men to communicate.

The concepts here expressed show awareness of the ideological load of language, of the difficulty of evading the strong pull of ingrained socio-cultural classifications. However, through other forms of communication, connected to action and social behaviour, human beings can overcome the burden of prejudice and succeed in establishing effective contact and achieve the process of transculturation. Similarly, although Aldana harbours discriminatory feelings towards certain ethnic groups, when it comes to actual personal encounters, she finds enough reasons to commend specific individuals. As to Clara, she is unprejudiced enough to become a partner in an inter-racial marriage and the Chalfens establish close personal connections with both the Bengali Iqbal children and the half West-Indian Irie Jones. Not even Millat who expresses his hatred against the British and wants to avenge their treatment of his father and family, or Hussein-Ishmael who “had been a victim of serious physical attacks and robbery, without fail, three times a year” and who come together under the banner of

KEVIN (an Islamic extremist group) are actually convincing in their professed intentions to initiate violent actions against the host country and its inhabitants. Millat's and Hussein-Ishmael's reasons for becoming members of KEVIN are as spurious, self-centred and laughable as those of Shiva:

Well, in fact Shiva had joined KEVIN for three reasons. First, because he was sick of the stick that comes with being the only Hindu in a Bengali Muslim restaurant. Secondly, because being Head of Internal Security for KEVIN beat the hell out of being second waiter at the Palace. And thirdly for the women. (WT 502)

No deeply felt commitment to a violent cause can be discerned in the members of KEVIN who find in the organization a place to get together and satisfy superficial personal needs. None is ready to risk their own security and well-being for a common cause as seen in the case of "Hussein-Ishmael, who, despite his desire to wreak violence upon somebody, *anybody*, had his shop to think about" (WT 500).

Living in Britain, these ethnically different characters are as devoted to their own original culture as to their present site of residence. In varying degrees, both cultures exercise an influence on their social and psychological behaviour. In the case of Samad Iqbal, a believer in cultural roots, the conflict between the two forces is particularly poignant. The identity struggle leads him to separate his twin sons and send one back for a true Muslim education in Bangladesh with very different results from those expected. When Magid returns, he is more English than the English while Millat, the son who stays, becomes a mock fundamentalist terrorist as an active member of KEVIN and in his adolescent identity crisis attempts to take arms against the British scientist Marcus Chalfen. Confronted with this disastrous finale, Samad wonders where

he has gone wrong and feels at a dead end, incapable of adapting to his country of residence and conscious of the impracticability of returning to Bengal (It would have been like “chasing your own shadow” WT 407). After so many years in England, Samad knows that his home country is no more than a distant dream. His feelings in this respect are not too far from Irie’s who dreams of a Jamaica she has never seen:

...*homeland* is one of the magical fantasy words like *unicorn* and *soul* and *infinity* that have now passed into the language. And the particular magic of *homeland*, its particular spell over Irie, was that it sounded like a beginning. The beginningest of beginnings. Like the first morning of Eden and the day after apocalypse. A blank page. (WT 402)

History, though, exercises as strong an influence as the process of transculturation so that the immigrant population of London will be, like Samad or Irie, forever wavering between different cultural backgrounds, confronted with the need to cope with a split sense of belonging, the result of an imperial past. As the narrator sustains, “this is the other thing about immigrants (‘fugees, émigrés, travelers): they cannot escape their history any more than you yourself can lose your shadow” (WT 466). We could add that they can neither escape the strong influence of the English local culture. The characters are culturally hybrid.

However, there is a difference in the reactions to the global situation of the first and second generation of immigrants. The former took the decisive step of leaving their land of origin with the clear purpose of finding a safer and /or more prosperous site where to raise their family. Once this basic aim is obtained they expect everything will run smoothly. They find, though, that their children suffer from cultural unease:

...there was much discussion - at home, at school, in the various kitchens of the widespread Iqbal/Begum clan – about *The Trouble with Millat*, mutinous Millat aged thirteen, who farted in mosque, chased blondes and smelt of tobacco, and not just Millat but *all* the children: Mujib (fourteen, criminal record for joyriding), Khandakar (sixteen, white girlfriend, wore mascara in the evenings), Dipesh (fifteen, marijuana), Kurshed (eighteen, marijuana and very baggy trousers), Khaleda (seventeen, sex before marriage with a Chinese boy), Bimal (nineteen, doing a Diploma in Drama); *what was wrong with all the children*, what had gone wrong with these first descendants of the great ocean –crossing experiment? Didn't they have everything they could want? Was there not a substantial garden area, regular meals, clean clothes from Marks'n'Sparks, A-class top-notch education? Hadn't the elders done their best? Hadn't they all come to this island for a reason? To be safe. Weren't they *safe* ? (WT 219)

In the excerpt above the long list of complaints focalized through the parents shows that the older generation are disappointed to see that the dream of a happy Indian family settled on foreign land they had envisaged has failed to materialize. They did not foresee the many difficulties that the process of adaptation to a new cultural situation would imply. Their cherished achievements (safety, a good education, and material comfort) are taken for granted by the younger generation who are now in search of adaptation at a deeper level of compromise. This process creates anxiety in both generations: among the parents, who feel their children are losing the traits that identify their own culture, and among the children, who want to belong to their adopted country to avoid being considered different. While the parents do not like to see their children being “contaminated” by the local cultural environment, the children want to blend with



their English neighbours. For example, to his father's amazement, Magid rejects his birth name because of its foreignness: "I GIVE YOU A GLORIOUS NAME LIKE MAGID MAHFOOZ MURSHED MUBTASIM IQBAL!' Samad had yelled after Magid when he returned home one evening and whipped up the stairs like a bullet to hide in his room, 'AND YOU WANT TO BE CALLED MARK SMITH!'" (WT 151). Given the length and difficulty of pronunciation for English speakers of Magid's full name, one is not surprised about the boy's preference. However, his father feels that the boy's choice is an affront to his culture. A similar tendency towards assimilation with the local culture is to be found in Irie: "She had a nebulous fifteen-year-old's passion for [the Chalfens], overwhelming, yet with no real direction or object. She just wanted to, well, kind of, *merge* with them. She wanted their Englishness. Their Chalfiness" (WT 328). While it is possible to trace some similarities among immigrant characters as to their response to Englishness, it is also true that the novel deals with this issue mostly in terms of individual traits. As a result there is a broad gamut of varied reactions ranging from Magid's complete assimilation to the local culture to Millat's assessment that all issues in the relation mother country/ colonial subjects can be reduced to a power struggle and an imbalance which he is determined to redress (WT 506).

All the central questions that concern the postcolonial experience come to be dramatically represented in the many vicissitudes the characters in *White Teeth* experiment in the course of their lives: from dogmatism and the consequent discrimination to the pains of diaspora, the duality of hybridity and transculturation and the fear of miscegenation. In spite of the seriousness of the issues involved, the incidents recounted never reach the level of tragedy since tension is released through laughter. While Caryl Phillips, for example, unravels his plots through tragic conflict, as has been seen above, Smith turns hers into light comedy. The narrator in *White Teeth* is

highly conscious of the humour inherent in human weakness and folly and takes advantage of every turn in the action to relieve tension through acknowledgement of absurdity or paradox.

The novel shows traces of Bakhtin's grotesque realism, a literary form which brings the high, the serious, the spiritual and the lofty to the level of the low, the comic, and the earthy. In the process, reality is seen from an unusual perspective and the dogmatic is disintegrated by the recognition of the relativity of phenomena. Such an attitude has "a positive, regenerating power" (Bakhtin 1984: 38). The adherence to a unique, restricted truth is replaced by the concept that "necessity is relative and variable" (49) with the consequence that "human consciousness, thought, and imagination [are freed] for new potentialities". The medieval folk festivity of carnival emerged as a counterpart to the serious dogmatic world of official life. In its modern, romantic manifestation, the grotesque became "...a reaction against the cold rationalism, against official, formalistic, and logical authoritarianism, it was a rejection of that which is finished and completed, of the didactic and utilitarian spirit of the Enlighteners..." (37). In *White Teeth* the hierarchical social order of the everyday rational world with its commitment to certainty dissolves into a contradictory, hybrid structure of transgressed borders where joy is possible. The eternal, dogmatic and fixed is replaced by the mutable, ambivalent and fluid, as present in Millat's characterization as a "social chameleon", a "joker" (or trickster) who could "please all the people all the time" (WT 369). When the dogmatic appears in the novel, it is exaggerated to the point of the grotesque. This is the way religious dogmatism is treated in the figure of Clara's grandmother, Hortense Bowden, whose creed is described as *Bowdenism*, a combination of Revelation plus the church of Jehovah's Witnesses. Hortense's eccentric behaviour based on a literal reading of the scriptures is displayed in hilarious accounts that diffuse

an otherwise extreme intolerance to other forms of belief. In the same way, Millat's fundamentalist Muslim observance is made laughable through its exaggerated respect for insignificant details. As the reader laughs, the threatening implications of the building of impermeable borders lose their force.

If dogmatism is ridiculed, the interaction between people of different skin colour is treated in an equally light vein and becomes a manifestation of the spirit of carnival in its combination of heterogeneous elements. At the wedding of all white Archie and all black Clara, "... even the registrar, who had seen it all – horsy women marrying weaselly men, elephantine men marrying owlsh women – raised an eyebrow at this most unnatural of unions as they approached his desk. Cat and dog" (WT 50). In this example, the monstrous imaginary transformation of people into animals contributes to the grotesque. According to Bakhtin (1984: 37), carnival "liberates from the prevailing point of view of the world, from convention and established truths, from clichés, from all that is humdrum and universally accepted". As a result, the flexibility of personal choice and inclination replaces the iron rule of determination. The normative is avoided and deviations "from the usual aesthetic forms" become common (36). *White Teeth* contests traditional judgments on beauty and race in the description of Clara, Archie's love: "Clara Bowden was beautiful in all senses except maybe, by virtue of being black, the classical" (WT 23). The description of this character also points to the spirit of carnival in its emphasis on orifices, the means through which the world and the individual come into contact. Bodily openings connect the human body to the outside and show that the body is never a "closed, completed unit" (Bakhtin 1999: 26) but is in a permanent state of transformation. These ideas are present in the introduction of the character of Clara. We see her for the first time through Archie's eyes:

Now, as Archie understood it, in movies and the like it is common for someone to be so striking that when they walk down the stairs the crowd goes silent. In life he had never seen it. But it happened with Clara Bowden. She walked down the stairs in slow motion, surrounded by afterglow and fuzzy lightning. And not only was she the most beautiful thing he had ever seen, she was also the most comforting woman he had ever met. (*WT* 24)

This cinematographic vision is soon dismantled as Archie concentrates on her mouth: “She gave him a wide grin that revealed possibly her one imperfection. A complete lack of teeth in the top of her mouth” (*WT* 24). The grotesque image that emerges completely undermines the glamorous vision of Clara that the narrator previously built by choosing Archie as focalizer. Simultaneously, with this image Clara is represented as grotesquely combining traits both of youth (she is only nineteen) and of old age. These combinations are characteristic of carnival as the symbolic expression of a state of becoming, the union of birth and death that co-exist in human life.

The liberating force of carnival is ascribed by Bakhtin (95) to the fact that

Laughter created no dogmas and could not become authoritarian; it did not convey fear but a feeling of strength. It was linked to the procreating act, with birth, renewal, fertility, abundance. Laughter was also related to food and drink and the people’s earthly immortality, and finally it was related to the future of things to come and was to clear the way for them.

The people’s perpetuation in time as a form of collective affirmation is represented in the novel by the portrayal of the life of two families throughout three generations and

their projection into a fourth with the implication of the power of the cyclical. In the account of the main characters' routine, food and drink are valued as contributing to free and friendly talk in the regular meetings of Samad and Archie at O'Connell's Pool House where basic needs are joyfully satisfied and camaraderie reigns among a varied assortment of customers.

The global world in which the story in *White Teeth* is set is characterized by hybridity. In fact the moral of the tale is that purity is unattainable as much for the host culture as for the immigrant. As Alsana says "You go back and 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!"(WT 236). This idea is dramatically present in the novel in the fact that the Chalfens who are endowed with the characteristics of Englishness are in fact third generation Jewish immigrants. However, the figure of the hybrid, with its share in the spirit of carnival owing to its definitional ambiguity, is probably most patently present in the characterization of the twins Millat and Magid who are simultaneously two and one to the point that Irie cannot distinguish between them as the object of her love or identify who is the father of her child. The twins come to symbolize the two aspects of their father's personality, the transcultural field, the land of no-where, the locus where the crucible of identity comes to be realized.

Although racial and cultural intermixture is the main theme of the novel, two metanarratives underlie the central conflict in which the characters are involved. One of them is the metanarrative of science which is identified with the English ethnic group. This ideological conception upholds a belief in reason as the instrument to reach truth, to control the environment and to achieve progress for the benefit of the physical and

social health of humanity. Good heirs of the Enlightenment philosophy, the Chalfens sustain with great conviction their belief in the application of logic to life and in the perfectibility of the human race: “In the Chalfen lexicon the middle classes were the inheritors of the enlightenment, the creators of the welfare state, the intellectual elite and the source of all culture. Where they got this idea is hard to say” (WT 435). The presence of an overt narrator making comments on the characters’ beliefs gives the characteristic humorous touch and helps to highlight the extremism of their position. As Joshua Chalfen claims in reference to his father, “[t]here’s no point being reasonable with him because he thinks he *owns* reasonableness. How do you deal with people like that?” (WT 405). The Chalfens’ trust in science is so absolute that Marcus as a geneticist is equated to God in his wife’s view: “Her husband didn’t just make money, he didn’t just make things, or sell things that other people had made, he *created* beings. He went to the edges of his God’s imagination and made mice that Yahweh could not conceive of...” (WT 311). Along this line of thought, their conviction leads them to believe that they can rule out chance and ascertain supreme control over matter. This position is exemplified by Magid, one of Marcus’s fervent followers, who, having been part of the creation of the “FutureMouse”, feels he has conquered the right to a form of divinity: “No second-guessing, no what-ifs, no might-have-beens. Just certainty. Just certainty in its purest form. And what more, thought Magid...what more is God than that?” (WT 490).

While Magid and the Chalfens (except for the late Joshua) adhere to the extreme view described, Hortense, Samad, and Millat, each in their own peculiar way, sustains the religious metanarrative of divine fate. Rather than abide by the supreme power of man, this group of characters supports the supremacy of the divine as well as the belief

in the presumption of those who attempt to meddle with divine creation. As Samad claims, they think that

Marcus Chalfen has no *right*. No right to do as he does. It is not his business. It is God's business. If you meddle with a creature, the very *nature* of a creature, even if it is a mouse, you walk into the arena that is God's: creation. You infer that the wonder of God's creation can be improved upon. It cannot. Marcus Chalfen *presumes*. He expects to be worshipped when the only thing in the universe that warrants worship is Allah. (WT 455)

The characters that oppose genetic experimentation are fatalists. In Joshua's words, "...the world happens to you...You don't happen to the world" (WT 497). Divine will determines their destiny as well as the course of history and the functioning of nature. On the basis of these fundamental beliefs, to take steps towards the modification of nature as Marcus Chalfen does with the creation of his FutureMouse is seen as presumptuous madness, as an attempt to usurp the role of creator who belongs exclusively to God. On the opposite side, those who sustain the infinite capacity of science to develop, consider any obstruction to its progress as a reactionary attitude and a threat to general improvement and well-being. The confrontation between these two opposing views eventually brings all the characters and their varied story lines together to converge in the last chapters of the novel. As in previous incidents, the closing event in the novel avoids resorting to open violence. Chance plays its part in the dénouement and the end proves to be only a new beginning. There is no closure or definite resolution; however, what remains clear is that dogmatisms can never offer the expected answer. Archie's double-sided coin will forever play its game leaving the reader to cope

with the duality of the unexpected, the paradoxical, the uncertain, in one word, with the hybrid.

The themes of hybridity and that of the collapse of the metanarrative of science are intimately connected and have their expression in the content as well as in the form of *White Teeth*. According to Pieterse (238)

Hybridity is to culture what deconstruction is to discourse: transcending binary categories. Another account of hybridity is “in-betweenness”. Recognizing the in-between and the interstices means going beyond dualism, binary thinking and Aristotelian logic. Methodologically this is the hallmark of post-structuralism and deconstruction; it represents an epistemological shift outside the boxes of Cartesian epistemology. Postmodernism has been a general heading for this change in outlook.

Opposition to the postulates of the traditional Aristotelian view with its reliance on temporal, spatial and logical contiguity is reflected in both the form and the content of the novel. The work is divided into sections which, except for the last, start in the present and move towards the past, thus breaking with the expected linear succession in time with its symbolical connotation of progress and its reliance on the logic of cause as prior to consequence. At the same time, spatial contiguity is dislocated by constant changes of settings from London to central Europe, India or Jamaica. The strong influence of the relation between cause and effect is also avoided through the presentation of characters that are shown as making life choices led by whim or chance oblivious of the strong pull of circumstances. Both Clara and Archie make a clean break with their past and face their life together as if newly born. But the best example is probably Archie’s tendency to make decisions in his life by tossing a coin. This is how



he decides whether to kill Dr Sick and the way he suggests Samad should go to make a decision as to which of the twins to send to Bangladesh. Equally free from deterministic shaping factors, Magid and Millat take their own turns in life much to their father's surprise. Neither seems to be burdened by past or present circumstances that determine their fate. Identity is here conceived not as the result of unavoidable circumstantial forces but of free choices in a global world which has lost the traditional certainties of the nation-state to move in the direction of a fluid, ever-changing reality where divergent and equally valid options are available.

According to Bauman (2006:1-38), velocity, freedom and fluidity are the qualities that mark postmodern society. Human identity has been transformed from a "given" into a "task" and the "irrevocable" and "predetermined" have been superseded by the mobile and the uncertain. This remarkable shift is to be noticed even in fields like science where determinism used to be the guiding principle. As Bauman (2006:136) argues

Once moved by the belief that 'God does not play dice', that the universe is essentially deterministic and that the human task consists in making a full inventory of its laws so that there will be no more groping in the dark and human action will be unerring and always on target, contemporary science took a turn towards the recognition of the endemically indeterministic nature of the world, of the enormous role played by chance, and of the exceptionality, rather than the normality, of order and equilibrium.

The act of living in the present world is best understood in terms of figures like those of the game and the labyrinth "where the layout of the roads may not obey any law" and

where “chance and surprise” signal “the defeat of Pure Reason” (138). *White Teeth* bears witness to a flexible and humane conception of identity that agrees with the needs of a cosmopolitan, global, urban society.

Zadie Smith’s juggling with the principles of Aristotelian logic reflects the postmodern tendency to problematize the easy reliance on the ideologically founded realistic contract. Postmodernism is suspicious of the confusion between representation and reality that naturalism propounded and strives to raise awareness of the constructedness of meaning. This position is reflected in the narrator’s frequent interruption of the line of action to introduce metanarrative comments that lay bare the fictional device. These are usually short and come to introduce an analepsis (“Let’s rewind” *WT* 137), a descriptive passage (“But first a description” *WT* 23), or a prolepsis (“and keep an eye on that vase, please, it is the same vase that will lead Magid by the nose to his vocation” *WT* 213). In the same way, the use of isolated noun phrases which remind of stage directions break the illusion of reality so dear to the naturalist. In the last chapter of the novel (*WT* 529-530), the narrator uses this device to mark the setting of the successive actions that take place simultaneously inside and outside the lecture hall. The metanarrative comments are conspicuous enough to alert the reader about the presence of a mind organizing the fictional world. The message that such gestures communicate is that language and conventional forms of representation (such as the realist novel as a genre) create the meaning that they pretend to “merely reflect”. “From this perspective”, as Linda Hutcheon (7) sustains, what we call ‘culture’ is seen as the *effect* of representations, not their source”.

Even though *White Teeth* breaks with the realist contract at the level of general organization through the disruption of the contiguities of space, time and logic and

through the use of self-reflective metanarrative comments, at the level of each of the episodes, the novel relies repeatedly on the effect of verisimilitude in the delineation of characters and the account of events. It is in this way, according to Hutcheon (15), that postmodern art comes to de-doxify established values and forms of representation that characterize the modern. As she persuasively argues, the postmodern mode of representation both uses and abuses, inscribes and subverts previously established genres to deconstruct generally recognized values and alert the reader of ideologically naturalized constructions.

Zadie Smith's choice of the genre of comedy to deal with serious issues that are the concern of Postcolonialism can also be interpreted as a subversive gesture that breaks with expectations. Used to tragic accounts of the many penuries suffered by the colonial population under imperial rule, readers find the story of Hortense's mother in the British colony of Jamaica a refreshing surprise. The narrative includes many of the complaints against powerful empires that normally mark postcolonial fiction. From its first lines, chapter thirteen, "The Root Canals of Hortense Bowden", points to two evils that are seldom absent from this kind of plot: the abuse of power from the imperial envoys and their Enlightenment compulsion to "improve" the local population:

...it had not been enough for Captain Charlie Durham – recently posted to Jamaica – to impregnate his landlady's adolescent daughter one drunken evening in the Bowden larder, May 1906. He was not satisfied with simply taking her maidenhood. He had to *teach* her something as well. (WT 356)

The abuse of power from the representatives of the crown included all members of the local community. However, sexual harassment was the privileged mode when young women were involved. As to the question of education, the narrator soon explains that

“When an Englishman wants to be generous, the *first* thing you ask is why, because there is always a reason” (WT 357). The irony in every one of the statements above makes the criticism of imperial policies plain. Ambrosia, the young landlady’s daughter is abused in more than one way since the whole arrangement is based on deception. Under cover of generous behaviour, the British captain serves his own private purposes: after the regular lessons and “when Ambrosia’s mother was safely out of the house”, he taught her “anatomy, which was a longer lesson, given on top of the student as she lay on her back, giggling”. And this is not all since “mostly he taught her that she was no longer a maidservant, that her education had elevated her, that in her heart she was a lady, though her daily chores remained unchanged” (WT 357). The exploitation of the colony’s resources (human and natural) under cover of the “generous” offer of introducing the benefits of education and technical progress was a regular complaint in the colonial struggle. Local labour was used and abused to the imperial power’s convenience (when slavery was not enforced, labour was shamefully underpaid and workers enjoyed few rights or none at all). When Captain Durham’s time to return to Britain comes, he does so without notice and leaving Ambrosia with child. From this point on, the girl is sexually required by Durham’s friends but in true magical fashion, the structure of the novel provides the necessary circumstances to save her from their impositions: the first time it is her pregnancy that refrains Sir Edmund Flecker Glenard from taking her in as a house maid (“...the pregnancy became obvious. People began to talk. It simply wouldn’t do” WT 358). The second time Glenard attempts an assault on her; it is an earthquake that comes to her rescue. Sir Edmund Flecker Glenard leads her into a deserted church with the intention of abusing her when the earth starts to move:

Ambrosia stumbled from the scene, making it only as far as the confessionals before the ground split once more – a mighty crack! – and

she fell down, in sight of Glenard himself, who lay crushed underneath his angel, his teeth scattered on the floor, trousers round his ankles. (*WT* 361)

The hilarious scene relieves tension and the light tone is sustained by the introduction of the conventions of the fairy tale:

If this were a fairy tale, it would now be time for Captain Durham to play hero. He does not seem to lack the necessary credentials. It is not that he isn't handsome, or tall or strong, or that he doesn't want to help her, or that he doesn't love her (oh, he *loves* her; just as the English loved India and Africa and Ireland; it is the love that is the problem, people treat their lovers badly).... (*WT* 361)

The irony around the significance of the verb "love" is sustained throughout the chapter, a device made extensive to the double dealings of the imperial representatives whose professed feelings and intentions contradict the implications of their actions. The ethical quality of the whole imperial enterprise is put to the final test after the earthquake. The population of Jamaica is in extreme need owing to the natural disaster. However, when American ships arrive from Cuba carrying essential assistance, the governor of Jamaica-Sir James Swettenham- who classes all black women as whores and places them at the same level as livestock (*WT* 363), sends the ships back out of national arrogance, leaving the local population unassisted. Swettenham cannot tolerate that the Americans should be more resourceful than the British. National pride prevails over the urgent needs of the inhabitants of the colony. Even when the issues under scrutiny in this chapter imply serious ethical flaws, the comedic treatment is sustained without relinquishing the privilege of the exposure of evil. At the same time, both the

colonial and the imperial representatives become figures of fun: the British because of their shameless hypocrisy and the local population because of their extreme gullibility.

