

Barriers, Borders and Crossings in British Postcolonial Fiction

Barriers, Borders and Crossings
in British Postcolonial Fiction:
A Gender Perspective

By

Cecilia Rosa Acquarone

**CAMBRIDGE
SCHOLARS**

P U B L I S H I N G

Barriers, Borders and Crossings in British Postcolonial Fiction:
A Gender Perspective,
by Cecilia Rosa Acquarone

This book first published 2013

Cambridge Scholars Publishing

12 Back Chapman Street, Newcastle upon Tyne, NE6 2XX, UK

British Library Cataloguing in Publication Data
A catalogue record for this book is available from the British Library

Copyright © 2013 by Cecilia Rosa Acquarone

All rights for this book reserved. No part of this book may be reproduced, stored in a retrieval system, or transmitted, in any form or by any means, electronic, mechanical, photocopying, recording or otherwise, without the prior permission of the copyright owner.

ISBN (10): 1-4438-4670-8, ISBN (13): 978-1