If the colonial past deserves a light tone, the same can be said of the treatment of the current postcolonial, global situation. The grimness of the topics involved in the power struggles studied by Postcolonialism can easily lead to the victimization of the underprivileged other. This tendency is shunned by Zadie Smith's novel and replaced by the celebration of difference. The statement that *White Teeth* makes is that global postmodernity does not only present viable circumstances for social conflict but also offers opportunities for the peaceful co-existence of difference. The celebration of diversity is achieved through the avoidance of judgment which leads to hierarchical distinctions among cultural traits. Through the use of the devices of irony and satire in the presentation of the attitudes and actions of characters belonging to both the immigrant and the host population a levelling effect is attained which discourages categorization. Simultaneously, the highlighting of similarities that characterize the opposing camps in the colonial divide collapses the effect of contrast and contributes to the building of bridges. The linear, black-and-white presentation of characters and situations that fosters the victimization of some groups and the indictment of others is replaced by the portrayal of a broad gamut of subtle nuances of personal response in the complex web of intercultural reactions. In this original scenario, contradiction, paradox and absurdity can apply as much to one as the other camp leaving both on equally uncertain ground.

One of the best examples of the use of such narrative devices in *White Teeth* is the masterfully depicted incident of the chase of a supposedly "Nazi" scientist by Archie and Samad during their forceful stay in Bulgaria at the end of the war. As

representatives of the British army, neither Bengali Samad nor English Archie, involved in this so-called military action, rises to the occasion. The narrator strongly satirizes the former's attempt to redeem himself by turning into a war hero through the seizure of the Nazi doctor. Samad is portrayed as drugged and incapable of sustaining his initial purpose. English Archie, on the other hand, dumbly follows his friend's early impetus to find that he is eventually challenged to kill the scientist himself. Both are equally laughable in their ineffectual wanderings and contrast sharply with the traditional picture of the glorious warrior. *White Teeth* always avoids the hypostatization of stereotypical ethnic traits. Personal characteristics and forms of reaction are unevenly distributed among the different individual characters irrespective of their national extraction. This is the case of the fear of miscegenation, which, though generally connected in Postcolonial studies with white people, is here approached from an unusual perspective:

But it makes an immigrant laugh to hear the fears of the nationalist, scared of infection, penetration, miscegenation, when this is small fry, *peanuts*, compared to what the immigrant fears – dissolution, *disappearance*. Even the unflappable Alsana Iqbal would regularly wake up in a puddle of her own sweat after a night visited by visions of Millat (genetically BB: where B stands for Bengali-ness) marrying someone called Sarah (aa where 'a' stands for Aryan), resulting in a child called Michael (Ba), who in turn marries somebody called Lucy (aa), leaving Alsana with a legacy of unrecognizable great-grandchildren (Aaaaaaa!), their Bengali-ness thoroughly diluted, genotype hidden by phenotype. (*WT* 327)

Fear of miscegenation is revealed to be present on both sides of the ethnic divide although with a slightly different tone to the sense of loss. From the immigrant perspective, the loss of purity feared by the white bears no comparison with the loss of the very existence of the peculiar in a sea of whiteness that they confront. Thus, in the present novel, and contrary to expectations, miscegenation is portrayed as a trait that surfaces among both West-Indian and Bengali characters as we see in Samad's and Clara's families:

When Millat brought an Emily or a Lucy back home, Alsana quietly wept in the kitchen, Samad went into the garden to attack the coriander. The next morning was a waiting game, a furious biting of tongues until the Emily or Lucy left the house and the war of words could begin. But with Irie and Clara the issue was mostly unspoken, for Clara knew she was not in a position to preach. Still she made no attempt to disguise her disappointment or the aching sadness. From Irie's bedroom shrine of green-eyed Hollywood idols to the gaggle of white friends who regularly trooped in and out of her bedroom, Clara saw an ocean of pink skins surrounding her daughter and she feared the tide that would take her away. (WT 328)

Reactions to the mixture of blood, however, are often contradictory or even paradoxical avoiding the creation of new stereotypes. Clara expresses her fears of her daughter's inclinations although she herself is married to white Archie while Bengali Millat, the source of his parents' apprehensions because of his obliviousness about ethnic difference, has an unusual reaction at the consideration of a possible union with half white, half West-Indian Irie: "...imagine what our kids would look like...Brown-



black. Blacky-brown. Afro, flat nose, rabbit teeth and freckles. They'd be freaks!" (WT 229). As to West-Indian Hortense, with her peculiarly extremist mode of thought, she rejects her daughter, refusing to speak with her again when Clara marries white Archie and expresses her views very clearly in the sense of keeping ethnic groups separate: "Black and white never come to no good. De Lord Jesus never meant us to mix it up...When you mix it up, nuttin' good can come. It wasn't *intended*" (WT 384-385). However, and in spite of her words, she loves and protects her grand-daughter Irie, the issue of that very mixture she so energetically objects to. In every one of the examples, the paradoxical approach to the issue of miscegenation is accompanied by a comedic tone which also contributes to the lightening of the emotional burden that the subject usually implies.

Surprising reactions and character traits which do not conform to expectations are to be found in many of the characters in the novel. The West-Indian Bowden family unselfconsciously and graphically sustains the prerogatives of the white race in Hortense's tapestry which proudly hangs in their living-room: "The anointed were all blond and blue-eyed and appeared as serene as Hortense's cheap wool would allow, and were looking down at the Great Crowd- who were happy-looking, but not as happy as the Anointed- frolicking on eternal paradise on earth" (WT 582). In spite of the character's staunch defence of her own coloured folks, she chooses white people to represent the saved. Similarly, and despite Samad's attack on Western false values and resistance to the principles that the English Chalfen represents, when it comes to the appreciation of his son Millat's achievements at school, he ascribes them to the influence of the Chalfens (WT 352). As to the power of Enlightenment tenets, these are not a prerogative of the English as we see in Magid's "conversion" to the Western creed to the point that his mother confesses that being with him is like "sitting down to

breakfast with David Niven” (WT 424). Similarly, Alsana, who fears the English for being “birds with teeth” who lead her children away from her (WT 345), cannot hide her admiration for English culture: “it was almost impossible to change [her] mind about the inherent reliability of her favoured English institutions, amongst them: Princess Anne, Blu-Tack, Children’s Royal Variety Performance, Eric Morecambe, *Woman’s Hour*” (WT 221).

The same tendencies to avoid stereotypes and to adhere to a light comedic approach are to be found in the treatment of the various tensions that arise in the locus of intercultural relations. In *White Teeth* cases of open physical violence exercised against immigrants refer exclusively to secondary characters and are dealt with summarily. This is the case of the Bangladeshi Muslim Mo Hussein, a member of KEVIN who suffered persecution from white attackers:

Mo had been knifed a total of five times (*Ah*), lost the tips of three fingers (*Eeeesh*), had both legs and arms broken (*Oaooow*), his feet set on fire (*jiii*), his teeth kicked out (*ka tooof*) and an airgun bullet (*ping*) embedded in his thankfully fleshy posterior. *Boof*. And Mo was a big man. A big man with attitude. The beatings had in no way humbled him, made him watch his mouth or walk with a stoop. He gave as good as he got. But this was one man against an army. There was nobody who could help. The very first time, when when he received a hammer blow to his ribs in January 1970, he naively reported it to the local constabulary and was rewarded by a late-night visit from five policemen who gave him a thorough kicking. Since then, violence and theft had become a regular part of his existence, a sad spectator sport watched by the old Muslim men and young Muslim

mothers who came in to buy their chicken, and hurried out shortly afterwards, scared they might be next. (WT 472)

The stereotypical presentation of the character of Mo as a victim, a pitiable character, is here avoided. In spite of the injustices suffered, the use of a broad, panoramic form of account, the colloquial language and the light approach all contribute to diminish the painful character of the whole and to retain the comedic tone.

As described above, *White Teeth* opposes the philosophical attitudes of Samad Iqbal and Marcus Chalfen and identifies them respectively with Eastern regard for the past and subjection to God's dictates, and with Western respect for free will and forward-looking resolve to expand and dominate. The first position is satirized through Samad's nostalgic, confused and futile life while the second is exposed through Chalfen's domineering and dismissive attitude. Both views are presented, dissected and laughed at for their weaknesses. Archie Jones has neither Iqbal's nor Chalfen's strong convictions: his intellectual limitations save him from both Chalfen's struggles to improve the lot of humanity and from Iqbal's philosophical wanderings and existential angst. Samad teasingly describes Archie as a "frontal lobotomy case" while Jones identifies himself as a humble representative of the sturdy English stock. His lack of aspirations, however, does not save him from satire as we see in the narrator's description of Archie and Samad's friendship:

In short, it was precisely the kind of friendship an Englishman makes on holiday. A friendship that crosses class and colour, a friendship that takes as its basis physical proximity and survives because the Englishman assumes the physical proximity will not continue. (WT 96)

In Smith's novel, the broad gamut of reactions and positions that characterize an intercultural society are displayed, levelled and satirized for their weaknesses as long as they are sustained as absolute and incontestable truth. Thus the acceptance of difference makes of hybridity a reality. The triumph of heterogeneity leads to the dissemination of power from the former centres to the peripheries erasing inequity and highlighting the positive aspects of postmodernity. Simultaneously, the rebellious quality of laughter subverts authority, shuns restrictions and empowers the low while the force of paradox rejects abstractions in favour of the immediacy of experience. The central message of *White Teeth* is that at all costs we should avoid the basic error of confusing the significance of the term "fundamental" with that of the word "fundamentalism" as the quotations that head the section entitled "Magid, Millat and Marcus" well illustrate (*WT* 413). The value of fundamental human experience should never be placed at the service of any system of ideas which might arrogate the power to rule supreme.

### 3.2.2. Bernardine Evaristo's *The Emperor's Babe*

Both Zadie Smith's *White Teeth* and Bernardine Evaristo's *The Emperor's Babe* show a remarkable interest in depicting the hybrid quality of current English society together with a concern with the tracing of historical antecedents to the present situation. These writers' work attempts to trace "the non-white presence in London" to ancient times (Cuder-Domínguez 176) highlighting by this means the mythical quality of the belief in an original all-white past.

From the dictum in the voice of Oscar Wilde: "The one duty we owe to history is to rewrite it", Bernardine Evaristo's *The Emperor's Babe* sets out to entice the reader with its grace and topicality. Both the form and the content of the epigraph closely correspond to the text it presides. The form introduces the celebrated Wildean epigrammatic irony which is well attuned to the tone of the novel while its content points to contemporary preoccupations with the problem of representation and the discursivity of history. The subsequent prologue cannot but surprise the reader who has not been challenged in the present times with the reading of novels in verse. However, far from daunting the unprepared reader, the fluid language awakens interest in what is to come with its conciseness and its vividness that synecdochically create the setting and present the central characters.

The first poem "Londinium Tour Guide (Unofficial)" prefigures the light and playful tone of the whole novel as much as its central themes and interests. Here we learn that this unusual piece will be about human relations from the viewpoint of the female protagonist for whom love is opposed to violence, betrayal, greed and lust, and the action will be framed by poverty and wealth, by the crude and the refined creating a complex web concerned with both the private and the public spheres of life. Against this

general background, the prologue already offers glimpses of the vivid description of life in Roman Londinium in 211 AD as well as an anticipation of the refreshing perception of historical accounts that the novel proposes. Zuleika, the autodiegetic poet-narrator exhibits a postmodern perspective by interweaving contemporary philosophical issues into the context of the Roman colony. Simultaneously, the prologue introduces us into the contemporary theme of hybridity activated in the multicultural character of third century Londinium with its mixtures of languages, nationalities and races. The portrayal of the hardships of immigration and diaspora that mark the protagonist's childhood with the family's migration from Khartoum to Londinium on a barge and the references to the unequal distribution of power between the sexes set an ironic parallel with the contemporary situation.

Throughout *The Emperor's Babe*, Evaristo shows that, like Oscar Wilde, she is highly conscious of the ideological value of the re-writing of history. If, as Walter Benjamin (68-69) argued, history is the account of the victors, its laborious re-statement can result in liberating gestures by giving new opportunities to those suppressed by the force of both the sword and the word. The issue of difference and discrimination in all its manifestations is central to the novel and though there is a chronological transposition, the postulates of postmodern theory are easily recognized in the setting of imperial Roman Londinium. The treatment of such issues is a most potent theme in the presentation and development of the central character. As a descendant of poor black African immigrants and as a woman, Zuleika knows she is a second class Roman citizen. Racism, imperialism and patriarchy, all exercise their powerful policies of domination on the vibrant young girl. Her sister-in-law makes this fact bluntly evident to her: "You will never be one of us" and later: "...Felix will never/ take you to Rome, Little Miss Noobia, / he has his career to think of" (EB 53). Although Zuleika

is married to an influential Roman [...a senator, military man, businessman...] and [...a landowner...] (*EB* 15)] whose parental family is close to the Emperor himself, she cannot aspire to social recognition: “To the patrician I was always less than, / As if my very birth were an aberration” (*EB* 197). She is lonely in the company of the high-class guests her husband procures:

...The wives of the Great and Good  
talk over my shoulder – Antistia was spot on,

I will never be a Grand Dame  
with a face of stale dough, cracks and all.

I am so used to eating alone, in company. (*EB* 75)

Class is one more variable under whose shadow Zuleika is made to suffer. This fact reinforces the connections with contemporary ideological realities since in the British imaginary the question of race is closely connected with that of class (Loomba 123). None of the issues at stake in the particular crossroads where the protagonist finds herself can be dealt with in isolation and treatment of one will invariably bring in the other/s. The construction of identity plays on the thin border line between identification and alienation. Self assertion can imply the exclusion of any person, object or trait which does not belong to the self. The more alien the other appears to be; the easier it becomes to make him/her into an intractable Other from whom the self wants to differentiate itself. The process of hypostatization that ensues can turn the other into a stereotypically negative object as Frantz Fanon so vividly describes in “The Fact of Blackness”. To this must be added the identification of the coloured, the colonized and the female that results from the metaphorical constructions that trace analogies among

these unprivileged groups. A good example of the identification of the woman and the colonized is to be seen in the traditional iconographic representation of the new continent as a naked woman in the European imaginary of the historical event that came down in history as the Discovery of America (Dainotto 39). The white man subconsciously identified the conquest and possession of the land with that of the woman. The ideological traces described can be identified in the characterization of Zuleika: in the lines quoted above, we see how she is ignored, treated as a non-human entity, how she becomes almost invisible at a dinner party in her own house. If, according to Césaire (in Lomba 133), colonization can be equated to “thingification”, the situation is doubly unfavourable to an exotic black woman in colonial Londinium. As a young girl she has to suffer the greedy gaze of the owner of a brothel who wants to annex her for the enjoyment of his clients. Although she escapes this tragic fate, she soon learns that the white man’s gaze frames the black other as his prey and she can recognize the “hungry eyes” of her male guests

who will strip her naked and fling her

On the floor in the blinking nanosecond

Of a Rapid Eye Movement,

That she is a knock-out objet d’art. (*EB* 75)

Similarly, she is dealt with as merchandise by his father “who sold his daughter to the highest bidder” (*EB* 80) as well as by her husband for whom she is no more than an object for his comfort and pleasure. No understanding or mutual knowledge mediates their relation. Although Zuleika lives in comfort, nothing she has is for free as she says in reference to the services of her masseuse, which she values highly: “If I am good to Felix, she comes every day, / If not, I do without. (Such / is the price of a blow job.)”



(*EB* 73). The treatment she receives is not very different from that her Caledonian slave girls get from Tranio, Felix's "Head Honcho": "He surely takes the girls as he pleases" (*EB* 70), Zuleika assumes. Colonial policy was marked by the ghost of rape, which, according to Loomba (164), became a "recurrent metaphor for colonial relations". From Zuleika's wedding night, which she describes as "my first night in the Kingdom of the Dead" (*EB* 19), rape presides over her marital relations. In this world there is no consideration for women's feelings or needs and degradation comes in the form of objectification or of the comparison with animals. Zuleika expresses compassion for Septimus Severus' former courtesan who is compared to the Horse of Troy by the populace once she loses favour: "Alas, she had passed her sell-by-date" (*EB* 116). She herself feels like a marinated pig when "oiled and scraped" (*EB* 74) by her servants<sup>14</sup>.

Diminished by all around, her father and her husband as well as by her mother who ignores her showing an obvious preference for her male offspring, Zuleika finds companionship and understanding in her friends Venus and Alba who sustain her to the end. Nevertheless, her close friends cannot understand her artistic ambitions: their aims are reduced to the satisfaction of more immediate, coarser pleasures. At the same time, her patriarchal entourage disapproves of female efforts at emancipation as expressed by Felix in conversation with Anlamani (*EB* 17):

...I have been looking for a nice,

Simplex, quiet, fidelis girl, a girl

who will not betray me with affairs,

who will not wear me out with horrid fights,

---

<sup>14</sup> It is of interest to notice here that the treatment of the woman in the novel corresponds with historical accounts of the period recreated by the setting of the novel (Veyne 50-59)

unlike my pater's subsequent three wives,  
  
who made my life hell, *and* his,  
  
who were of the hedonistic breed  
  
of aristocratic matronae, determined to compete  
  
with the husband in all spheres,  
  
ever boastful of their sexual shenanigans,  
  
humiliating the dear gentle man in public  
  
and prepared to argue until dawn on matters  
  
of politics, world affairs and the arts. (*EB* 16)

In the exchange above, Felix plainly explains what kind of a wife he wants: a woman who will not expect to be treated as an equal, who will keep quiet and refrain from disturbing him. Female disadvantage is also made patent in comparison with the chances for education and advancement that her brother enjoys in spite of his poor intellectual endowments and his reluctance to learning. Zuleika, on the other hand, is never given the opportunity of choice although her husband is ready to offer “lessons in *elegantia*” (*EB* 17), which he agrees on only because he believes that they might contribute to his social advancement. A man among men, her tutor Theodoros shares the reigning patriarchal ideology and disbelieves in her talents.

The critical description of Theodoros's views in Zuleika's voice is an intertextual re-elaboration of Virginia Woolf's arguments in her essay *A Room of One's Own* where she highlights the harassment and deprivation that women have suffered in

the course of history. Erased from historical accounts and denied access to economic means, personal freedom and education, women have been confined to the private sphere of life where they have served “as looking- glasses possessing the magic and delicious power of reflecting the figure of man at twice its natural size” (*ROO* 37). This description corresponds to Felix’s expectations as to his future wife. A simple, plebeian, uneducated, and consequently dumb woman can be the ideal background against which his aristocratic figure can be enhanced. In her essay, Woolf expands on the formidable material difficulties women encountered, which did not allow for the building of their necessary self-confidence. To these factors, the lack of an audience and of a female tradition in writing must be added to contribute more impediments to the task of becoming a writer. Echoes of all these restrictions are recognized in Theodoros’s “authoritative” advice to her pupil. Zuleika is made to read the poetry of Homer, Pliny Jr., and Virgil, which she finds boring and irrelevant to her own interests. Theodoros sustains that Zuleika’s personal experience can have little interest as subject matter for poetry and that “all notable poets were men” (*EB* 84). He also devalues the productions of female writers whom he does not even care to name, using the disrespectful expression “butch dyke” (*EB* 84) to refer to them. Zuleika recognizes her lack of experience in the wide world but sustains that her interest lies in topical matters close to her own secluded life. The lack of support she suffers from her environment is well portrayed in a scene in the novel in which Zuleika invites her parents and brother home. When after dining together she manages to build up enough courage to disclose her ambition of becoming a writer, she receives no response or enticement from her relatives. Her mother remains oblivious of her as usual, her brother is unresponsive mostly because his mind is dazed by over eating and drinking and her father barely succeeds to recover from his doze to remind her that she should give him a grand-child.

None is sympathetic or even slightly interested in her predicament and the only answer she gets bids her to fulfil the biological duty of motherhood. Zuleika, like the imaginary female authors Woolf digresses about in her essay, is furious in her impotence and is left without an audience for the poem she offers to read: “I was exhausted, my cheeks burnt, / My fists were clenched, my chest was tight, / I was frowning, I was frothing...” (EB 85-86). In spite of indifference and opposition and inspired by love to Severus, she finds the strength to organize a “verbosa orgia” in the hope to gather an audience for her poetry. This attempt would also fail since, even before she has the chance to read,

Verbosa orgia had descended into an almighty

Piss-up, fill-up and throw-up, the floor  
was a pit of writhing flesh, grunts and gasps,

even Valeria and Aemilia were entangled

In a foursome at the back. (EB 199)

Deprived and harassed, Zuleika sees her ambitions curtailed. She is destined to have no voice since those around her deny and silence her: “from the first days of our marriage- / *Silentium mulieri praestat ornatum*, / silence is a woman’s best adornment-” (EB143). As part of the “muted” group (Ardner qtd. in Spender 76) she has no rights and is generally ignored, becoming a mere “plaything” even for her lover Severus who does not consider her a worthy audience for his words:

Somewhere over my left shoulder,  
had appeared an audience. All the men

in my life did this, as if their words

were too important for my ears alone.” (EB 145)

As Loomba (158) reminds us, “...colonial sexual encounters...often exploited inequities of class, age, gender, race and power”. In the case of our protagonist every one of the descriptors mentioned is activated. An older white man and a powerful aristocrat, Felix exploits his wife on the basis of his precedence. As a victim, she cannot be at a greater disadvantage and this fact is patent from the first stages of their connection through an understanding between Felix and her father in which she is bought from her own family. Anlamani is ready to lie about his daughter’s character traits so that Felix will choose her as his wife and he can find himself in the advantageous position of son-in-law to a rich senator. Rage and despair seizes Zuleika at this point: she feels betrayed, but she knows that she cannot fight against the greedy patriarch. The trap has been set and there is no way to escape:

I knew I had to accept my fate. I *could* throw

countless tantrums, I *was* an expert,

but it would go ahead, regardless.

The man’s voice carried such utter imperium,

and he expressed such an awful desire for me. (EB 18-19)

In the above lines, we can see the utter deprivation to which women were subjected in the past. They had no voice about their own destiny; this was sealed by men’s dictum.

The objectification to which Zuleika is subjected is reflected in the life of other underprivileged groups in the fictional Londinium such as the slaves, most notably Zuleika’s Caledonian girls in whom the protagonist recognizes the uncanny presence of aspects of herself: “Fascinating, so vile, yet something / Just for me, id and ego. Pets”

(*EB* 55). Little respect for individual human life is to be found in this society where people could “murder over seats” at the amphitheatre (*EB* 114) to watch men and women fight an unequal bloody battle against voracious wild animals who eventually devour them to the boisterous excitement of the audience. Although Zuleika is a woman of her times and she participates of the spectacle, her sensitive spirit is affected by the extreme brutality of the scene, “boiling” (*EB* 179) tears drop from her eyes and when the excitement subsides, numbness and emptiness overcomes her.

The titles to the last three poems in section VII that deal with the amphitheatre spectacle sustain a running commentary on the connection between violence and power. The poem “Nulli Secundus. (Second to None)”, whose title points to the emperor, describes the ceremonial opening of the amphitheatre presided by the supreme authority and gives details of the first part of the show including Zuleika’s reaction which fuses the shock of fierce violence with her own intimate experience of rape and betrayal. The poem skilfully relates references to her father, her husband and her lover to point to the iniquities that lacerate the inner life of the young woman in Zuleika, the innocent target of male power. The next poem “Abyssus Abyssum (One Depravity Leads to Another)” recounts the gladiator show from the portrayal of the Olympian figure of the popular hero to the delirious response of the audience at his victory. The piece is worked in great detail and restrained force, highlighting the depraved lustful enjoyment of the mastery of the overwhelmingly superior power of the Eradicator over his helpless victim. The last poem in the section, “All the Evil of the World let Loose”, much shorter and condensed, retakes the personal tone from the very title with its allusion to Pandora’s box, a reference already present in the last lines of “Nulli Secundus. (Second to None)”, where Zuleika feels that the spectacle has cracked open her own Pandora’s Box. The last poem in Section VII is a concluding statement that makes patent the

destructive effect of the bloody amphitheatre spectacle with great restraint and sobriety avoiding the iridescence of sensory images that characterizes other sections of *The Emperor's Babe*. The titles to the poems in this section give special relevance to the central theme of the link between power and violence which is extensively developed in the texts they preside.

In spite of the novel's obvious indictment of imperial and patriarchal injustice as well as of the violent daily habits of what is to contemporary sensibility a barbarous age, *The Emperor's Babe* is notorious for its humorous touches, and light ironic tone which prevail in the reader's mind over its darker shades. If the workings of power in human relations can bring about pain, life can also offer opportunities for mutual understanding, moments of tenderness and reciprocal pleasure. If sex can be spelt in terms of rape, death and hell ("Till Death Do Us"), it can also be grotesquely funny ("Amo, Amas, Amat") or it can mean simply bliss ("Post-coital Consciousness"); if death brings the irredeemable end, the shattering of hope ("Vale, Farewell, my Lybian", and "Albatross"), it can also be approached with humour even if it is our own ["Vade in Pace. (Go in Peace)"]. The potent force of love is recognized as the feeling that can redeem all human weaknesses. Love's positive, sustaining value is primordially present in the relationship between Zuleika, Venus and Alba, the three close friends who, in spite of occasional squabbles and mutual jealousy sustain each other in good and bad times. Their meetings are mostly recounted in dramatic form, in dialogues full of pep, tenderness and good humour, together with frequent touches that reveal the personality of each of the characters with the use of verse never obstructing the vivid, realistic portrayal. Evaristo is here successful in the difficult task of making verse an unobtrusive medium in contemporary literature. At the same time, she manages to eschew the modern exclusive association of versification with the serious. Her style is flexible and

adaptable enough to convey as much the most intimate and tragic feelings [“Till Death Do Us”- Section I- and “Animula Vagula (Little Soul Flitting Away)”- Section X] as moments of intense elation (“Thus one may Go to the Stars”-Section VIII- and “Post-coital Consciousness”- Section V) all interspersed with light comic touches. The adventures of the character-focalizer are infused with her moods that subtly go from the ironic and playful, to the bitter, the ecstatic or the solemn. The style is rich and powerful but the rhetoric avoids the danger of pomposity by the humorous twist that brings the writing back to sobriety.

The comic element is often the result of the use of anachronisms, which in their intrinsic hybridity bridge the gap between ancient and present times. This rhetorical device brings the ancient world closer to our own experience without distorting the spirit of the historical time as we see in the use of contemporary designer labels (Valentino, Armani, and Gucci) to refer to the clothes worn by the wealthy Romans. Historians mention the fact that in the ancient Roman Empire, the rich spent huge amounts of money on well-cut garments produced by professional tailors (Koner 240 - 249). Equally, Alba advises Zuleika to get a personal trainer or go to a gym and forget about Felix. Even if these allusions are contemporary, the Romans valued physical exercise and the famous Baths were also partly gyms (Koner 277) (Veyne 196). At other times anachronisms are activated in the choice of lexis: terminology used today to refer to international commerce is chosen to describe the management of the state by Severus (*EB* 144) or the slave trade (“multinational slave-trading agency” *EB* 126). Such references remind us that, although international commerce was not then as powerful and tightly organized as today, the Roman Empire was a global world and international commerce with Africa and the East through Greece was current.



The vivid effect created by the use of anachronisms is also sustained by the impressionistic style that characterizes the setting and the character portrayal. The reader is introduced to the bustle and thriving activity of every-day life in the far-off Roman colony and shares in the life of both the poor who lived in the streets (the early Zuleika) and the rich who enjoyed the luxuries of spacious facilities ( her later married life). Either walking along the narrow, dirty and crowded streets or racing out of town and into the nearby countryside in an open carriage, the reader is immersed in the local life with its smells, sounds and sights and shares in the character's excitement.

*The Emperor's Babe* has a very neat structure, framed by a prologue that alerts readers to what is to come and an epilogue that confirms the readers' perception of the empathy between writer and character. Evaristo manages what "Vivat Zuleika" proposes: to slip into the character's skin to come to know her "from the inside" (*EB* 252). The use of an autodiegetic addresser no doubt contributes to the creation of an intimate atmosphere which the reader enters to become one skin, one mind, and one heart with the child Zuleika who, in spite of the variety and depth of her life experiences, is only eighteen by the time both the novel and her life end. The ten sections into which the poems are classed respect diachrony: the story goes from Zuleika's family origins and childhood moving into a married life plagued by growing dissatisfaction, unease, and failed personal ambition, to her encounter with desire and power in the figure of her exalted lover Emperor Septimus Severus together with her adult engagement in social violence at the spectacle in the amphitheatre, which is significantly followed by the protagonist's experience of sexual climax and her encounter with death.

However, in spite of the realistic traits mentioned (vivid setting and characterization, respect for the spirit of the historical period, together with general

adherence to chronology and logical organization), *The Emperor's Babe* mirrors the postmodern condition subversive quality in a large variety of creative ways. As much in form as in content, the novel subscribes to the fall of the great metanarratives of the Western world: progress in history, patriarchy, imperialism and racism are all put to question in a heterogeneous form that subverts the realistic construct from inside. If the novel can be read as a realistic portrayal of a girl's coming of age with its pains and joys, this is no doubt realism plus something else sustaining the postmodern bias for double-coding (Jencks 288). In its mixture of the high and the low, the past and the present, the serious and the comic, poetry and narrative, history and fiction, this novel is de-centring and hybrid. The latter qualities are made obvious in the varied population of Londinium where different ethnicities and colours intermingle, in the mixture of Latin and English in the language of the characters as well as in the frequent use of anachronisms which include the use of contemporary youthful slang by the third century protagonists. In this way, the novel allows for multiplicity even when the central consciousness is exclusively Zuleika's. The instability of meaning and the simultaneity of possible interpretations that the above devices inspire are vividly present in Zuleika's words when close to her own end: Felix isn't a bad man, you know. /He's the person he was brought up to be (*EB* 147). Even when the reader has the tendency to side with the protagonist, especially one like Zuleika who has been evidently wronged by circumstances, s/he is left with the impression that there is always another side to an argument. No central, total (with its implication of totalitarianism) answer should be subscribed.

The treatment of history shows an equally postmodern perspective. The accurate novelistic recreation of the ancient Roman past, without falsifications or sentimentality, and with the inclusion of a real historical figure in the person of the Emperor, gestures

in the direction of the present-day consideration of history as narrative with the inevitable erasure of the border between fact and fiction. History, the novel seems to say, is recreated each time it is recounted. Events become in the telling. Simultaneously, the treatment of current issues in the context of ancient times debunks the modern conception of progress, showing that in spite of much advancement in technology and science, we are still debating similar existential questions. The use of anachronisms is especially significant as an index which points in the direction of the identification of both worlds, a fact that can be interpreted as a gesture of agreement with Lyotard's concept of the postmodern as a mode rather than a historical period.

The hybrid quality of the novel with its echoes of the carnivalesque together with its choice of light comedy as a generic inscription to deal with serious issues contribute to the breaking of boundaries understood in Brah's terms:

Borders: Arbitrary dividing lines that are simultaneously social, cultural and psychic; territories to be patrolled against those whom they construct as outsiders, aliens, the Others: forms of demarcation where the very act of prohibition inscribes transgression; zones where fear of the Other is fear of the self; places where claims to ownership – claims to “mine”, “yours” and “theirs” – are staked out, contested, defended, and fought over. (Brah 1996: 198)

If, as deployed above, most evils in the history of humanity can be ascribed to the erection of borders, *The Emperor's Babe* can be described as making a contribution in the direction of sustaining the opposite policy. The kaleidoscopic world that Bernardine Evaristo creates in the present novel sends a positive message in spite of its darker shades: the violence of discrimination is not allowed to prevail over the richness of human solidarity. The ties that build the protective shield under which Zuleika and her

friends gather are woven of common social complaints in the form of gender issues. However, these do not cohere in the form of identity politics. Venus exemplifies hybridity in her ambiguous sexual affiliation showing that gender is a personal choice the character takes even if it implies alienation from family and class ties. The pain of estrangement is assuaged by new connections established in freedom, which sustain Venus in the process of becoming the hybrid being she chooses to be. None of the three main feminine characters in the novel can be seen as a helpless victim since they actively forge their own lives and cooperate to sustain one another in adversity. Not even Zuleika who is poisoned by her enraged husband can be inscribed as a victim of circumstances. Within the limitations imposed by the cultural conditions that characterize her environment, she makes her own decisions and takes her risks.

*The Emperor's Babe* identifies the protagonist with the plight of women and places her at the centre of the stage in the concluding poems. In the last two pieces: "Vade in Pace (Go in Peace)" and "Vivat Zuleika" we can observe the presence of specific iconography, which, in spite of its unobtrusiveness in the midst of the simple and colloquial language that characterizes the novel, produces a specific effect in the reader's mind. In her last hour, we find Zuleika in the atrium between two columns (*EB* 252), dramatically laid on a golden bed and dressed in violet and gold ("Dress me in my violet damask dalmatica/with gold thread...*EB* 248). Apart from its connection with mourning, the colour violet, as well as the precious gold, symbolically refers to royalty and nobility. Suffering and discrimination have ennobled Zuleika whose present circumstances are explicitly paralleled to those of the Emperor himself. The first few lines of "Vade in Pace" explain that while Zuleika is slowly dying, Felix is attending "the Emperor's wake in York" (*EB* 243). The same implication can be identified in the circumstance that the protagonist imaginatively conceives of herself as at the top of the

power scale: “I’d have made a good empress” (*EB* 249). The inclusion of the adjective “obsidian” in “Vivat Zuleika” (*EB* 253) to describe the protagonist’s skin as she lies in her deathbed may count as another symbolical reference in a similar direction. This black, glassy stone<sup>15</sup> was connected to spiritual wealth among Western Oregon tribes, and obsidian knives were a symbol of rank and authority among other ancient cultures both in America and Africa. Simultaneously, although her death will certainly not summon a gathering of influential people like her lover’s, she also deserves a mausoleum (“My home had become my mausoleum” *EB* 243). The use of this lexical item contributes to exalt her figure since it implies a comparison with the beloved Mausolus, the king of Halicarnassus, in whose honour a magnificent tomb was built.

But probably the most suggestive of all the symbolical references at the end of the novel is the presence of Medusa (“...your couch faces a pool//fed by the aching stone mouth of Medusa” *EB* 253). Apart from contributing to convey further significance to the story of the Londinium girl, the mythical Gorgon’s name comes to affirm many of the central themes in the novel. Some critics assume that the Gorgons<sup>16</sup> were a nation of women and that their conquest by Perseus may contain the historical memory of the fundamental cultural change from matriarchal to patriarchal forms of cultural organization. This aspect of the myth can be linked to the many indices in the novel that point to the power struggle between the sexes. The reversal of the current supremacy of patriarchy with the contribution of the re-evaluation of the feminine is present in Medusa’s myth in the mysterious power of the Gorgon who could bestow both life and death (a drop of her blood could either kill or cure). Psychologically, the

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<sup>15</sup> Information taken from *The Art of Ceremony*  
[http://www.willamette.edu/arts/hfma/pdf/teacher\\_guides/Art\\_of\\_Ceremony.pdf](http://www.willamette.edu/arts/hfma/pdf/teacher_guides/Art_of_Ceremony.pdf) (August 2, 2011)  
and *Quebec History*  
<http://faculty.marianopolis.edu/c.belanger/quebechistory/encyclopedia/IndianKnives.htm> (August 2, 2011).

<sup>16</sup> Information taken from *American Literature. Medusa in Myth and Literature*.  
[http://www.english.illinois.edu/maps/poets/a\\_f/bogan/medusamyth.htm](http://www.english.illinois.edu/maps/poets/a_f/bogan/medusamyth.htm). August 4, 2011.

latter fact can be referred to men's fear and awe of women as the begetter of men and the source of castration patently present in the ancient legend of the dentate vagina. Even if these particular motifs and legends are not mentioned anywhere in the novel, the clear intention of *The Emperor's Babe* marks its interest in fostering the precedence of women by rescuing the mystery of their power from the ancient past. Zuleika's intimate and friendly colloquy with her bosom friend Alba in "Vade in Pace" also acquires added significance against the background of the Medusa myth. The Gorgon's mask had the force of a talisman that protected men from the power of women and kept them away from their secret mysteries and ceremonies; at the same time it was worn by young virgins to safeguard their maidenhood against the lust of men. The echoes of the myth in the novel enhance the fictional theme of friendly intimacy among women to the level of feminine mysteries from which men are barred. It is also to be noted that Zuleika was the victim of her husband's brutal lust; the presence of the Gorgon points to the end of Zuleika's fears under Medusa's protection. The final message of Evaristo's novel is enriched by the occurrence of the silent and majestic mythical stature of Medusa, the guardian of Hades. At the moment of Zuleika's death, the presence of Medusa contributes to the elevation of the humble and innocent figure of the protagonist and to the simultaneous reverberation of a multitude of powerful echoes connecting her character with the plight of women in history.

### 3.2.3. Meera Syal's *Life isn't all ha ha hee hee* and *Anita and Me*.

Meera Syal's novels *Life isn't all ha ha hee hee*, and *Anita and Me*, the same as the novels by Smith and Evaristo analyzed above, are concerned with a globalized and heterogeneous London. Interracial connections are inherent to the background of Syal's novels and crop up circumstantially in incidents that concern the protagonists who share a common Indian ancestry. The themes of betrayal, cultural clash and minority patriarchy<sup>17</sup> are common to both of Syal's novels. However, negative tendencies are not predominant since in both cases the general tone is hopeful with humorous touches and the topics that imply confrontation are judiciously balanced by the themes of personal solidarity, and intercultural understanding.

Much of the interest of *Life isn't all ha ha hee hee* lies in the study of intercultural connections in today's cosmopolitan London. The history of the process that has led to the present-day mixture of ethnicities in England is metonymically present in Syal's novel through the panoramic account of the vicissitudes suffered by a particular London property, the Buzz Bar, the setting of a dramatic scene in the development of the plot. Through this account we learn that the building was originally state property: it functioned as a Victorian workhouse in the disreputable East End of London, synonymous of immigrant life, squalor and extreme poverty. As time went by, the property was bought by a Jewish family who landed in London escaping from persecution in Eastern Europe and who turned it into a warehouse. After three generations of commercial activity on the premises, the family earned enough capital to move to the rapidly expanding middle class suburb of Woodford where they

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<sup>17</sup> The expression "minority patriarchy" has specific application in the field of multiculturalism as defined by Reitman (216): "As a working definition the term 'minority patriarchy' denotes the collective category of individual or tangible practices producing patriarchal forms of regulation which arise out of a minority's distinct set of norms or codes, submission to which is considered defining in some significant way of group membership or as a maker of identity"

“relocate[ed] the ghetto” (*LHH* 155). Meanwhile, the former workhouse was bought by an Arab family, the Wahaabs, who withstood the racial hostility of their neighbours for decades until they experienced a marvellous transformation of their world as the East End was renovated and became a thriving community thanks to the initiative of Bangladesh immigrants. Imran Wahaab reflects on the strangeness of the situation: “How odd ... so much time and concrete spent keeping the world at bay, and now the world comes smiling and spending to us” (*LHH* 156). Globalization contributes to the rapid transformation of the social and ethnic characteristics of the neighbourhood and to the effacement of hostile relations to the benefit of all in new forms of prosperous interaction. In the new circumstances, Wahaab sells his property to a young and flashy Bengali businessman who transforms it into the fashionable Buzz Bar decorated to imitate a rustic Indian village dwelling, the setting for the meeting of the ethnic community that people the world of Syal’s novel for a film premiere. The history of this particular London building comes to symbolize both the multi-ethnic background in which the characters live and their own mixed allegiances. Their family histories are often the result of successive diasporas as illustrated by the extraction of Chila, one of the three female protagonists of the novel. Her parents were originally from India but they now lived in London after years of residence in Africa. This circumstance leads her to ponder: “Strange, she called herself Indian when she had never been there. And her parents rarely talked about Africa as their regret at leaving overwhelmed any joy or remembrance” (*LHH* 303). In spite of the feeling of loss at the home left behind, and although by the end of the novel Chila plans a long-delayed visit to India, the level of assimilation of the diasporic population is high and the elder generation do not idealize the community of origin because “the India they all knew had vanished around the time of black and white films and enforced sterilization” (*LHH* 193-194).



Within the diasporic space of London, *Life isn't all ha ha hee hee* deals with the complexity of inter-cultural issues as well as with relations within the Indian community whose members establish strong emotional links with family and friends. Inter and intra-ethnic and generational connections give shape to the young protagonists' subjectivities. As to young Asians' adaptation to English culture, Michael D. Giordana (66) sustains that, "according to a 1995 study, Asian youth in south London variously identified themselves as British, Asian and British Asian", a diverse mode of self-recognition that shows young people's integration in U.K. society. Although the British media of the 70's and 80's tended to identify Asian youth with "culture clash" and "intergenerational conflict", Avtar Brah (2007:245) sustains there is no justification to believe that young Asians suffer from identity conflicts or that the differences that separate the young and the old within the same community usually evolve into conflict. According to this theorist, Asian British identities are "closely interwoven into the British social and cultural fabric" (250) as much among the young as among the older generations. These sociological descriptions are confirmed by the situations described in Syal's novel. If the young characters often show disagreement with their parents, this never leads to open conflict and the differences are negotiated. Even when Indian parents, being more traditional, prefer Asian girls as mates for their sons while Indian boys have a tendency to choose white girls, the outcome of the difference never gets anywhere near rupture of family relations. Deepak's parents never think of rejecting their son when he selects white girl-friends but they are naturally delighted when he finally decides to marry a Punjabi girl: "They almost wept with relief, having endured a parade of blonde trollops through their portals for most of their son's youth" (*LHH* 12) Sunita (another of the female protagonists of the novel) half mockingly theorizes that the youths' choice is the expression of Asian revenge against

white men: they steal their women from them. Be as it may, and even if the older generation keep their religion, their marriage and burial customs and wear traditional Asian clothing, none of this will prevent the young from going their own way and showing their identification with Western ways such as having sex outside marriage or wearing lycra and stiletto heels, or combining bindis with leather jackets.

However, the influence is not unidirectional since transculturation is a feature of contemporary British social reality that has to be traced as back as the Greeks and Romans: “Britain has carried the imprint of Asia, Africa and the Middle East for at least two millennia” (Brah 2007: 247). Such a pervading influence is detected today in the success of Asian cool, a fact the novel refers to through the description of the thriving Little India or in the presentation of individual characters’ reaction to Indian culture. White Britons may feel slightly puzzled at cultural difference as when a group of English guests at an Indian wedding (*LHH* 26) do not understand why there is an outburst of wailing and sobbing from the bride and her family at the newly-weds’ departure after a long day of happy rejoicing. White characters, for their part, are also depicted as attracted by foreign ways in the “contact zone” as when the white Mr Keegan (*LHH* 331) shows his admiration for the friendliness, and the open expression of warm affection among Asians at a funeral cremation. On the other hand, creolization is patently expressed in an incident that involves the third protagonist of the novel. When her boss expresses his desire that she should reduce her creative work to the portrayal of Asian life, Tania retorts: “No more grubbing in the ghetto, I’m mainstream now” (*LHH* 258). The young woman’s reply appears as a dramatic representation of the metaphorical meaning of Ashcroft et al’s title *The Empire Writes Back*. Tania refuses to be identified primarily as Asian or ethnic and demands to be accepted as an artist without undue restrictions. At the same time her words imply that as an Asian she does

not belong to the fringe. Although *Life isn't all ha ha hee hee* (144, 230) offers occasional instances of ethnic stereotyping and discrimination, it is possible for the Indian community in London to lead peaceful and successful lives in a heterogeneous, multiethnic environment.

The hybrid culture of the protagonists is expressed as much in the environment that surrounds them as in every detail of their busy lives. Tania describes a crossroads in Little India as follows:

There was border control, the Victorian police station on the corner which separated the Eastenders from the Eastern-Enders: on one side auto-parts shops and a McDonald's, on the other, Kamla's Chiffons and the beginning of two miles of sweet emporiums, café-dhabas, opulent jewellers and surprisingly expensive Asian fashion boutiques. It was possible, literally, to stand with a foot in each world on this corner. (*LHH* 40)

Although the narrator uses the word "border" in reference to this imaginary line, the division is far from clear as we see by the fact that the young people who haunt the place wear Westernized Indian clothes and listen to recognizable Indian tunes against a background of Western Acid rhythms following the postmodern trends. Equally hybrid is their attitude to uses and customs in the relation between the sexes as seen in the conduct of the young at Asian wedding parties:

It was a game the young singles all played at weddings, regardless of the secret lives and liaisons outside these rarefied hours. For now, they could flirt as their forefathers must have done, brush up their smouldering techniques, pretend that their futures were arranged at such venues under

the eyes of their parents, rather than on their mobile phones on the way home. (*LHH* 25)

The behaviour of young Indian people in terms of marriage customs exhibits the inevitable influence of Western traditions; however, they still recognize the old ways as part of their culture and respond to them even if more in the spirit of a game which they enjoy playing.

On the opposite side of this imaginary divide, many white Britons respond favourably to Asian ways, which have become a fashionable choice since “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” (*LHH* 109). The general feeling in the novel is of constant change and mutual influence leading to identities in flux. Akash, Sunita’s husband, expresses this view when he refers to his generation as “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” (*LHH* 103). The capacity for agency in identity construction is a salient point in the quotation above. This fact can be recognized in both male and female characters in the novel as can be read between the lines in Tania’s expression, “I can go to a rave one night, and the next morning be cooking in the communal temple kitchen! Watch how I glide effortlessly from old paths to new pastures, creating a new culture as I walk on virgin snow!” (*LHH* 148). The character’s words express her vivid experience of interrelations between diasporic subjects in the liminal space of cultural merging. Tania has created a new culture and forged her own identity in her relations with other Asians as well as with her white lover Martin who admires Asian culture and whom she values as her “big blond giant, [the] Viking of [her] heart” (*LHH* 153), feeling grateful because his difference

liberates her from her past. Affective relations between diverse ethnic groups solidify interconnectivity and validate social bonds.

In the affair between the brown Tania and the white Martin several central postmodern issues converge. His stand as a white, heterosexual, middle class male is portrayed as anodyne since it offers no doors into adventurous, heroic feats in postmodern circumstances. As a male he has lost the traditional role of economic dominance as is illustrated by the fact that Tania's income pays the common bills. As a result of his personal situation Martin feels that "[n]owadays, there [aren't] enough opportunities for a man to feel, well, manly" (*LHH* 111). The loss of centrality of man in the private sphere of life is here made patent and interpreted as a characteristic of the contemporary social structure. Now the interest lies in the fringes, the interstices; this is the liminal space where creativity can flourish. Tania's boyfriend feels lost, with no cause to fight for and regrets that the particular socio-cultural crossroads where he stands deprives him of the possibility of developing his creativity:

Now if he had been born a black woman, a single mother on a council estate with an errant ex-partner, bossy God-fearing parents and a radical lesbian rapper for a sister, he could write something amazing. Not a comedy maybe, but something with soul, purpose, fire. He would have suffered, the first prerequisite for creating Great Art<sup>18</sup>. (*LHH* 110)

Martin's identification of border positions in the form of the female gender, a black skin, and sexual deviance points to the themes of patriarchy, racism and sexism. Tania's lover sees the struggle against these social evils as a kind of justification in the face of the community, a fact that leads him to admire the epic quality of Tania's life: "It was all so epic! The upheaval of emigration, the overpowering patriarchal father, a dying

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<sup>18</sup> It is interesting to notice from the point of view of the hypothesis that underlies the present work that Martin did not imagine himself capable of approaching his creative work from the perspective of the genre of comedy.

mother, the schizophrenia of her teenage years, the brother who made money and refused to have her name mentioned in his mansion” (*LHH* 110). Although in its exaggerated tone, Martin’s words appear comic, the issues raised are those that constitute central themes and preoccupations of the postmodern condition. On the other hand, Tania represents the embodiment of the present-day feminine liberal spirit as long as she refuses to fulfil the role that her patriarchal family expected: “I haven’t been at home, feeding everyone, supporting everyone, smiling at everyone, keeping the family going, filling the hole” (*LHH* 110). Her reaction to family assumptions means suffering and alienation but it also earns her other peoples’ admiration and the possibility of having an autonomous life, independent from male tutelage, as well as the exercise of agency in the building of her own personal identity.

The theme of patriarchy is central to Syal’s novel and manifests itself in the accounts of the lives of the three protagonists. The fact that the characters belong to the Indian community makes a significant difference since their culture is particularly prone to sustain the supremacy of the male as seen in the expectations that the female role arises in their midst. Throughout the novel, the three female protagonists are described as participating in situations that exemplify the struggle between the opposing extremes of personal freedom and family responsibility with the corresponding feeling of guilt when they fail to respond to social expectations. Sunita is overburdened by her situation as a working mother of two young children who demand much of her time and is frequently in conflict with her husband who does not take equal responsibility. At the same time, she is frustrated because she has an unrewarding job and because she has failed to finish her university studies (Tania suspects that Akash, her friend’s husband, is somehow to blame for his wife’s failure in this respect). At one point in the novel Sunita is described as reading a book entitled *Dark Lotus: the Mythology of Indian*

*Sexuality*, which includes a chapter significantly entitled “Patriarchy Made Divine”. Sunita heavily underlines a paragraph where the Goddess Sita is identified as an example of female sacrifice. The section reads: “...many Indian women subconsciously equate marriage and partnership with trial and suffering. Indeed, they expect it, welcome it as proof of a virtuous liaison, blessed by tradition” (*LHH* 210) and it later adds “...Sita will encourage masochism, martyrdom and the subjugation of the self...” (*LHH* 211). The attitudes described in the book Sunita is reading are coincidental with the examples set by the older generation within the protagonists’ families. Although the elders’ culture has suffered significant changes in comparison with the restrictions of an original Pakistani tradition, for them the position of women is still tied to the fate of marriage. The same as in the distant Pakistan, in the British-Indian community, middle-aged people consider marriage “the most significant event and a turning point in a woman’s life” (Zubair 776). Young Asian women are expected to catch a good husband and to preserve their virginity until they marry.

Of the three protagonists of the novel, Tania is the one to offer greater resistance to the pressures of the Indian community and to be more open to Western influence. On this account she is rejected by prospective husbands procured by her family who judge her as “too modern”, “too Western”, “a bit of a slapper” or not ready to adjust to the closed community of Indian social life (*LHH* 150), which she finds claustrophobic. Her strong personality based on a high degree of self-assurance allows her to shun “[t]he sheer physical effrontery of her people, wanting to be inside her head, to own her, claim her, preserve her. Her people” (*LHH* 15). Her choice is to remain single and be independent at the cost of estrangement from her traditional brother and his family. The young Chila cannot count on an equally staunch personality to work her way in life. Carrying the burden of her school history as a slow learner, she feels diminished and

underprivileged. When the time comes for her to make a match the situation turns very stressful. She belongs to a traditional family who considers her “defective material” and being afraid that she might remain single, they “assaulted the marriage market from all fronts” (*LHH* 148). In this community the emotional ease of a girl’s parents depend on how successful they are to find an appropriate partner for her as the narrator ironically records in the chapter “Spring” (*LHH* 198): “By worshipping their daughters’ husbands, they were ensuring their daughters’ happiness, for wasn’t everything dependant on that? Knowing that a kind, decent man would be caring for their beloved girls when they were no longer here to check up on everything?”

In such a context women are inevitably devalued to the point of objectification as symbolically shown in the description of Chila’s wedding ceremony:

She wanted to celebrate. But instead she was mummified in red and gold silk, swaddled in half the contents of Gutpa’s Gold Emporium, pierced, powdered and plumped up so that her body would only walk the walk of everyone’s mothers on all their weddings, meekly, shyly, reluctantly towards matrimony. (*LHH* 14)

Like a present to her future husband, she is wrapped in gold and immobilized. She is alienated from her own feelings, expectations and desires. The description of the ceremony shows her as complying with a pre-ordained law:

She could not look up even if she wanted, weighed down by an embroidered dupatta encrusted with fake pearls and gold-plated balls. The heavy lengha prevented her from taking more than baby steps behind her almost-husband to whom she was tied, literally, her scarf to his turban. She would have liked to wear a floaty thing, all gossamer and light, and skip around the flames like a sprite (*LHH* 13).



Prevented from seeing and her movements severely limited, literally tied to the bridegroom, the bride has little scope for personal choice while the bridegroom is placed in a situation of dominance that favours male abuse as exemplified in this particular occasion by another symbolical gesture. Chila's brother, unnerved by the inevitable slowness of her movements, hisses a few harsh words at her and pushes her forward. Both the symbolical elements of the wedding ceremony and the example posed by the elder generation reveal the traditional supremacy of the male and the subjection of the woman as characteristics of the Indian families described in the novel. The women make a cult of being at the service of their husbands and sons and build their lives around their needs while the male take their efforts for granted and are free to move about and take decisions ignoring their partners. As a young girl, Sunita starts noticing the inequality between the sexes in the world that surrounds her:

The way the men would enter the house and sit, playing cards, waiting to be served while the women ran in clucking circles around them. The way my brothers would waltz in and out of the house with their mates, rolling back whenever they wanted, not even seeing my mother waiting up for them at the kitchen table, their dinners reheated and ready. (*LHH* 82)

Social expectations about the woman's role imply her personal devaluation and practical effacement in communal and family relations with the purpose of exalting the figure of the male and of allowing for the better satisfaction of his needs. Tania disapproves of her mother for complying with uses and customs that sustain the male mystic. She remembers that her mother "shrivelled to the size of a wrinkled pea around her husband" while, following the tradition, she taught her daughter how to please others while "tak[ing] up as little room as possible". Tania is equally critical of those of her friends who, although they have an independent and successful professional life,

they drop all their brilliance and self-assurance at the door of their homes and become humble and apologetic allowing their husbands to order them about, to dismiss and patronize them. She compares this inexplicable transformation to the Jekyll and Hyde phenomenon and calls it “our collective shameful secret” (*LHH* 147).

Sunita is equally critical of chauvinistic attitudes. She loves and protects Chila and is conscious of the power inequality within her friend’s marriage. Such an imbalance is made patent in the sharp question Sunita poses to Deepak in reference to his feelings for his wife: “do you need her because you love her? Or do you love her because she needs you?” (*LHH* 173). Caught by surprise, Deepak remains silent and feels deeply disturbed at his questioner’s perspicacity. The relationship between Chila and Deepak is marked by her gratitude and his enjoyment of her subservience. This circumstance is evident from the early stages of their association as manifested by the following incident recounted by Chila herself: “I was up for promotion just before I got engaged to Deeps but he said no wife of his was going to work if she didn’t want to. (I did want to as it happens but he forgot to ask me that bit)” (*LHH* 35). As a consequence of her acceptance of this imposition, she is deprived of the possibility of enjoying some degree of independence and of developing her self-assurance. The precarious balance that keeps their marriage going is broken at a dramatic moment of revelation when she realizes that the feelings that connect them is not enough to sustain a love relationship:

And now she knows what she was afraid of, what has always haunted her, what propelled every smile, every altruistic gesture, every cheerful acquiescence, every I don’t mind, jaan. She has constructed a whole life around it. No-one must leave. No-one leaves nice people. I will make myself nice. (*LHH* 183)

Chila's fear of being forsaken by her husband, of being left alone as a divorced woman in the midst of the Indian community is a reasonable reaction as exemplified in the novel by the vicissitudes in the life of Sunita's "Modern Auntie", a beautiful and elegant young woman who is forced to get a divorce on the grounds of serious incidents of family violence that often sent her to hospital with "Five broken ribs, nose broken twice, broken arm, burns to chest..." (*LHH* 81). In spite of the fact that she was obviously more than justified to take the decision of separating, her friends and relatives reject her on this account. She becomes alienated from the rest, pitied, despised, offered scraps of love and attention and accused of prostitution because she dares to have an independent life. The belief that underlies this cruel reaction is the ancient tradition that Pakistani women should never leave their home: girls are brought up to believe that "Only death would make them leave their marital home... Women who transgress or challenge these norms bring disgrace to their family's honour" (Zubair 775).

In sexual matters, the female characters in the novel are equally devalued and subjected to objectification. As examples of such debasement we can mention a few scenes in the life of two of the protagonists. At their wedding ceremony, Deepak enjoys the feeling of possessing Chila's virginal purity (*LHH* 12) and early in their married life, he once describes her as juicy meat because of her "voluptuous bust and cushiony hips". His wife's reaction is immediate: "She hadn't liked the last bit of that. It made her feel like she should cover herself with lime pickle and hand him a serviette. But she had kissed him all the same until her lips hurt" (*LHH* 52). Similarly, Sunita, who receives little attention from her husband, is enraged by his dehumanizing attitude: "It was the quiet storm she rode at home, every time Akash patted her rump, as if saying goodnight to a friendly beast, and turned over to sleep, while she lay awake in the darkness, willing her desire to roll over and play dead, and let her sleep too" (*LHH* 123). The

female protagonists feel diminished or ignored by the attitude of their husbands and naturally respond with anger. Such an emotion corresponds to Jaggar's description of "outlaw" emotion (160).

People who experience conventionally unacceptable, or what I call "outlaw," emotions often are subordinated individuals who pay a disproportionately high price for maintaining the status quo. The social situation of such people makes them unable to experience the conventionally prescribed emotions: for instance people of colour are more likely to experience anger than amusement when a racist joke is recounted, and women subjected to male sexual banter are less likely to be flattered than uncomfortable or even afraid.

Chila and Sunita feel anger at the humiliation to which they are subjected. However, brought up in the belief that the position of the husband is preeminent and that he is always right, they feel guilty of their inability to comply with expectations. Anger is here an outlaw emotion since it is not sanctioned by the women's community of origin. Chila is unhappy and afraid and makes great efforts to "save" her marriage from dissolution until her anger overpowers her and she faces her husband with the truth of his betrayal. Sunita, for reasons that equally refer to power imbalance, grows highly dissatisfied with her marriage and this negative feeling leads her to the sick reaction of secretly and purposefully cutting herself with a razor blade. The anxiety produced by a situation she cannot manage leads to this pathological response with the purpose of releasing the pent-up tension.

Such emotional suffering may lead women to isolation, emotional disturbance, confusion or fear. Alternatively it can become the origin of a new awareness of the fact that "we are in a situation of coercion, cruelty, injustice, or danger" (Jaggar 161). These

outlaw emotions can become the ground for the necessary stamina to revert the unfair situations that originate them. In the case of our protagonists we find that their initial muted anger is later superseded by a level of self-awareness and the necessary emotional strength and equilibrium to allow them to overcome the position of easy victims of oppression. The influence of Western models of feminine independence to which the female characters in the novel are exposed, together with their assimilation to their adopted culture surely contribute to this favourable resolution.

Minority patriarchy affects the life of all the women characters in the novel. Sunita summarizes the pattern when she describes Asian women's customary mode of reaction as that of "taking the pain for someone else" (*LHH* 171). Given the circumstances, it is not surprising that (as a radiographer tells Sunita and Chila), the maternity hospital has the policy to avoid revealing the sex of the coming baby to the prospective mother because: "we had a number of the ladies afterwards requesting...terminations, when they found out they were carrying girls" (*LHH* 230). Equally revealing is the popularity among Indian women of clinics "where they guarantee you can have a boy" (*LHH* 233). It is against this background that we have to understand Chila's reaction at a kind request of her mother's before she learns the sex of her coming baby:

"'Beti?'" Her mother was blocking her way to the door. 'You're not going yet? I've made biriani, your favourite, with extra ghee for you-know-who.'

'Who? The little prince in here?' Chila shouted, prodding her belly. 'Or the waste-of-space little girl?'" (*LHH* 200)

The mythical identification of the figure of the woman with the ideas of restriction, debasement and sacrifice makes life difficult for these young women living

in a Western country like England which poses extremely different models. However, vicious struggles with identity issues and open confrontation in the battle of the sexes are more a matter of the periphery than of the centre in the plot of Syal's novel. This fact makes the preservation of a light and often humorous tone possible. Secondary characters who are not involved in the main design are the protagonists of such clashes. Inner identity conflict, which favours split personalities, is described as the problem of one of Tania's friends who appears only once in the novel and as quoted below:

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 I thought she was going to do a Basil Fawlty and give the iron a damn good thrashing for confusing her man. (*LHH* 147)

The astounding change in attitude shown by the incidents described betrays personality maladjustments, the consequence of the simultaneous co-existence of two very different cultural backgrounds.

In spite of occasional difficulties to match discrepancies between their two cultures, none of the central characters in the novel, suffer from serious identity disruptions. On the same lines, the use of physical violence between the sexes features as marginal and as concerning secondary characters. Open conflict arises within a couple at one of Akash's therapeutic sessions with members of the Indian community which results in a tragicomic incident. The patients are a young couple who have been attending regular sessions because of mutual misunderstanding with chauvinistic attitudes often appearing as central. On this occasion, the woman can articulate the

reasons for her discontent: “ ‘I’m thirty-three, and I’ve already had enough practice at being a good girl and keeping quiet and I’ve got lots more years to live and I’m scared of wasting them and I don’t have any more time to wait until my husband gets kinder or sexier or...better...’” (*LHH* 104). Having justified herself, she then expresses her intention to leave her husband for another man. At the disclosure of the news, her husband flings a chair at her, which she is quick enough to dodge.

In the female patient’s words we can identify the same reasons that cause unease within Sunita’s or Chila’s marriages. However, this is not the way the central characters choose to resolve the conflicts that beset their lives. By the end of the novel, Sunita expresses her wish to revise her relationship with Akash with the purpose of recovering the original fire:

She would do what all the books had advised: honesty, tell him how the lack of communication in their marriage had led her to seek comfort elsewhere, albeit emotionally, and that Krishan – oh, those eyes – was merely a symptom of a much deeper problem that had to be aired in a civilized and frank manner... (*LHH* 310)

Although the novel does not give an account of this proposed exchange, the result is mutual understanding since next thing we learn is that Sunita has retaken her university studies and that “Akash is whisking her off for a romantic weekend to Barcelona” (*LHH* 328). As to Chila, she is only ready to part with her husband after making great efforts to save her marriage pretending that she is not being shamefully betrayed by him. The moment of understanding and maturity finally comes for Chila and although by the end of the novel she is “solitary” (*LHH* 333), she does not feel lonely. Both protagonists, in their various ways overcome the initial and customary position of victims of patriarchal dictates and prefer empathy to aggressive “othering” using their intellectual and

emotional intelligence to achieve their aims. Sunita and Tania are also active and successful mediators in the intra-generational conflicts that involve their friends. Sunita and Chila sustain each other in bad moments and prove to be capable of staunch friendship even in their relationship to Tania who deceives them both. In spite of misunderstanding and suffering, the final message of the novel is one of tolerance and compassion. The three old friends, even if in pain, can once again hold hands and Sunita, who has done so much to support Chila knowing of Deepak's treacherous behaviour, has a moment of compassion for him when his suffering is made obvious. Deepak, the man who is at one point successful in coming between Chila and Tania, finally recognizes the firmness of the women's friendship when he wonders "[h]ow could he ever have imagined that anything he might offer could intrude upon their friendship?" (*LHH* 307). Tania, disappointed by Deepak's dishonest behaviour with both herself and Chila, and somehow readmitted to the old friendship, can express the idea that "it is possible to love without expecting anything back" (*LHH* 329), a thought that significantly appears close to a reference to her childhood bosom friends.

The postcolonial/postmodern interest of Syal's *Life isn't all ha ha hee hee* is mostly to be found in the current themes of feminine confrontation with patriarchal issues, globalization, cultural heterogeneity and transculturation. The structure and narrative technique of the novel, on the other hand, are mostly traditional with occasional transgressions of the realist contract. The piece is divided into two main sections with the break between them marked by a decisive incident in the plot. The novel respects chronological order in the development of the plot, which deals with the life of the three protagonists and their mates. Simultaneously, the presentation of information subtly connects the setting with incidents in the plot and the characters' feelings. Part I (untitled) is set in winter and starts with the presentation of bleak, ugly



Leyton under the snow as a background to the description of Chila and Deepak's wedding ceremony in a sour-sweet tone. As the narrative progresses, the reader is introduced to the other two protagonists and their mates as well as to the conflicts that beset them growing to a dramatic climax by the end of the section. Part II (entitled "Spring") starts with a promising setting at the rebirth of nature and correspondingly portrays the growing maturity of the characters involved and the resolution of the conflicts. Although as the title of the novel suggests, not everybody is happy by the end, the protagonists have learnt a lesson and have re-emerged fortified by the vicissitudes undergone. As a peculiarity of the structure we can mention the unusual alternation of numbers and names to start the chapters contained by the two parts of the novel. Each protagonist narrates two chapters fronted by their names while the numbered chapters are narrated by a heterodiegetic voice which enjoys the quality of omniscience. This device enriches the novel by offering both the peculiar outlook of the protagonists and the viewpoint of a narrator alien to the action. Although this balanced distribution of perspectives offers a broad panorama, there is no doubt that the author is mostly interested in the personal view of the female characters.

Characterization is nuanced and subtle, a fact that contributes to verisimilitude and to the creation of situations that relate easily to real life. The language used is generally simple and current in the tone of people's daily exchanges. However, it occasionally reverts to poetic imagery to express overwhelming feeling as when Chila faces her husband on his betrayal: "Deepak choked on something hard and spiky. He knew if he opened his mouth, his wails would topple walls, he would vomit up the sickness that had brought him here, leaving a gutless, empty skin. He wrenched open the door and almost ran down the tree-lined sweeping drive" (*LHH* 282). Rage at being discovered and guilt at the darkness of his behaviour reach levels of unutterable

intensity and appear as symptoms of acute physical discomfort. Similarly, and separated by half a page, Tania's passionate reaction to the sudden revelation of her lover's insincerity is expressed in powerful prose:

Tania stood naked before him. She clung to the wall behind her for support. Against the white wall, she was as darkly stark as the desert, so many shades of gold and brown. She looked at him, profound with loss. A hot wind began blowing him away, grain by grain. Her voice, when it came, was parched, parchment dry. 'Get out'. (LHH 283)

Although both characters find themselves in a questionable ethical position, the woman's sincerity contrasts with the man's egotistical manipulation of both Tania and Chila. The difference in moral import is subtly conveyed by the choice of appropriate imagery that opposes ugliness to beauty.

The fact that the novel starts with a wedding and ends with a funeral seems to imply the ups and downs of life, an idea that is also present in the suggestive use of the negative in the title of the piece. The final message is optimistic as long as it indicates that forgiveness is possible, however painful the wound. Hope is found in the support offered by the friendly embrace and by communal response to loss. The last image in the novel is that of singing, flying sparrows observed by an "exhilarated" Tania accompanied by her friends at her father's funeral. Life is sour-sweet, the same taste that the novel leaves in its readers.

*Anita and Me* has both points of contact and sharp differences with *Life isn't all ha ha hee hee*. As mentioned in the introduction to the present section thematic lines connect both novels and identify them as belonging to contemporary Britain owing to their interest in the analysis of social conditions in a global, heterogeneous context. The struggles of immigrant families to make a home in diasporic spaces, confrontation with

prejudiced, racist individuals within the host community together with intra and inter generational relations among the protagonists stand out as focal interests in these novels by Syal. However, *Anita and Me* is more traditional in structure and general organization. The more salient feature on this line is the unobtrusive identification of chapters with running numbers which metonymically refer to the inevitable progress of time in this bildungsroman. There is no experimentation with narrative technique or trespassing of the linear logic of time: the story is recounted by an adult protagonist who looks back on her past as the daughter of a Punjabi family in the former mining village of Tollington from her earliest memories to her initiation into adulthood. The autodiegetic narration, sustained throughout the thirteen chapters that integrate the novel, adapts the limitation of perspective to the degree of understanding of situations proper to the different stages in the life of the young protagonist. The language used remains that of the adult character while the ideological perspective develops with the character's growth into maturity. Aspects of form such as the unitary voice and the respect for internal coherence with its adherence to temporal and spatial contiguity facilitate the sociological study of the insertion of the central character in the specific context of contemporary Britain and the enactment of the drama of intercultural relations in a hybrid social milieu.

As the novel progresses, the reader follows the vicissitudes in the life of Meena Kumar as she struggles with herself and her environment to grow out of childhood and family dependence and become a responsible adult shaping her personality under the influence of two quite different cultural backgrounds. On the one hand, she counts with an Indian ancestry, her parents being first generation immigrants come to Britain with the hope to be able to offer their children better living conditions and the opportunity to study. Her mother is a teacher, an educated woman with high moral values and a desire

to progress and adapt to her new country. Together with the father, who sustains the same ideals, they work hard to help Meena acquire the necessary attitudes and values to have access to a respectable life among the middle classes in the host country. On the other hand, the working class English neighbourhood where the family have settled offers the attraction of alternative models of behaviour that lure Meena to exploration into the outer world. In the intimacy of the family and their Indian friends, the girl is protected and guided, but with her will to grow and her independent mind, Meena feels this circle is too restrictive and pines for the opportunity to live her own life. Education is important for the Kumars who place great emphasis on providing their daughter with the means to become independent and successful in later life. In this respect the novel ends at the climactic moment in the protagonist's life when she sits her exam to enter the grammar school which guarantees the opportunity to escape the economic and cultural limitations of the local village. In a significant gesture, the end of the novel shows the family's celebration of "this next reincarnation in our English life cycle" (*AM* 327), meaning the move into a bungalow "with a large landscaped garden" (*AM* 308) which clearly contrasts with their present location, a "boring rectangle of lumpy grass bordered with various herbs that mama grew to garnish our Indian meals" (*AM* 15-16). Meena would no longer be embarrassed at her garden being the only odd one out in the village, she can now dream of a better life having grown out of the awe that has characterized her childhood relations with her troublesome friends Anita Rutter and Sam Lowbridge who impersonate the models of the English culture she has been trying to emulate. Having grown out of a relationship which pained and disappointed her, Meena feels happy with herself and in a moment of sudden understanding, "floated back down into [her] body which, for the first time, fitted [her] to perfection and was all [hers]" (*AM* 326).

However, this moment of illumination comes after a period of struggling to conform to the standards of her gang so that Meena could belong and be accepted as equal among her English mates. During this stage she felt burdened by difference:

...I wanted to shed my body like a snake slithering out of its skin and emerge reborn, pink and unrecognizable. I began avoiding mirrors, I refused to put on the Indian suits my mother laid out for me on the bed when guests were due for dinner, I hid in the house when Auntie Shaila bade loud farewells in Punjabi to my parents from the front garden, I took to walking several paces behind or in front of my parents when we went on a shopping trip, checking my reflection in shop windows, bitterly disappointed it was still there. (AM 156)

The rejection of her ancestry is the natural reaction to the need to belong that besets this particular period in her personal development. However, after some incidents that unveil the inconsistency of her alleged friend's sincerity and dependability, Meena comes to revalue the richness of her family's culture and accept its bounty. She is now able to understand the difference in moral standing between Anita and Sam's position and that of her own family background. In this context, her former friends' disloyalty and insensitiveness no longer affect her: to show this change into maturity she discards her planned revenge against Sam and Anita and leaves them without regret knowing that she has much more to achieve in the future than they can ever hope to accomplish, trapped as they are in the dead-end of a self-centred ignorance that places them always on the brink of falling into a defiance of law and authority.

With its interest in personal and collective identities within a minority group so as to sustain and foster their development, *Anita and Me* marks its inscription in the post-colonial scene. The story of Meena's family reveals faith in the individual's

capacity to negotiate with difference, sustaining signs of identification without forcing a clash with the other. The novel also shows an interest in individuality (both personal and collective) in its detailed account of ethnic uses, customs and myths portraying Indian culture as a vivid presence in British society. The statement that the novel makes, however, avoids the concept of fixed identities as well as the adversarial hypothesis and fosters the broadening of the middle ground of double allegiance in the diasporic space of Britain. As Meena self-reflectively ponders on the many intercultural issues that mark her life, the reader can observe the process through which a hybrid personality takes shape making choices that shun the abyss of violence and hatred to support tolerance and mutual understanding. Alternatively, when the other refuses to accept the pacifist contract, as we see at the end of *Anita and Me*, the protagonist reacts by leaving the arena in the certainty of having made the right moral choice.

Adaptation in exile implies dealing with a conflicting past, a situation which is dramatized in the novel through Meena's sense of discomfort when the history of the international relation between India and Britain is the subject of study at school. In the canonical account of events occurred in colonial India, as shown in the school textbook,

...the map of the world was an expanse of pink, where erect Victorian soldiers posed in grainy photographs, their feet astride flattened tigers, whilst men who looked like any one of my uncles, remained in the background holding trays or bending under the weight of impossible bundles, their posture servile, their eyes glowing like coals. (*AM* 211)

The portrayal places the British in the foreground as victorious heroes while the Indians can hardly suppress their sense of humiliation as they stand in the background. When the Indian independence revolution comes into focus, history presents the local men as the agents of evil and the British as the defenceless victims:

There would be more photographs of teeming unruly mobs, howling like animals for the blood of the brave besieged British, the Black Hole of Calcutta was a popular image, angelic women and children choking on their own fear whilst yet more of my uncles and aunties in period clothes danced an evil jig of victory outside. (*AM* 211)

The rendering does not improve when it implies the representation of more contemporary scenes:

Then there were the 'modern' images, culled from newspaper and television clips, where hollow-eyed skeletons, barely recognizable as human beings, squatted listlessly around dry river beds, and machete-wielding thugs tore into each other in messy city streets, under the benevolent gaze of a statue of Queen Victoria. (*AM* 211)

For the young Meena the image of her own kin in such degrading positions can only result in downright rejection, which manifests itself in a dislike for the subject History:

I always came bottom in history; I did not want to be taught what a mess my relatives had made of India since the British had left them (their fault of course, nothing to do with me), and longed to ask them why, after so many years of hating the 'goras', had they packed up their cases and followed them back here. (*AM* 211-212)

In spite of the light ironic tone in which Meena's situation is pictured, there is a clear criticism of British partiality and inability to assume a position of responsibility in reference to the consequences of their forceful intervention in foreign lands. At the same time, the text makes a side gesture at the paradoxes and incongruities that are manifested in the life of nations in the course of their history. The burden of the past affects the lives of the characters as shown in Meena's reaction to history and in the

sorrowful memories of her parents and their Indian friends who suffered the violence let loose during the Partition of India as a result of the Indian Independence Act in 1947. Their memories of racial and religious intolerance leading to the murdering of whole families, to the dispossession of property, to kidnapping and rape move Meena deeply:

I realised that the past was not a mere sentimental journey for my parents, like the song told its English listeners. It was a murky bottomless pool full of monsters and the odd shining coin, with a deceptively still surface and a deadly undercurrent. And me, how could I jump in before I had learnt to swim? (AM 75)

This past belongs to Meena's people and as a consequence it also claims her. Vaguely, she feels the insistent pull of a soil she has never walked on and of a culture she knows but little about:

Papa's singing always unleashed these emotions which were unfamiliar and instinctive at the same time, in a language I could not recognise but felt I could speak in my sleep, in my dreams, evocative of a country I had never visited but which sounded like the only home I had ever known. The songs made me realise that there was a corner of me that would be forever not England. (AM 112).

There is here a pointedly ironical allusion to the lines in Rupert Brooke's poem "The Soldier": "there's some corner of a foreign field/That is for ever England" which highlights the similarity between the two experiences.

The account of the protagonist's emotions connected with her relation with India evokes the feeling that Freud identified as "the unheimlich". This German term has the peculiar characteristic of suggesting two opposing meanings simultaneously: that which is familiar and that which is strange or rather that which should have been kept hidden



and has manifested itself (Freud 200). This idea refers to the concept of the double because of the co-presence of two elements in the relation between which similarity is simultaneously affirmed and denied. According to Freud the uncanny proceeds from the fact that: “el doble es una formación que pertenece a épocas psíquicas primitivas, a tiempos pasados en que, sin duda alguna, tenía un sentido más amable. El ‘doble’ se ha transformado en espantajo, así como los dioses, una vez caídas sus religiones, se tornan demonios” (Freud 215). That which has been repressed returns to consciousness and presents itself as familiar and strange at the same time. The internal forces that inhabit us and which are only slightly known to us produce fear and anguish. This fear is expressed in situations of undefined duality: the impossibility to define with precision one state in opposition to another. Meena’s exposure to the experiences, songs and memories of the Indian community have made an impact on her young mind since very early in life and they have vaguely remained with her to reappear later on the surface of consciousness as both familiar and strange. Familiar because they have been with her from times of which she has no memory but also strange and anxiety-ridden because alien since she has not really experienced them herself. Although these memories are somehow unfamiliar and she cannot fully share her elders’ feelings (*AM* 72), they stir more attraction and interest than refusal through fear and Meena feels the pull of Indian culture as strong enough to claim a part of her. The other part, however, belongs to the host community and although the novel reveals moments of clash between the two cultures, in Meena’s process of personality development, these incidents resolve themselves satisfactorily.

The gamut of discriminatory practices in the community of Tollington is broad and varied, going from offensive evidence of a feeling of superiority wrapped in the form of a compliment to the most brutal expression of hatred. The assertion of the value

of sameness could take many forms. Mrs. Kumar expresses sometimes amusement and some other times weariness at compliments such as: “‘You’re so lovely. You know, I never think of you as, you know, foreign. You’re just like one of us’” (AM 29). If to be the same is good, to be different means to be inferior and despicable. Meena’s mother is highly conscious of this frame of mind and this awareness leads her to instil in her daughter the idea that she has to be a good representative of her nation: “‘Don’t give them the chance to say we’re worse than they already think we are. You prove you are better. Always’” (AM 45). British people’s level of tolerance with difference is portrayed as varying in degrees from amused acceptance to outright insulting rage as shown in the incident when Mrs. Kumar has difficulty negotiating a particularly steep slope when she drives to town:

The truck drivers, the taxi drivers, the fat men squeezed into small cars and the thin women rattling around in hatchbacks, all wore the same amused expression, as if my mother’s driving had only confirmed some secret, long-held opinion of how people like us were coping with the complexities of the modern world. Putting their car into reverse was, for them, an act of benevolence, maybe their first, as well-intentioned as any of Mr. Ormerod’s charity parcels to the poor children in Africa. (AM 96-97)

While the above attitude is portrayed as general, the violent response is also present as the unique occasion in this incident: “a sweet-faced elderly woman” gives vent to her disagreement openly, “‘Bloody stupid wog. Stupid woggy wog. Stupid’” (AM 97).

Plain objectification of the one who is different is another of the forms that discrimination takes as an alternative to the classification as deficient or inferior. When Nanima arrives in Tollington she becomes the focus of attention of the local members

of the village community. With her keen sense of observation, Meena is aware of the quality of the British neighbours' consideration: "I knew they were being friendly, but it was not somehow a meeting of equals, I felt like we were suddenly the entertainment". "It was a strange kind of compliment they paid Nanima, wanting to touch and feel her like an imported piece of exotica" (AM 220). Objectification of the different other is a racist attitude that degrades the subject to the level of a non-human entity. Another common practice exemplified in the novel is the assertion of the imperial race as superior and then as responsible to guide and help the uncultured other to reach higher levels of civilization. This is Mr. Ormerod's view: "I mean, Mrs. Lacey, it's not just about giving them stuff, is it? It's about giving them culture as well, civilization. A good, true way of living, like the one we have" (AM 172). When this particular episode is recounted, Mrs. Kumar shows her worry at English ignorance and provinciality expressed in their blindness to alternative cultural manifestations.

Racism can also manifest itself in the cruel inferiorization of the black to the level of the animal, a form which is visually manifested in *Anita and Me* in the description of one of the entertainments at the village fair: "Sam Lowbridge and a group of his biker mates had taken over the shooting range. He was aiming a rifle at a jungle scene where tigers, lions and occasionally a grinning black face with a bone in its nose would pop out from the foliage, daring him to fire" (AM 119). The contiguous representation of animals and a black face on the shooting line, with the violence and will to kill that this activity connotes, is here mirrored by the syntax which uses the conjunction "and" indicating the equation of the black human to wild animals. The viciousness of the implications is highlighted by the fact that the representation is part of a game in a fair organized for charity and for the entertainment of the local families. The presence of Sam as the centre in this incident is not accidental since he is the

protagonist of several episodes of racism as the novel develops. When the fair draws to its end and the participants are discussing about the destiny of the money which has been collected: “Sam interrupted, a sly grin curling the corners of his mouth: ‘You don’t do nothing 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” (AM 198). Later, taking advantage of the presence of television cameras in Tollington, Sam drives past in his motorcycle and shouts above the reporter’s voice: “If You Want A Nigger For A Neighbour, Vote Labour” (AM 273). Such racist assaults affect Meena deeply: she feels panicky (AM 93) or “hurt, angry, confused, and horribly powerless because this kind of hatred could not be explained” (AM 98). Many of these attacks, however, are unintentional. Such is the case of the villagers’ curiosity for Nanima or of Mr. Ormerod’s sincere, though misguided interest in helping the “backward races”. In the case of Sam’s proffered hatred for the black, as Meena says, he has “let the cider and his single brain cell do the talking” (AM 227). Proof of this is the fact that he does not understand why the protagonist is angry with him since the insults were not meant to include her.

*Anita and Me* also refers to racial issues featuring in the British media: Meena notices that the heroines of her favourite comic *Twinkle* are always “limpid-eyed, anorexic, blonde” (AM 137-138), and the presence of non-white actors on television is so rare that when a walk-on or a secondary character on a television serial happens to be Oriental the family are so surprised that they “crowd round [the television set] and coo” over him “and welcome him into [their] home like a long-lost relative” (AM 165). The media are also described as having a tendency to stereotyping, the habit of classing all people belonging to the same nation as having exactly the same immovable, unalterable traits which are then repeatedly portrayed in successive representations of the ethnic

group. The audience, used to such treatment of difference, learns the stereotype which is later applied to all cases perceived as similar. Deirdre, Anita's mother is afraid of the Kumars because they do not conform to the stereotypical pattern of Indian people she has learnt:

...she was frightened of us. Of course it made sense; we were not one of those faceless hordes depicted in the television news, arriving at airports with luggage and children, lost and already defeated, begging for sanctuary. We were not the barely literate, perpetually grinning idiots I occasionally saw in TV comedies.... (AM 215-216)

Dreidre's reaction shows her ignorance and consequent limited understanding of unexpected social data. Incapable of discrimination and provided with a learnt pattern which is inapplicable she feels lost. If the model had applied, she would have felt superior and powerful. In the new situation the mechanism is unavailable. The incident also helps to show that, as Mr. Kumar well perceives, his family has been well received in Tollington and they have no grounds to fear open discrimination in spite of minor awkward situations.

The few occasions of cultural clash in which Meena is involved are resolved successfully. The welcoming party at Meena's maternal grandmother's arrival from India is the opportunity of one of such encounters. The girl's experience with Punjabi is that it is used by the local Indian community as the language of intimacy, spoken within friends and family and in hushed tones when in public in the English environment. That evening, however, there are too many guests at home and the night is warm so the party slowly spread to settle in the garden and Punjabi is loud "under the stars" (AM 203). At the same time, "Tollington front gardens were purely for display purposes, everyone knew that. And here were all my relatives using our scrubby patch of lawn like a

marquee, laughing and joking and generally behaving as if they were still within the security of four soundproofed walls”. This unusual situation, caused by the overjoyed participants, “threw [Meena] into a minor panic” (AM 203) at the risk of misunderstanding on the side of the English neighbours. Two of the women of the Ballbearings Committee chance to pass by on their way back home, and the situation evolves into an amiable interchange between the white women and the male Indian guests at the Kumars’ party. Meena’s reaction to this successful encounter of her two worlds shows her enjoyment of the process of mutual adaptation that leads to the constitution of hybrid personalities:

I hesitated on the porch step, unsure whether to flee indoors, dreading what the reaction of any passers-by might be, but also strangely drawn to this unfamiliar scene where my two worlds had collided and mingled so easily. There was a whiff of defiance in the air and it smelled as sweet, and as hopeful as freshly –mown grass. (AM 204)

Meena’s family is conscious of the need to make adjustments of the manners and ways of their own country so as to become full members of the new community. The effort that this process implies is reflected in the fact that some foreigners fail to achieve the necessary adaptations. Mrs. Kumar shows her disapproval of such failures:

These other Indian women would inevitably be dressed in embroidered *salwar kameez* suits screaming with green and pinks and yellows (incongruous with thick woolly socks squeezed into open-toed sandals and men’s cardies over their vibrating thin silks, evil necessities in this damn cold country), with bright make-up and showy gold-plated jewellery which made them look like ambulating Christmas trees. Mama would

acknowledge them with a respectful nod and then turn away and shake her head. (AM 26)

Meena, however, is successful in fostering the process of agreement between the different conceptions of reality that contribute to her personality and achieves a level of compatibility that, by the end of the novel, fares well for her future in the adopted country. The constant support of her family no doubt contributes to this efficacious result.

Two of the most potent influences in the development of Meena's hybrid personality are her childhood friend Anita Rutter and her Indian Grandmother. These two powerful forces are remarkably distinct in character; the latter represents the mystery and consequent attraction of her ancestry while the former stands for the pull of the outside world, of adventure and risk together with acceptance by and adaptation to the majority culture. The elder daughter of a disrupted marriage plagued by poverty, ignorance, drink and loose sexual conduct, Anita gives expression to her pain at the lack of love and care within her family in a generally rebellious attitude. Meena, who is younger than her friend and who is used to her family's close surveillance and protection, is attracted by the freedom and independence of Anita's style of life. The protagonist's imaginative nature values her friend's passionate temperament and her qualities as a leader. In Meena's eyes Anita's character traits promise a life full of adventure. At this point in her development she feels suffocated by the limitations of her own family entourage and the restrictions of the models that are posed for imitation. She ignores and despises Auntie Shaila's daughters because she finds them too obedient and modest, lacking in personal initiative and will to explore the world:

Even their names reeked of childhood, something I was desperate to wrap in rags and leave on someone's doorstep with a note, Take It Away. Pinky

and Baby born a year either side of me, Auntie Shaila's daughters who displayed their medals from the debating society on their chichi dressing table laden with ugly, stuffed gonks, who fought over the privilege of handing round starters or wiping down surfaces under the proud gazes of the grown-ups, whose scrubbed, eager faces and girlish modesty gave me the urge to roll naked in the pigsties shouting obscenities. 'I don't like them. They are boring.' I said finally. (AM 148)

Meena is eager to leave childhood behind, and liberate herself from the guidance and demands of her closest milieu to discover on her own what the outer world can offer. She considers that her "life [is] outside the home, with Anita, [her] passport to acceptance" (AM 148). Anita is what Baby and Pinky can never be: a fellow companion and initiator in the arcane of adult life. In her she sees "a kindred spirit, another mad girl trapped inside a superficially obedient body. In fact, sometimes when I looked into her eyes, all I could see and cling to was my own questioning reflection" (AM 150). This identification lasts as long as she trusts her and admires her capacity for leadership.

However, Anita's capricious, violent nature, the unpredictability of her wayward behaviour and her dubious ethical sense slowly divides the friends. Some fundamental values that Meena sustains are absent from Anita and her friends' code. Anita's gang are insensitive to others' needs and feelings; they think little of loyalty and resort easily to violence as a devious form of communication with their environment. By the end of the novel, Anita's betrayal and sheer incapacity to establish love bonds lead to their final estrangement. In a climactic moment of decisive revelation Meena learns that her best friend has hidden from her that she is having an affair with Sam Lowbridge, a member of their group who flirts with them both. Naturally enough, given the characteristic passion of adolescent liaisons, Meena experiences this as a blow:



My best friend in all the world really did have a boyfriend and had never told me. My best friend was sharing me with someone else and I knew whatever she had been giving me was only what she had left over from him, the scraps, the tokens, the lies. I had fought for this friendship, worried over it, made sacrifices for it, measured myself against it, lost myself inside it, had little to show for it but this bewildered sense of betrayal. Now I knew that I had never been the one she loved, I was a convenient diversion, a practice run until the real thing came along to claim her. (AM 277)

This incident is immediately followed by Anita's account, in amusing terms of how she has participated in a bout of "Paki bashing" in which a bank manager is seriously injured.

This Paki was standing at a bus stop, he was in a suit, it was dead funny! Nah, I only watched, the lads like did it, you know, and us wenches, we just shouted and held their lager...They really did him over and you know what, the stupid bastard didn't do nothing back! He didn't even try, he just sort of took it...and after we kissed and kissed and kissed, with tongues and all...Nah you silly cow, not me and the Paki. Me and Sam. Sam Lowbridge... (AM 277-278)

The shock of this revelation is so intense that Meena cannot utter a single word, dazed by a profound sense of loss, she mounts her friend Sherrie's horse, breaks into a gallop, loses control and has a serious accident that keeps her in hospital for months. Twice betrayed, both in her personal attachment to Anita and in her closeness to the victim of the racist assault, Meena grows out of her false image of her bosom friend and her entourage and comes to realize the full implications of their commitment to drink,

violence and sex. In spite of its obviously negative aspects, the protagonist's relationship with Anita and her gang fulfils the important function of allowing her to try her skills and capacities to fend for herself in the outer world until she acquires enough expertise to stand on her own feet. In the course of this process she manages to define herself in opposition to their image.

Although the central character's grandmother also helps her to grow up, she does so in a much more positive way, in alliance with the girl and within the same moral framework. The opposition between the two forces that mark her as a person is dramatized in the novel through Nanima's open rejection of Anita. In spite of cultural differences, the elderly lady's perceptiveness allows her to realize what kind of influence the older girl has over her granddaughter. Her behaviour on one of Anita's visits symbolically shows that she considers the girl impure. To protect Meena, Nanima gives Anita "glowering looks" and "she wipe[s] around where Anita s[its] with a wet cloth" (AM 255). Notwithstanding this particularly unwelcoming gesture, Nanima is kind and forthcoming, and finds it very easy to communicate and to make friends even when she cannot rely on the vehicle of language. She cannot speak English but she can get through to the Kumars' neighbours most naturally to the point of establishing a conversation with Mr. Worrall, a disabled war victim who has lost the capacity to speak and who can understand no Punjabi (AM 217). The secret of her success lies in her good will and her caring attitude, expressed in a language which needs no translation. With her resourcefulness and sense of humour, she manages to soothe the tensions that are affecting her daughter's capacity to cope with the daily burdens of life such as Sunil's endless crying and excessive dependence on her mother, or Meena's unwillingness to help with household chores. Her charm makes even her most annoying habits appear attractive (such as her practice of never leaving anything in its proper place) and brings

relief to the parents and joy to the younger ones. Meena especially appreciates her skill at story-telling, a habit that she finds amenable to her own inclination to mix fact and fiction. To the girl her stories of India “seemed full to bursting with excitement, drama and passion, history in the making, and for the first time [she] desperately wanted to visit India and claim some of this magic as [hers]” (*AM* 211).

The protagonist has a very active imagination and enjoys the excitement of the unexpected. When she cannot satisfy this thirst in her daily existence, she invents stories which become part of her life. Her parents are very worried about this irritating habit which they find inexplicable and morally questionable. These stories are sometimes a reflection of the child’s efforts to imagine her parents’ past in India or of her dreams of an ideal future as an adult. In either case they can be very funny as the examples below show:

My parents in a love story! I kept myself awake imagining them chasing each other around old Indian Streets (which were basically English streets with a few cows lounging around on the corners), mama on a bicycle laughing loudly as papa tried to grab onto her saddle and haul himself beside her whilst various old people looked out of half-shuttered windows and tutted under their breath. (*AM* 32)

In the narrative process, elements of her daily life are assembled together and pieces of information she gets from people in her environment are added. All this is then infused with the spirit of romanticism as seen in the quotation above. Similarly, when Anita tells Meena that when she grows up she will live with her friend Sherry in a flat in London, the protagonist imagines a glamorous picture of that future:

I imagined them living in a penthouse flat in a place called the Angel (my favourite stop on the Monopoly board as it sounded so beautiful). They

both wore mini-skirts and loads of black eyeliner and were eating toast whilst they looked out of their window. Before them stretched Buckingham Palace, the Tower of London, the Houses of Parliament and several theatres, all lit up, throwing coloured flashes onto their laughing faces, and tethered to a post attached to the breakfast bar was a sleek chestnut bay that looked just like Misty. (AM 99)

Having no idea of what London is like or what city life may imply, Meena places together the landmarks she has heard of plus all her pleasant experiences in a hilariously unreal picture of her friends' future in the capital.

On the evidence of the protagonist's explanations about how she created her stories as she grew up, it can be ascertained that she has the mind of a novelist:

It was never enough to have a vague picture, such as 'I save Donny Osmond from near death and win a medal'. I had to know what I was wearing, whether it was a fire in a top London hotel or a runaway horse in a summer meadow, what the weather was like, who was watching and how my hair looked at the moment of rescue. (AM 202)

Meena has an eye for detail and is highly perceptive as shown in a good number of episodes impressionistically recounted that add to the beauty and interest of the novel. Her perceptiveness also contributes to the vivid presentation of the hybrid environment that surrounds her and to the satirical touches with which both the Indian and the English cultures are portrayed. In the example chosen, the girl receives the warm welcome of her family's friends:

I did the round of *namastes* and kisses, smiling through the lipstick assaults and the over-hard cheek pinching as my suit was praised and tweaked, my stomach tickled and jabbed, my educational achievements

listed and admired, until I felt I was drowning in a sea of rustling saris, clinking gold jewellery and warm, brown, overpowering flesh. (AM 110)

Drowning in a whirl of auditory, tactile and sight images, the protagonist allows herself to be pampered by her “aunties and uncles”.

The significance of storytelling in the relationship between Meena and her grandmother fulfils another fundamental function in this bildungsroman. Storytelling is central to the novel as the expression of the process of identification the girl goes through. Both at the level of nations and at the level of the individual, the capacity to tell stories about oneself constitutes a fundamental ability to achieve sociological and psychological identification traits. The voice of the adult Meena mentions this fact in the first pages of the novel: “I ... learnt very early on that those of us deprived of history sometimes need to turn to mythology to feel complete, to belong” (AM 10). As she grows into an adult, Meena works with facts and with her imagination to invent a story and thus a person for herself. This mechanism is a mode of compensating for the sense of shame provoked by discrimination as illustrated by the protagonist’s reaction to Nanima’s objectification by the British neighbours on their first encounter. Her quick inventive reacted with the story that her grandmother did “precious mineral mining” back in India, “but her biggest mine was destroyed by a volcano last month. She and my granddad had to flee a sea of foaming lava. They managed to save most of the jewels though. Lucky she knows how to ride a motorbike eh?” (AM 200). Her own self-importance grows as she metonymically participates in her grandmother’s role of the Indian heroine. At the same time, connecting aspects of reality with invented bits the girl tries out different ways to insert herself in her environment as when she tells “a group of visiting kids in the park that [she] [is] a Punjabi princess and own[s] an

elephant called Jason King” or tells her teacher she hasn’t “completed [her] homework because of an obscure religious festival involving fire eating” (*AM* 28).

The incongruity of the invented details Meena introduces in her stories mirrors her attraction for the marvellous together with her sense of the unpredictability and unaccountability of life. Life is exciting because it forever surprises you as she confirms when her riding accident crashes her plans to sit for her exams or when death interrupts her close friendship with Robert at the hospital. The presence of danger and the concomitant risk is another stimulating ingredient that seasons life. Meena is thrilled by Nanima’s world,

A world made up of old and bitter family feuds in which the Land was revered and jealously guarded like a god, in which supernatural and epic events, murder, betrayal, disappearances and premonitions seemed commonplace, in which fabulous wealth and dramatic ritual was continually upstaged by marching armies and independence riots. (*AM* 210-211)

The existence of such traits in life is well illustrated by the development of the plot of the novel when by the end there is the almost miraculous discovery of Indian friends ready to help the Kumars in the Big House of Tollington. The magical nature of this episode enacts at the level of the real, the fantastic character of the stories Meena’s parents tell her about their past in India: “what obsessed me was this meeting of two worlds, the collision of the epic with the banal” (*AM* 36). The coexistence of these two irreconcilable qualities can be the source of the comic as we see in the episode of the sausage:

Mummy and papa were talking again, soft whispers, sss sss sss, my mother’s bracelets jingled as she seemed to wipe something from her face.

This was my birthday and they were leaving me out again. I squeezed my hot dog and suddenly the sausage shot into my mouth and lodged firmly in my windpipe. I was too shocked to move, my fingers curled uselessly into my fists. They were still talking, engrossed, I could see papa's eyes in the mirror, darting from my mother's face to the unfolding road. I thought of writing SAUSAGE STUCK on the windscreen and then realized I could not spell sausage. I was going to die in the back of the car and somewhere inside me, I felt thrilled. It was so dramatic. This was by far the most exciting thing that had ever happened to me.

The car went over a bump in the road and the offending chipolata slipped out of my mouth and into my lap, leaving a red stripe across my yellow satin dress. When my mother looked round, my face was wet with tears and I was panting and pointing the sausage at her like a gun. "Just look what you've done to your dress! Can't you just be careful?" I did not tell her what had happened. This was my near death experience and I would make damn sure I'd use it on her one day. (AM 27)

Humour arises from the fact that an ordinary hot dog can become the source of death. The circumstances also contribute to hilarity since the unexpected happens twice: first that the sausage should lodge in her windpipe and then that the bump in the road should dislodge it in time to avoid choking. The sense of imminent danger transports the imaginative Meena to the adult world and she appreciates the value of the experience. She relishes in it and wants it to be her secret weapon against her mother for her outrageous reaction. Once again the banal (Meena's dress gets stained) clashes with the serious (her near death experience). The device of humour contributes to sustain the

novel on the side of comedy in spite of the presence of several instances in which actual death or serious danger threatens the characters.

The sense of the random present both in the protagonist's stories and in her life together with her willingness to choose her path escaping from fatality draw a conception of identity as changeable, fluid and forever unstable. As Meena ponders: "Terrible things could happen, even to ordinary people like me, and they were always unplanned" (*AM* 36). The term "terrible" in this quotation should be understood in its two meanings: "awful" and "awesome". Meena has a vivid imagination and an unquenchable thirst for life. She is highly conscious from her early years that she has to be prepared for what life can bring and develop her capacity to make the best of opportunities. In this process she has to find a way to make her Indian ancestry compatible with the culture of her host country. At first the perception of a lack of balance between the relative socio-historical levels of importance of both cultures leads to a sense of shame:

It was all falling into place now, why I felt this continual compulsion to fabricate, this ever-present desire to be someone else in some other place far from Tollington. Before Nanima arrived, this urge to reinvent myself, I could now see, was driven purely by shame, the shame I felt when we 'did' India at school.... (*AM* 211)

Nanima's visit comes to fulfil a fundamental function in the process of identification which Meena is undergoing. She contributes to redress the imbalance between the Indian and the British culture revaluating the girl's ancestry. The elderly lady provides her with the means to assert the Indian traits in her personality without shunning the marks of the English cultural influence. In her own behaviour, Nanima shows that they are not incompatible. There is no doubting her own complete identification with Indian



culture, however, she adapts easily to her new circumstances in England, she enjoys making contact with the local people and finds pleasure in the advantages the country can offer. Meena profits from contact with her as a source of Indian cultural lore and as an example of easy adaptability to difference. Simultaneously, she comes to reassert the ethical values sustained by the family and opposed by the gang she frequents, mostly Anita and Sam whose influence Meena eventually manages to overcome. At the same time, as exemplified above, her grandmother openly rejects Anita while she establishes a friendly connection with other English people whose behaviour attests to their human and moral worth such as the Worralls, posed as examples of marital love, solidarity and kindness.

With clear-sighted analysis the protagonist compares and contrasts the cultural traits of those around her and learns to discriminate avoiding the negative effect of stereotyping, a form of identification that leads to the fixation of marks and results in discrimination. In the excerpt that follows we can see an instance of such procedure that eventually leads to Meena's entrance into maturity as a balanced hybrid individual:

Not all the English were selfish, like mama sometimes said, but then again, I did not think of Mrs. Worrall as English. She was a symbol of something I'd noticed in some of the Tollington women, a stoic muscular resistance which made them ask for nothing and expect less, the same resignation I heard in the voices of my Aunties when they spoke of back home or their children's bad manners or the wearying monotony of their jobs. My Aunties did not rage against fate or England when they swapped misery tales, they put everything down to the will of Bhagwan, their karma, their just deserts inherited from their last reincarnation which they had to live through and solve with grace and dignity. In the end they knew

God was on their side; I got the feeling that most of the Tollington women assumed that He had simply forgotten them. (*AM* 67)

In Meena's mind, nationality or cultural allegiance is not a permanent, unavoidable set of traits that an individual is determined to possess but a flexible compound of possibilities to navigate among. The capacity to identify differences and to accept them without judgment, apart from marking a level of maturity, also indicates the enrichment of the individual's personality in the hybrid context. Options appear for the subject to choose among a diversity of positions. English people could be self-centred, violent and erratic like Sam and Anita but they could also be generous, self-effacing and charitable like Mrs. Worrall. They could show their solidarity with their neighbours with a variety of minor though significant gestures and weave in this way a thick web of relations that bring cohesion to the community of the provincial Tollington. They could also be understanding and generous in their appraisal of English accountability in the historical management of India like Mr. Turvey who responds warmly to Nanima, expresses his favourable opinion of India ("Magical country. Magical people. The best"), and proffers his rejection of the politics that gave rise to the Indian Empire ("We should never have been there. Criminal it was! Ugly". *AM* 222). The quotation above (*AM* 67) also contributes to offer a contrast between two different cultural modes of facing the vicissitudes of life. Situated in the in-between, the protagonist can decide which to adopt and as she grows up, her attitudes show her as inclined to avoid the pressure of determinism in favour of a concept of identity as built by individual agency as she incorporates and moulds to her own needs the influences of her environment.

Exchanges between different cultures on a common soil lead to enrichment in the hybrid locus of diaspora. Meena expresses her awareness of this fact in her appraisal of the quality of life among the participants of the itinerant fair that visits Tollington:

I was fascinated by these travelling people, envied them their ability to contain their whole home in a moving vehicle, and imagined how romantic it must be to just climb in and move off once boredom or routine set in. How many countries had they visited, I wondered, how many deserts and jungles had they driven through, setting up their rides and booths on shifting sands or crushed palm leaf floors. (AM 102)

Exaggerations proper to her childish and romantic view aside, the protagonist can appreciate the value of difference and the enrichment that contact with other civilizations provide. The same reaction may be recognized in her assessment of the behaviour of the elderly Indian couple who has remained secluded in the Big House for years avoiding contact with the villagers of Tollington:

I wanted to prise open my eyes and ask her was it just shame then, that had kept them so hidden for all these years, wasting their gifts and zest for life instead of sharing them with people whom they could have inspired and entertained, for whom they could have been living proof that the exotic and the different can add to and enrich even the sleepest backwater. (AM 319)

Cross-cultural exchanges foster transitional identities amenable to the feminine in today's global world. This view of flexible, unstable identities in flow is possible and advantageous in the transatlantic mode of life in the interconnected global village. Meena recognizes the transitional or hybrid quality of her being, fosters it and enjoys it: "I knew I was a freak of some kind, too mouthy, clumsy and scabby to be a real Indian girl, too Indian to be a real Tollington wench, but living in the grey area between all categories felt increasingly like home" (AM 150). Rosi Braidotti theorizes on the "female feminine" subject (Davis 374) and poses the metaphor of the nomad as a way to

dismember the fixed connection between country and nationality which led to the modern concept of nationalism and its exclusive modalities. Within this feminist perspective, diaspora and exile are no longer the locus of suffering and the feminine is no longer a synonym of victim. The female-feminine subject is fundamentally an agent who chooses her path and invents herself as we see Meena doing in *Anita and Me*. In the in-between space of Europe, the constitution of subjects in flow is favoured. The nomad conception of identity fits the sociological conditions that prevail in the continent of Europe and promotes a new position for the woman who can define herself as an identity in process and independent from the oppositional paradigms that placed her at a disadvantage in the past. Processes of transformation go hand in hand with processes of affirmation that allow this flowing structure to act as standing ground for action. Meena's pliable nature, sustained by a firm ethical framework, allows for adaptation and self-affirmation in diaspora. She is neither one nor the other, however in this unstable position she can still make the proper ethical choices, establish valuable human connections and choose between the options available. Her positive and joyous nomad spirit is well exemplified by the following excerpt that appears in the last chapter of the novel:

...I was content.... I was not a bad girl, a mixed-up girl, a girl with no name or no place. 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. This sense of displacement I had always carried round like a curse shrivelled into insignificance against the shadow of mortality cast briefly by a hospital anglepoise lamp, by the last wave of a gnarled brown hand. I would not mourn too much the changing landscape around me, because I would be a traveller soon anyhow. (*AM* 303-304)

A traveller in life, Meena can be seen as a prototype of the nomad, happily looking forward, ready to take the challenges that come and little prone to look back melancholically at what was not or bitterly regretting the deeds of the past. Energetically transforming negative into positive feelings, she will not incriminate Anita and Sam in the violent incident that leads to Tracey falling into the lake and she is ready to move on to the next stage in her life as a student in the grammar school, leaving behind a world she has outgrown. She enacts the potentials of the nomad driven forth by desire: “El deseo es la fuerza propulsora que nos lleva a la autoafirmación, o sea, a transformar las pasiones negativas en positivas. El deseo no consiste en preservar sino en cambiar; es un anhelo profundo de transformación o un proceso de afirmación” (Braidotti 2004:172).

In the field of intercultural relations, *Anita and Me* turns the tables on the stereotypical imperial view of the other as uncivilized since it is Meena and her family as representatives of the migrant that sustain the values of civilization, understood as cultural sensitiveness and respect for the other. The Kumars show a strong sense of family and community ties, a quality that is repeatedly exemplified by their reactions to both the Indian and the English people they are in contact with. This collaborative spirit dramatically contrasts with the behaviour of the English Sam, Anita and their friends. This opposition is well illustrated by Mrs. Kumar’s feelings about certain aspects of English society:

“I will never understand this about the English, all this puffing up about being civilized with their cucumber sandwiches and cradle of democracy big talk, and then they turn round and kick their elders in the backside, all this It’s My Life, I Want My Space stupidity. You Can’t Tell Me What To Do cheekiness, I Have To Go To Bingo selfishness and You Kids Eat

Crisps Instead Of Hot Food nonsense. What is this My Life business, anyway? We all have obligations, no one is born on their own, are they?"(AM 58-59)

In this quotation, we can identify a clear reference to the classical dichotomy between the need to achieve self fulfilment and the duty to the community. In the Western frame of mind, exaggerated adherence to the rights of the individual self can often lead to the self-centred urge to assert oneself at all costs irrespective of the way that such behaviour affects others. Eastern effacement of the self for the benefit of others offers an interesting alternative when it does not imply the enslavement of the weakest. In the present novel, minority patriarchy is played down and Indian women's devotion to their families is presented as a valuable contribution to communal life, exemplified in this particular case by Meena's achievements as the main beneficiary of this generous attitude. In this context, Mrs. Kumar's preoccupation with nourishing has symbolical import implying her capacity to give not only at the level of the physical but also at the level of the emotional and the spiritual:

From the moment mama stepped in from her teaching job, swapping saris for M&S separates, she was in that kitchen; it would never occur to her, at least not for many years, to suggest instant or take-away food which would give her a precious few hours to sit, think, smell the roses – that would be tantamount to spouse abuse. This food was not just something to fill a hole, it was soul food... (AM 61)

In this context it is interesting to notice how different the families of the protagonists are. While Meena's parents constitute a harmonious and caring marriage, Anita's parents are divorced and their children are left without guidance to find their destiny on their own in the streets of the village. This contrast comes to reinforce the many details

in the presentation of characters' traits and actions that exemplify the value of the Easter culture. By this means the novel dramatically testifies against the local people's sense of racial superiority.

Love and care for the other is not the only one of the civilized traits that the family display. Meena's mother also shows a refined sensitiveness to cultural differences as can be seen in the expression of her feelings about certain awkward situations in which she finds herself in the double locus of a transcultural society. On the occasion of her attendance at an English funeral, she is worried about cultural difference as to the dress code and the restrictions of her limited wardrobe:

Mama agonised for hours whether to wear white, as in traditional Hindu mourning, and thus risk upsetting the conventional mourners, which was everybody, or stick to black, the only black garment she possessed being an evening sari shot through with strands of shimmering silver thread, not quite the garb for a midday gathering on a windswept former slagheap.  
(AM 79)

The rich and sustaining quality of the human relations established by the family most notably portrayed through the poetic account of the intimate understanding between the generations (Meera and her father, Meera and her grandmother) establish a potent contrast with the intolerance, disloyalty and lack of solidarity that characterize the attitudes of Anita and friends who feature prominently in the life of our protagonist. Fortunately the presence of other minor characters of British origin, who appear as exponents of a positive communal response, come to disprove that the above objectionable example should be considered as general. This choice poses a clear contrast with *Life isn't all ha ha hee hee* where the opposite situation stands. As seen above, in the novel mentioned secondary characters of Asian origin display the most

negative traits in reference to the multicultural situation. This irregularity as to the distribution of positive and negative traits among characters belonging to different ethnic groups contributes to the richness of Syal's characterization and to the avoidance of the stereotyping tendencies which are so noxious to intercultural relations. The same aim is reached by the application of humour to the exposure of objectionable traits in both the British and the Pakistani cultures.

The voices of both Meena and her "Aunties" are heard in the expression of criticism of British culture. When the "Aunties" get together they become "a formidable mafia" whose power is to be feared. They often agree on finding fault with the weird British uses and customs:

Mama...explained that all this garden frippery, gnomes, wells and the like, was an English thing. "They have to mark out their territory..." It was on the tip of her tongue to add "...like dogs", but the Aunties recognized their cue and launched into their own collected proverbs on English behaviour. "They treat their dogs like children, no, better than their children..." "They expect their kids to leave home at sixteen, and if they don't, they ask for rent! Rent from your kids!" "They don't like bathing, and when they do, they sit in their own dirty water instead of showering..." "The way they wash up, they never rinse the soap off the dishes..." (AM 33)

The excerpt above exposes some of the incongruities that mark ways of social reaction which are taken for granted within a certain culture, in this case the humanization of dogs or even the assimilation of animal habits into human life as well as the unreasonableness of hygienic habits that are part of the daily routine. A similar effect is obtained by Meena's account of the result of her rounds in the neighbourhood in



response to the local Methodist leader's request to collect used articles for the coming "Spring Fayre":

None of our neighbours liked giving anything away, materially or otherwise, and by the time I had reached the Christmas' house I remember feeling completely demoralised. After two hours of knocking and being polite, all I had to show for my efforts was a bunch of dog-eared back issues of the People's Friend, two tins of sliced pineapples, a toilet brush in the shape of a crinoline-clad lady, whose expression was surprisingly cheerful considering she had a lav brush up her ass, and a scratched LP entitled "Golden memories; Rock'N'Roll Love Songs with the Hammond Singers". (And even that had been difficult to prise away from Sandy, until she had remembered it had belonged to her "ex-bastard", as she called him, and flung it at me with a flourish). (*AM* 40-41)

In this case the target of humorous criticism are the egotistical inclinations of the English, their shyness in connection to the body as expressed in their need to "dress" the toilet brush and their sexual habits. The latter trait receives equally funny treatment in the description of Sandy's ineffectual efforts to call Hairy Neddy's attention to herself (*AM* 51). In every case the critical appreciation avoids hostility remaining at the level of "gentle malice" (*AM* 33) and provoking "much affectionate laughter" (*AM* 34).

If Syal is capable of introducing cultural criticism of English habits, she can also and equally effectively expose the ridiculous aspects of her own ancestral origins. For this author, cultural analysis includes self-criticism as when she describes Asian people's incongruous mode of dress following the fashion of a tropical country in the cold English weather (*AM* 26). Other aspects of Asian life focused critically in the novel are the excessive preoccupation with the quality and quantity of food in the preparation

of friendly gatherings within this ethnic community. On such occasions Indian women's extreme devotion to their family results in a long process of feeding others at the end of which, when the time comes for them to eat, they are "usually sick of the sight of food" (AM 71). Syal's capacity to laugh at the absurdities of both the host population's and the immigrant's cultural baggage is one of her most distinguishing features and has gained her the approval of large audiences not only as a novelist but most notably in the media of television.

Humour is also used in the novel to portray the pangs and uncertainties of growth. The effect is produced by highlighting the opposition between the adult perspective and the child's view. These incidents offer a picture of the level of maturity and knowledge of the way the world works that corresponds to the age of the character. Equally funny are the accounts of linguistic misunderstandings as when Meena mixes up the English word "woe" with "Wo Wo" the "Punjabi euphemism for shit" (AM 56) or when she shows her incompetence at school while the class are discussing *Othello* and at the teacher's question about where the Moors came from, the girl answers "confidently, 'Yorkshire, sir!'" (AM 213). The protagonist's limited understanding of human relations is also exposed humorously when she makes a suggestion as to how to solve the problem of her brother Sunil's loud and tiresome wailing:

...I did not think I was being too unreasonable when I did suggest to mama, after yet another sleepless night, if she could maybe drop Sunil at the orphanage for a trial period. Her reply was to burst into tears and rush into her bedroom where she locked the door, and did not come out until papa spent ten minutes talking softly to her through the keyhole. He then pushed me into my bedroom and told me to "Stay there until you realize what you have just said.... (AM 169)

As time goes by, the fact that Meena is growing up is made patent by the issues raised. These soon show the interests of adolescence as when the older Anita asks her if she is a virgin. Completely at a loss as to what to answer, the protagonist tries to infer what “virgin” might mean:

I racked my brains furiously to think of what I and Mary, mother of the King of Kings, might have in common. She was not from England anyhow, that might be a clue, but then she was much older than me. She rode a donkey, she was married – no obvious connections there. I tried to recall how Anita had said “virgin” – did it sound like something you wanted to become, or a dreadful disease you would dread to have? I took a gamble; Mary did give birth to someone pretty important, therefore virgins could not be all that bad. “Yeah, I am one actually,” I said confidently.

(AM 248)

Meena does not want to appear childish in the presence of her older and more knowledgeable friend so she uses all her deductive ability to make out what she means. Although the protagonist is unsuccessful, she chances to give the correct answer and in her innocence she decides to ask her father’s help to unveil the mystery when she goes back home.

*Anita and Me* gives front stage to women roles with the three generations of the Kumar family as central. Nanima, Mrs. Kumar and Meena can be seen as enacting the construction of kaleidoscopic forms of identity that sustain an attitude of tolerance of multiplicity and a capacity for adaptation to difference. In the present-day global conglomerate of England, the model they represent can make a significant contribution to transculturation in the role of mediators/interpreters avoiding hierarchical dualities and the consequent imposition of illegitimate power. Such an attitude dissolves colonial

dichotomies enhancing “movements of affection and participation in solidarity”  
(Canclini 2001:259) within which understanding is possible.

#### 4. Conclusion

*El recuerdo, según el modo nómada, es la reinvención activa de un yo jubilosamente discontinuo, en oposición al ser melancólicamente consistente, programado por la cultura falocéntrica. (Braidotti 2004:172)*

The contemporary British novelists of mixed cultural origin whose work is the central interest of the present thesis are concerned with the past and the present of the English nation against the background of the general reality of the European Community and directly or indirectly deal with most important aspects of life in multicultural Britain today. Wholly or partially set in Britain, the novels here studied show deep concern with postmodern and postcolonial themes often including protagonists of mixed cultural background that bear witness to the heterogeneous ethnic character of this nation. Identity issues within a hybrid society, conflicts of adaptation and mutual rejection together with the devastating effects of racism constitute common themes which feature in varying degrees in the fictional pieces studied.

Present-day British society is constituted by a mosaic of ethnicities as a consequence of historical processes originating in modernity and of the rapid development of multiple forms of interconnectedness that make distances shorter allowing for cultural encounters that may lead to diverse degrees of either hostility or mutual understanding. The interaction between nations that these circumstances offer constitutes one of the most salient traits of the postmodern world. The heritage of modernity, though, is still present and alive and the values sustained by liberal humanism on which today's European nations were built affect the lives of

contemporary postmodern communities. Ash Amin identifies four myths of origin that constitute the philosophical foundation for the idea of Europe:

...first, the supremacy of a legal system based on Roman law; second, an ethos of social solidarity and common understanding based on Christian piety and humanism; third, a democratic order rooted in recognition of the rights and freedoms of the individual; and fourth, a universalism based on Reason and other Enlightenment principles of cosmopolitan belonging. (2)

Even if we admitted that in themselves, the ideas above were valuable and worth sustaining, it has to be considered that the world in which these postulates were born and first formulated is no longer the world European people live in today. Roman law, Christian piety, democracy and universalism sustained the nations that constitute the core of Europe for centuries but many of the large diasporic communities which today share European soil come from far-away lands with alternative philosophical and cultural roots. Successful interaction between the different ethnic groups that share the same soil in the common ground of England demands a flexible attitude through which divergences can be negotiated. For this reason, the remaining traces of anachronistic forms of reaction originating in the absolute certainties of modernity should be confronted and overcome with the purpose of facilitating peaceful coexistence. This is the ultimate message that the novels analyzed in the present thesis convey through their recurrent scrutiny of the inner contradictions and fallacious quality of many of the postulates that the founding myth of the Enlightenment sustained. In the course of the 19<sup>th</sup> and 20<sup>th</sup> centuries, as the project of modernity developed, the tendency to believe in the supremacy and absolute truth of founding European traditions led to the parochialism of nationalism, to a feeling of racial superiority and the consequent

intolerance of difference. The firm conviction in the cultural superiority of “advanced countries” based on the concept of progress gave rise to a Manichean view that excluded most of the world from serious consideration. To this must be added the confidence in the belief that identities were homogeneous, fixed and stable and remained tied to geographical locations. This reified conceptualization of identity as “a thing to be possessed and displayed” (Gilroy 2000:103) made the idea of mixing of cultures and people obnoxious to the plan of modernity. As a result barriers were created and firm borders built to keep each in place, especially those who were excluded from the strict classificatory grid through which modernity looked at the world.

According to Brah (2007:252) the concept of race is “interlinked with slavery, colonialism and the Holocaust of Jews, gays and gypsies. Racism, therefore, can be said to be one of the key factors in the formation of Western societies”. In fact, the 20<sup>th</sup> century fascist persecution of the Jews can be seen as painful evidence of the constitutive character of racial tendencies within the European community. Against this background, the separation of the different immediately implied debasement since modernity abstracted and institutionalized cultural practices imposing a politics of identity on the basis of differences such as “gender, sexuality, class, religion, race, ethnicity, nationality” (Tomlinson 272). The logic imposed necessarily identified the central from the peripheral and the common-sensical and rational from the wild and irrational and constituted itself in the justification for measures that were flagrant examples of illegitimate uses of power. The mistaken application of reason, conceived as an end in itself instead of as a means, promoted the development of a frame of mind which rejected as secondary or derivative many forms of life and conceptions of the world. According to Docherty the use of reason that characterized Enlightenment thinking (the philosophical foundation of modernity) led to the fallacy of reading the

very contents of the mind in the world observed and presumed to be known. Far from allowing the rational observer to engage with the world, this application of reason led to a “ritualistic form of thought” which offered “a form without content” (Docherty 9). This way of thinking, considered the only means of legitimate knowledge, gave its practitioners the power to dominate those who failed to master it. Such a claustrophobic, totalitarian approach to reason and knowledge is the locus of ideology because of the process of naturalization of belief that results from its application and because of its social consequences as a source of illegitimate power<sup>19</sup>.

The philosophical conditions described above were mostly responsible for the failure of the originally high ideals of the project of modernity while their tendency to recur in contemporary society can contribute to produce uneasiness and malaise in the midst of the highly heterogeneous multicultural conglomerates of European communities today among which the United Kingdom features as prominent.

All the British writers studied in the present work express their disagreement with the modern ideas described above and pledge allegiance to postmodern, postcolonial and feminist principles. As poststructuralist movements, Postmodernism, Postcolonialism and Postmodern Feminisms share fundamental postulates which contest the myths of modernity. Succinctly put, these complex systems of thought imply general incredulity in totalizing narratives which place their exclusive trust on reason as

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<sup>19</sup> Although the term “ideology” has neutral connotation when it means the “collective representation of ideas and experience” (Jefferson 169), in the present context this collective representation is conceptualized as in opposition to the actual phenomenal reality on which these ideas are based. Within this meaning, the term refers to a form of distortion of the true relations between the social agents involved. There is a negative connotation to this meaning of the word since this ideational construction can be used as a means to convince a social group of the commonsensical, natural, and then inevitable character of a certain biased conception of the world. Relations of power are fundamental to this way of understanding the term ideology. According to Marxist theory, the middle classes have elaborated the idea that their way of life, their beliefs and values are universal and natural. This, however, is only a representation of reality from a specific perspective; it is a false or distorted view that has been rarefied into a reality. The problem is fundamentally one of representation: “Ideology consists in an inability to recognize the mediating function of representation, in assuming that it is an autonomous sphere, and thus mistaking the appearance for the thing-in-itself” (Hawkes 98). The aim of philosophy is to dismantle such false consciousness.



a source of knowledge, which believe in history as a record of continuous progress to perfection, and which sustain the hierarchical and (often) pseudo-scientific classification of all biological and social realities, a procedure that leads to power inequity in the expression of ethnocentric and patriarchal policies. There is then similarity in the issues raised and opposition to the dogmatic aspects of modern institutions and practices. All the movements mentioned question hegemonic definitions of knowledge and concepts of civilization and culture sustaining heterogeneity, hybridity and plurality with the purpose of avoiding unfair distribution of power. Within this common context, the theoretical elucidations of Feminism and Postcolonialism contest modern discourses which universalize white, Western male experience and highlight coincidences between the social discourses of racism and patriarchy which they oppose. The latter forms of thought and social reaction are ethically dangerous ideological devices of naturalization since they “figure the body as a bearer of immutable difference whether or not this putative difference is represented as biological or cultural” (Brah 1996:157).

Postcolonialism and the varying conceptions that constitute contemporary Feminisms also coincide in their opposition to modern conceptions of identity and subjectivity. In opposition to the modern concept of fixed identity philosophically tied to the belief in essences and politically connected to the rise of the modern nation states and their violent defence of frontiers and racial purity, these poststructuralist movements adhere to a conception of subjectivity as “neither unified nor fixed but fragmented and constantly in process” (Brah 1996: 121-122). The need for the building of barriers that issues from the modern conception of identity connects racism and patriarchy in the fear of miscegenation. The blurring of borders and the erasure of the vicious classification of the other (by religious, ethnic or genre adscription) as inferior is of focal interest to both Postcolonialism and Feminisms. In this sense, both theories have contributed to raise

consciousness about unfair social practices that have affected many underprivileged groups apart from the ones they particularly represent and defend. Coincidentally, these movements also strongly oppose the objectification of the unprivileged other be it on the grounds of religion, class, gender or ethnicity. The multiple interconnections between patriarchy and racism are dramatically explored and exposed as iniquitous practices in all the novels studied in the present work, though the issue is conferred greater centrality in Phillip's, Evaristo's and Syal's novels.

In Caryl Phillip's *The Nature of Blood*, the tragic destiny of the Stern sisters in the context of Nazi Germany exemplifies the conjunction of comparable forms of discrimination that in their specific situation adds the burden of female sexual vulnerability to the already intolerable violence of racism. This novel uses the device of intensification of effect through the accumulation of negative traits in certain characters. If in the course of history, Jews and Blacks have been victimized to the extreme of execution or the exercise of undue social pressure leading to states of psychological disruption as shown in the stories set in Portobuffole and Venice, in more contemporary circumstances, women can still be wronged due to a combination of stigmatizing traits such as femaleness, blackness and Judaism as shown by the destiny of the character of Malka. The same effect of intensification is achieved by Phillip in *A Distant Shore* by the presentation of the stories of Solomon and Dorothy in parallel as a means to underline the similar consequences produced on individuals by the inhuman pressures of racism and patriarchy. These immoral practices lead to equal debasement and social disorientation in all individuals subjected to their effects and in the most serious cases can result in derangement or actual death. The introduction of a variety of secondary characters in comparable circumstances (Mahood, Said and Amma) serves a similar purpose in *A Distant Shore*. By this means, the novel intensifies the portrayal of

societies pervaded by patriarchy and racism with the purpose of exposing their equally evil consequences on the life of their members. In Bernardine Evarito's *The Emperor's Babe* the superposition of negatively loaded ascriptions in the character of the protagonist contributes to identify the coincidences between a variety of forms of discrimination. As an immigrant of African origin, Zuleika knows she is a second-class Roman citizen. Simultaneously, she is degraded as a female by all the males in her entourage and belittled as plebeian by her husband's family and social circle.

Within the climate of thought deployed above, the ethnically mixed British novelists under scrutiny in the present work inscribe themselves as in opposition to the Enlightenment preference for hierarchical binarisms such as that which identified the white male as the centre and established a chain of connections that equated the rational mind to the masculine, and this to action and culture. They also find obnoxious the Western tendency to assimilate the image of the white man to humanity as against the figure of the uncivilized or savage. This strongly entrenched form of thought can be so powerful that, according to Cornell (423), to contest this particular binary opposition implies to destabilize the "meaning that has been given to humanity". On similar lines all the novelists here studied object to the opposition of the role of men to that of women which in the course of history has led to the priority of the former and to the confinement of women's roles to the realm of the secondary and the subservient. Their work interrogates and contests the superiority of men over women, the pre-eminence of the rational mode of apprehension of reality ascribed to the male as a prerogative as well as the belief in the incontestable truth of history. Their novels show a clear concern for the underprivileged minorities and confer a voice to those who in the course of Western history have been hushed or annihilated such as blacks, Jews, women or colonial subjects. As a consequence of these choices, the lives of the characters

presented in these fictional pieces contribute to offer alternative versions of reality that frequently challenge generally accepted present or past narratives. The theme of the re-writing of history is central in Evaristo's *The Emperor's Babe* and in Dabydeen's *Our Lady of Demerara* and features with varying degrees of importance in Syal's *Anita and Me* and in Smith's *White Teeth* while all the novels studied in the present work feature references to the situation of migrants in their dealings with European communities. Simultaneously, the fiction under scrutiny often rescues alternative modes of knowledge connected with diversity in ethnic, cultural or gender inscription. The effect of these writers' work is that of liberation from centralized modes of power exemplified by hegemonic institutionalized practices such as those of empire and patriarchy and from illegitimate uses of reason that lead to dogmatism as an instrument of enslavement.

In spite of the similarities between the writers studied in what concerns their thematic interests, ideological position and cultural insertion, there are noticeable differences marked by gender apart from their individual distinctiveness that identify their fiction as aesthetically valuable. The socio-historical development of males and females in Western civilization has shown changes in the distribution of power which left women at a disadvantage for ages until the arousal of movements at the end of the 19<sup>th</sup> century that have favoured a slow reversal towards more tolerant and fair circumstances. Simultaneous with the feminine gender's advance towards empowerment, the masculine position has suffered the consequences of the new scenario which implied sharing the private and the public world on more balanced terms with their female partners. The postmodern dismantling of the hierarchical binary opposition male-female is one of the effects of the slow transformation here described. The loss of centrality of the masculine role, coupled with the loss of confidence in the possibility of thorough control of the environment with the sense of authority this

implied, has led to nostalgia and a sense of tragic destiny. The conception of the white man as wholly conscious and self-determined originator of meaning, action and progress has been debunked as one of the central metanarratives of modernity while his role as moral legislator has been delegitimized (Bauman 1987).

Through European or European-influenced education, the male intellectuals of mixed cultural background studied in this thesis have been subjected to the process of disempowerment just described with the particularity that they experiment an unavoidable rejection of the modern tradition as the ideological construct that sustained the edifice of empire. Caryl Phillips's, Fred D'Aguiar's and David Dabydeen's personal implication with postcolonial issues predisposes them to reject the Enlightenment inheritance while they simultaneously share with their white contemporaries the sense of loss derived from their displacement by the emergence of a new conceptualization of the feminine that has irrevocably changed traditional sexual and social roles and relationships, affecting men's performance both in the private and the public sphere of life. These culturally hybrid writers respond to a double allegiance which has given them both a keen sense of the disadvantage that postcolonial cultures have suffered and the necessary cultural and intellectual tools to unmask and confront the strategies that the imperial authorities used to impose their power.

Although the writers mentioned above uphold the postulates of Postmodernism with its defence of plurality in the forms they choose to frame their stories, they seem to sustain by their treatment of violence and their hopelessness about the future, that the present European community will not succeed in its attempt to endorse a tolerant multiethnic society until a thorough revision of the evils of the past is exercised. The collapse of the high ideals of the initial Enlightenment spirit inspires regret for the missed opportunity to create a fairer world and the loss of centrality of man as the

paradigmatic model of humanity predisposes these male writers to ponder on the causes of gender failure. The need to examine the reasons for the fall of the metanarratives leads to interest in the analysis of the many cases of cruel discrimination the history of Britain (echoed by that of other European Empires) and her colonial satellite nations have seen in their course. The same ideas, which refer to the necessity to revise the past to maintain a viable present-day project, are expressed by Paul Gilroy in *After Empire*: “My argument is that these accounts of colonial war must be owned so that they can become useful in understanding the empire, in making sense of its bequest to the future and its impact on the moral and political contents of British national identity...” (2006:52). Gilroy’s proposal sustains that a clarification of imperial responsibility in the vicious dealings with the colonial others can contribute to a better understanding of the problems of present-day British society as regards intolerance towards the immigrant as living testimony of the shameful practices of the past. Thoughtful consideration of the past can provide the tools to reach and unveil the underlying causes of the picture of the former colonial who settles on British soil today as the enemy enacting a war of invasion with the inevitable hatred and rejection that this view can generate (Gilroy 2006:110).

Caryl Phillips’s *The Nature of Blood* explores the past (the Jews in the Republic of Venice and in central Europe in mid-twentieth century, the black Othello in Renaissance Venice) in search of circumstances that can be compared to current racist attitudes and *A Distant Shore* offers particularly poignant examples of murderous reactions against reputed “invaders” in the context of present-day Britain. David Dabydeen’s *Our Lady of Demerara* also traces the origin of today’s modes of discrimination to past practices making explicit connections between the universalizing and ethnocentric European Enlightenment, ancient Judeo-Christian traditions and the

modern, 19<sup>th</sup> century scientific mind. Relating different hierarchical forms of thought this novel deploys plenty of examples of the undue subjection of colonials, women and children simultaneously highlighting the similarity of past and present instances of unfair uses of power. This is the case of the accounts of Corinne's subjection to male abuse in the imperial context as compared with Rohini's murder in obscure circumstances (though clearly expressive of sexual violence) in contemporary England. Equally effective as a mode of relating the past and the present is the attitude of the character of Lance who, although critically looking back into historical instances of violent and unjust interventions of imperial forces, shows discriminatory attitudes towards the Arawaks in Guyana or towards his own wife because of her ethnic origins. Such parallel situations that compare present and past prejudiced practices are reinforced by the description of other characters' position as exemplified by the unfair treatment that the British-Indian Samaroo receives in contemporary England in spite of his loyalty to his country of residence.

Violent discrimination is also a central theme in Fred D'Aguiar's *Bethany Bettany* as most clearly demonstrated by the stigmatization of the protagonist whose weak stand is emphasized by the circumstances of her age and gender. Her situation of extreme vulnerability is comparable to that of the Jews in fascist dictatorships. A similar effect of comparison between the past and the present can be observed in the depiction of the character of the local school Headmaster whose present attitudes and behaviour echo those of the past imperial frame of mind. At the same time, his bigotry mirrors the narrow-mindedness of the foreign politics of the bordering countries in South America who wage fratricide wars. The originating impulse of these absurd and futile confrontations reflects the mutual national jealousy among the modern European nation-states which fuelled murderous wars in the 20<sup>th</sup> century. The erection of strong

ethnic and national bonds may be used to reinforce hostility against the “invaders” or the “foreigners”, in sum, the alien Others. The effect of such comparisons between the past and the present is to raise awareness about the contemporary survival of signs of a totalitarian form of thought that, irrespective of how much it is opposed or criticized, still remains and affects the life of many people in Britain today.

In his analysis of the rationale of contemporary racism, Gilroy (2000:116) offers the really alarming idea that the concept of “race” can be conceived at present as an answer against the general disappointment produced by the feeling of British political decline in the consensus of nations and the disorientation produced by the multiplicity of postmodern society: “The loss of Empire - and the additional loss of certainty about the limits of national and racial identity that result from it - have begun, ironically, to sustain people, providing them with both pleasure and distraction”. In this context, the idea of race can come to fulfil the function of stabilizing people who confront a horizon of social uncertainty. Such a situation is described in Phillips’s *A Distant Shore* in the diffused spirit of ennui, disappointment or disorientation that affects some members of the white British population in varying degrees, namely the character of Dorothy and the gang of young thugs who attack Solomon. The presentation of these characters can fit Gilroy’s description of people affected by uncertainty leading to perplexity and uneasiness, in many cases finally resulting in social alliance for the purpose of sustaining each other on the basis of race to exercise hostility against the different other. Gathering strength from the common ground of similarity, the youth gang in Phillips’s novel commits the final trespassing of the most basic of social rules when they proceed to the annihilation of another human being on the basis of difference. Likewise, the outrageous assault on Corinne in Dabydeen’s *Our Lady of Demerara* could be ascribed to similar social causes. The effort to revise the past in order to achieve redemption is a



thematic line in the latter novel, and can be interpreted as an underlying idea in both works by Phillips. The various lines of plot that intertwine in *The Nature of Blood* are concerned with a revision of historical circumstances within the context of imperial or totalitarian regimes with the purpose of rejecting their dogmatism as a source of extreme intolerance. In *A Distant Shore*, on the other hand, the indictment of the iniquities suffered by the protagonists seems to point in the direction of exploring the past causes for present-day malaise.

However, none of the three pieces by Phillips and Dabydeen here studied suggest a positive outcome of such an endeavour. This circumstance is directly implied in *Our Lady of Demerara* by the fact that the character of Lance fails to reach his aim in his backward-looking, archaeological search in pursuit of humanistic values hopelessly lost. The message seems to be that the revisionary plan of historical inspection has not yet produced the expected results. The worlds envisaged by Phillips's and Dabydeen's novels are dark and bleak; intense exploration of a tragic past and nostalgic regret for unfulfilled promises of a better future are marks that distinguish *The Nature of Blood*, *A Distant Shore* and *Our Lady of Demerara*. As to D'Aguiar's *Bethany Bettany*, in spite of the lighter touches introduced by the use of magical realism, its exhaustive study of violent behaviour and the work's focus on war and death in its final pages prevent speculations about a more promising future.

It can be ascertained that the three novelists discussed above express their indictment of ancient modes of thought that are foundational to European civilization and which have exhausted their usefulness as all-encompassing, legitimizing concepts. Dabydeen, D'Aguiar and Phillips agree on the need to reconsider these declining principles for the purpose of re-defining them and restricting their application and sphere of influence. As Gilroy argues, black intellectuals of the West express a

“profound disenchantment” (2000:70) with modernity’s failed promise of universal brotherhood on the basis of which theorists like Frantz Fanon rallied the Third World to envisage new concepts and imagine a different humanity. The cultural in-betweenness of these black intellectuals offers, according to Fanon, a unique opportunity to create alternative and more positive answers to the problem of human relations in postmodernity. In “these in-between locations... the double consciousness required by the everyday work of translation offered a prototype for the ethically charged role of the interpreter with which our most imaginative intellectuals have answered the challenges of postmodern society” (Gilroy 2000:71). The duality of this position comes to coincide with that of the condition of postmodernity as a transitional frame indicating the end of modernity but also the hesitation about what will follow. While there is certainty about what have been the mistakes of modernity, there is uncertainty about how to face the challenges of the future. Phillips, Dabydeen and D’Aguiar failed to imagine a promising future. This task appears to be more amenable to their female counterparts according to the evidence in the novels studied in the present work as well as in the production of other writers like Andrea Levy, and Shani Mootoo who also contribute with a hopeful picture in fiction tinged with comedy. These women novelists, though still accounting for the vicious aspects of today’s societies, have been capable of salvaging the force of love and solidarity from the debris that resulted from the collapse of modernity.

In the above context, the perspectives adopted by the feminine and masculine positions mark a different tendency in answer to a number of variables which affect their respective modes of approach to contemporary issues. It has been observed that we can identify a predisposition towards genre differentiation in the response to the new vistas that the vagueness and uncertainty of the postmodern condition unwrap before the mixed-ethnic intellectual in today’s British society. Every one of the novelists

considered in the present work deals with thematic lines concerning the dilemmas of interethnic relations in postmodernity. However, the masculine production shows characteristic traces such as a repeated concern with the past, with the thorough exploration of the evil consequences of the wrong application of the principles of the Enlightenment that modernity evolved together with a marked preference for the encoding of their stories in the form of tragedy. On the other hand, the feminine attitude, as present in the novels by Zadie Smith, Bernardine Evaristo and Meera Syal appears as more inclined to take the past as a starting point to reach forward to the future with a daring plunge into imagining new forms of solidarity and understanding against the background of a hybrid culture. Avoiding the position of the victim and less prone to pine for a lost dream, these women novelists employ fiction as a rehearsing ground for the enactment of new imagined forms of interaction. As a result we see how in the novels by Syal and Smith interest lies less on the exposure of the victims than on the exploration of the mutual influence between diverse cultural groups. The characters are hybrid, heterogeneous subjects forever unstable and in flux who participate in the process of transculturation. To inhabit liminal spaces implies flexibility, adaptation and a capacity to approach in good humour the paradoxical and irreconcilable. Standing on the threshold, acting as interpreters between camps (Gilroy 2000- Bauman 1987), the postmodern feminine/female (Braidotti 1993) subject can enjoy the ubiquity of the inside and outside and agree to the coexistence of paradoxical modes of thought and action. From this position evolves

...the concept of a multiple, shifting and often self-contradictory identity, a subject that is not divided in, but rather at odds with, language; an identity made up of heterogeneous and heteronomous representations of gender, race, and class, and often indeed across languages and cultures;

an identity that one decides to reclaim from a history of multiple assimilations, and that one insists on as a strategy.... (de Lauretis 9)

Such is the concept of identity subscribed by contemporary Feminisms, a form of thought that opposes the crashing determinism that underlies Phillips's and Dabydeen's portrayal of their characters as conditioned by their past and/or present circumstances.

The encounter of cultures in today's postmodern, global Britain can lead to either violence or celebration depending on what conception of identity is sustained. A modern conception will lead to alienation and rejection of the other while a postmodern conception of identity as deterritorialized and in flow may foster the celebration of difference. Identity as process implies multiple subject positions among which to choose. There is greater freedom and creativity together with the possibility of searching alternative forms of inscription in dealings with the other. Social roles in the course of Western history have predisposed women to define themselves in terms of human relations within the home, the family and the community. Their contribution in these areas as mediators between the needs and desires of members of a community facilitate their predisposition to extend such skills to their application in socio-political spheres and to imagine new forms of social interaction. As suggested by Wilshire (98-99), the feminine view is more liable to agree with a less restrictive and individualistic sense of self than the masculine centred on distinctiveness, assertion and a tendency to acquisition and possession. Within feminine identity, psychological and cultural reasons favour identity movements that rely on social and personal interaction fostering empathy among equals in preference over self-assertion and the imposition of hierarchies. In this context the feminine spirit can become a positive force in the diasporic circumstances of the globalized Western world. The re-evaluation of the body and affect in the new "sujeto incardinado", both female and feminine (Braidotti 2004:

168) allows for a more caring attitude particularly attuned to the needs of contemporary multicultural social conglomerates. From the feminist perspective personal experience becomes political, to borrow Kate Millet's coinage "the personal is political"<sup>20</sup>, taking this expression to mean both that modes of being in the sphere of private life can be extended to affect the public and that the exploration of power relations in private life can foster social and political changes. Brah (2007:253) acknowledges the relevance of private interactions in the definition of personal and social identity:

...conscious agency and subconscious subjective forces are enmeshed in the everyday rituals of eating, shopping, watching television, listening to music, attending political meetings or other social activities. These rituals provide the site on which a sense of belonging – a sense of 'identity' - may be forged in the process of articulating its difference from other people's ways of doing things....

The processes described above are at the core of the novels by women writers studied in the present thesis, including the way in which both conscious and subconscious forces play a part in processes of identification. As the panorama of the characters' daily life evolves before the readers' eyes, we see how their identities are shaped and how their choices define their present and their future. Simultaneously, we see them interacting with other ethnic subjects and negotiating against the background of difference. The characters in Evaristo's and Syal's novels define themselves as they relate to their culturally different neighbours and show their capacity for agency and their excitement at the possibility of choice that life brings. In Smith's *White Teeth*, although we find characters who are fatalists and others who are believers in personal choice, semantic and formal elements in the novel subscribe to a conception of identity

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<sup>20</sup> Expression used by Kate Millet in her 1970 dissertation "Sexual Politics" at Columbia University (Qtd in Rublin).

as a task and not as a given opposing freedom to the condition of the irrevocable and the pre-determined. The satirical treatment of dogmatic positions such as religious determinism, the elements of carnivalization that appear recurrently in the text and the bearing of chance at decisive moments in plot development, all indicate allegiance to a conception of identity in process and defined by personal agency. The same ideological stand can be identified in Syal's and Evaristo's work and all three novelists eschew dogmatism in the avoidance of stereotypical representations of cultural identities: character traits are allotted irrespective of ethnic background to avoid all possible stigmatizations. Concentration on the daily life of the characters in the novels by Syal, Evaristo and Smith also implies a positive evaluation of emotional connections within the circle of family and friends as central to the institution of a personal identity.

The recognition of the need for connectivity as a process of equal importance to that of separation for individuation may represent a new approach to the constitution of identities that might avoid the pitfalls of alienation and estrangement of the other. Patricia Waugh considers that "the recognition of the co-existence of these states might be essential for the survival of the human race". She believes that an alternative feminist conception of identity that challenges "autonomy through a relational concept of identity" (1992:135) can contribute a positive answer to the dead-end of modernity. She recognizes that "perhaps the most positive lesson of Postmodernity is that "'autonomy' can still be achieved but in ways which do not necessarily assert self by annihilating other" (164). With this positive contribution, the female/feminine position avoids the nihilistic attitude of many theorists of the postmodern and escapes the trap of nostalgia and the inevitability of determinism, seen in the present work as identifying the male novelists analyzed. It should be here highlighted that the positive note introduced by the feminine perspective does not imply the omission of the struggle against the many

forms of intolerance and exclusion denounced by the male novelists studied including the women's particular interest in the censure of gender discrimination. Syal, Evaristo and Smith also use their fine sense of humour and capacity for light irony to criticize the negative aspects they can identify as much in the host culture as in their own ethnic tradition.

The privileged position of women in the scenario that the postmodern condition offers has allowed for their positive contribution in the field of ideas. Brah (2007: 248) sustains that "Feminist Theory has been at the forefront of new directions in political, social and cultural theory" with special emphasis placed on the contribution of post-structuralist black Feminism and the combined explorations of this movement and Postcolonialism in the recent valorization of the concept of diaspora. The new conceptualization of diaspora that avoids its exclusive connection with the idea of punishment can produce positive theoretical results. From the postcolonial field, Gilroy (2000: 123-125) explains that what this seminal idea can offer is the opportunity to think of identity outside the confines of territorialization and racialization and against the background of multiple identities. The concept also adheres to the notion of identity as non-essentialist and in constant process, allowing for the development of "new understandings of self, sameness and solidarity" (128). In the border-line locus of diaspora, exhaustively explored by the novels studied in the present work, the issue of difference is fundamental. The question arises as to how difference should be approached: if as a positive contribution to mutual enrichment or as irreconcilable traits too arduous to handle successfully. While the masculine attitude as seen in Phillips, Dabydeen and D'Aguiar concentrates attention on the difficult process of overcoming barriers and borders solidified by an essentialist conception of group identity, the feminine response celebrates the rich texture of hybridity and the crossing of borders

exploring the possibilities of identities in flux. The role of women as translators or interpreters of difference can place them in an advantageous position to cooperate in the creation of what Brah defines, echoing Waugh, “an everyday politics geared to foster networks of solidarity and connectivity without erasing the uniqueness of others” (Brah 2007:255). Both Postcolonialism and postmodern Feminisms are concerned with the many obstacles and the multiple conflicts that arise from the encounters of cultures and genders and give shape to serious criticism of iniquitous social and cultural practices. Given the many lines of argument that connect these theories in their common struggle against inequality, their joint work could also offer points of departure to plan a better future in which understanding and solidarity might overcome the barriers that separate human from human.

Although all the novels under consideration in this thesis attest to a criticism of the modern condition and the exploration of the postmodern situation from the perspective of their ideational content not all of them show the same degree of commitment with Postmodernism in their conception of form. As Linda Hutcheon (3) has theorized, postmodern works of art de-naturalize canonical modes of representation in order to contest the ideological foundation on which they stand. By dismantling the realist contract, postmodern novels simultaneously use and denaturalize the conventions that substantiated the modern perspective. The double coding that such a strategy implies de-centres the text as the locus of meaning and stimulates a questioning attitude in the reader with the purpose of avoiding closure and totality. The participation that such an attitude fosters shuns easy conformity to inherited patterns of mimetic depiction with the consequent awareness of the constructed nature of all forms of representation (artistic or historical). Through this means postmodern novels serve the social function of offering models of representation that contest the universalizing, controlling tendency



of the modern rationalist in favour of a more local and embodied approach, and also more inclusive because of its tolerance of multiplicity. In this context the real does not disappear but can be experienced as fluid and changeable in opposition to dogmatic views that reflect oneness and fixity. As Waugh ascertains, postmodernist aesthetics reintegrates body and mind and includes theories of the social that reinvent identity as humane. These strategies have the effect of avoiding both the homogenizing tendency of modernity and the dissolution of agency and nihilism that identify some other postmodern approaches.

Of the eight novels studied in the present work, Phillips's and Dabydeen's pieces adhere most patently to the above description. Although Phillips's *The Nature of Blood* and *A Distant Shore* express a sense of naturalistic determinism from which the characters cannot escape and which is made patent in the latter novel by the use of the plot of predestination (Todorov 65), this trait is subverted by other experimental devices that mark both novels as belonging to the tradition of Postmodernism. The realistic portrayal of characters and situations stands against the background of extreme dislocation in the use of the dimensions of time and space. To this disarticulation must be added the creation of parallel worlds and the introduction of a variety of voices that break with the imposition of a single unified perspective. Equally postmodern are the introduction of discourses from different genres in *The Nature of Blood* and the effect of disjunction and fragmentation produced by the gaps between scenes and the abrupt changes of perspective in *A Distant Shore*. The complexity of the structure used in both novels avoids univocity, objectivity and the linearity that characterizes the realist construct as well as canonical history. Dabydeen's *Our Lady of Demerara* equates white male centrality and his control over the environment with the organizing power of omniscience in narratology and the effect of totality of realist writing. Through

disruption of linearity in time, space and logic and an unconventional form that defies coherent decodification the novel subverts the realist contract and its ideological presuppositions. The narrative piece is highly dialogic with a proliferation of limited perspectives from heterogeneous voices representing different social classes and genders, as well as ethnic and cultural origins. The parallel stories inserted within the four main narrative lines produce a counterpoint of viewpoints which defies legibility, closure and certainty. A multiplicity of thematic echoes, parallel characters and situations reverberate through the novel sustaining the coexistence of a number of equally valid realities. The use of unstable irony further contributes to shatter the illusion of realism leaving the reader with many unanswered questions.

D'Aguiar's *Bethany Bettany* is equally open-ended although it differs from the novels analyzed above in its preference for the literary device of magical realism as a means to express its opposition to modern forms of dogmatism. The choice of this literary mode acquires political significance as an indictment of hegemonic forms of power since it implies the simultaneous coexistence of the opposing designative and expressivist philosophical perspectives with their corresponding alliances with the faculties of reason and imagination respectively. The impossibility to distinguish between the real and the fantastic, together with the multiplicity of narrative voices and the lack of an objective authorial stand, all contribute to the creation of a postmodern multidimensional reality where equal value is conferred on contradictory epistemological positions.

The form of the novels by Phillips, D'Aguiar and Dabydeen implies a criticism of the philosophical postulates of modernity: their fictional pieces give ample treatment to the evils that result from this perspective highlighting the violent and discriminative attitudes it sustains. The conviction of "[t]he founding *absurdity* of race as a principle of

power, differentiation, and classification” (Gilroy 2000:42) is a central message in their novels. All three writers coincide in their choice of tragedy as generic inscription, in their interest in the detailed and recurrent presentation of incidents of open physical and psychological violence as well as in their exposure of the ineffectiveness of hybridity as a path to tolerance because of the historical recurrence of illegitimate uses of power.

The novels by Zadie Smith, Bernardine Evaristo and Meera Syal manifest less resistance to the realist construct as an expression of modernity. Meera Syal’s use of narrative forms is the most traditional with respect for chronology and the development of realistic settings and character portrayal in search of verisimilitude. The result is a detailed and vivid study of sociological aspects of the life of the Indian community in the diasporic space of England. The only deviation from this traditional pattern is the successive use of autodiegesis and heterodiegesis in alternative chapters of *Life isn’t all ha ha hee hee* with the corresponding effect of diversity in perspective that this device implies. Evaristo’s approach in *The Emperor’s Babe* is similar as long as the novelist reaffirms the realist construct in the diachronic arrangement of events and in the vivid creation of character and setting within a careful reproduction of the historical circumstances of Londinium in AD 211. However, Evaristo’s brilliant contribution lies in her adherence to postmodern forms in this scenario. Hers is realism plus something else (Jencks 288) in its mixture of the high and the low, the past and the present, the serious and the comic, narrative and poetry and fiction and history. Hierarchies and classifications explode in the arena of this hybrid novel which in spite of its observance of a single narrative voice with an autodiegetic narrator allows for the presentation of different perspectives and interpretations avoiding the limitations of a single meaning. Zadie Smith’s *White Teeth*, like the work of her fellow novelists, reaffirms the realist model but introduces dissident gestures in the disruption of spatial and temporal

contiguity, the problematization of mimesis through the use of metanarrative comments that raise awareness about the artificiality of all organizational patterns and the device of the grotesque as a subversive gesture which dissolves the fixed and permanent into fluid processes of transformation.

The three women novelists discussed above show a particular inclination to adhere to the postulates of Postcolonialism and contemporary Feminisms with a special contribution in *The Emperor's Babe* towards the re-evaluation of the feminine and its achievements in history by lifting Zuleika from her humble circumstances and ennobling her figure with the introduction of mythological references by the end of the piece. The novels by Syal, Smith and Evaristo give front stage to the study of the sustaining force of friendship and gender solidarity and of effective inter-ethnic contacts in transculturation towards the attainment of hybridity. Equally central to these novels is the expression of exhilaration in a new freedom in diversity and in successful crossings of borders and transgression of differences that results in the adoption of the gender of comedy to encode serious issues within the traditional concern of Postcolonialism. Using touches of the grotesque, Smith can laugh away the iniquities of empire and together with Syal they express amusement at many ingrained and absurd cultural practices among local and immigrant populations alike. This levelling ironical attitude introduces impartiality in the dealings with cultural traits traditionally connected with either central or peripheral nations. Evaristo's use of a double temporal perspective in *The Emperor's Babe* has its most perfect linguistic manifestation in the device of anachronism, which highlights in good, albeit often poignant humour, the similarities between the past and the present. In this way, she both calls our attention to the ideological value of the re-writing of history, and she debunks the modern historical conception of progress by showing that in the distant past people were already

concerned with current existential issues. None of these generalities, however, can obliterate these novelists' rejection of ethnic and gender stereotypes and their interest in the personal as unique.

If modernity is under equally stern scrutiny in all the novels studied in the present work, the male novelists stage their indictment in a tragic atmosphere while the female perspective deploys stories in a light vein to condemn the negative entailments of the application of instrumental reason by the modern mentality. Opposition to this frame of mind takes the form of radical subversion of the realist construct in the former group while the mechanism of laughter and the dramatic representation of the concept of hybridity achieve the same effect among the latter. Both carnival laughter and the ingrained paradox in the concept of hybridity lead to the rejection of authoritarianism by collapsing binarisms, among them, and most prominent in the novels here studied, the opposites reason/experience, white/black, man/woman and civilization/wilderness. Out of the blending or sudden permutations of the hierarchies in the above binary pairs emerge the unexpected, the paradoxical and the ambiguous with all the vitality and strong subversive power that these qualities imply. By this means, Cartesian epistemology is by-passed rather than openly confronted. The female strategy desarticulates the philosophical position that sustains modernity instead of offering open confrontation with its inevitable commitment to violence. Avoiding the tension and conflict which constitute the central concern of Phillips's, D'Aguiar's and Dabydeen's novels, the women writers' fiction dramatizes a more humane conception of identity that values connectivity as much as separation for individuation and offers glimpses into a more flexible strategy based on interpersonal abilities which allow for the peaceful co-existence of difference.

As a closing statement, it can be sustained that the theoretical elucidations of contemporary Feminism and Postcolonialism, as developments issuing from the fertile soil of postmodernity, lie at the root of the fictional pieces studied by the present thesis and that even if the masculine tendency reveals a tragic and nostalgic approach and the feminine is prone to adopt a comedic tone and a forward-looking perspective, in all cases the purpose is to raise awareness of the barriers that still persist and obstruct common understanding. In this way, the novels analyzed make a positive contribution in the direction of the acceptance of the different other in the contemporary world. However, gender inscription signals towards more specific goals: while D'Aguiar, Phillips and Dabydeen are intent on gathering the data to assemble a reservoir of collective memory as a firm foundational ground, Smith, Syal and Evaristo have taken upon their shoulders the task of imagining new forms of being and interacting in today's multiethnic communities. The overall message seems to be that the project of Europe can be judged as a failure unless all its inhabitants, under the inspiration of those intellectuals who are privileged by cultural in-betweenness, are prepared to jointly face the challenges of peaceful co-existence.

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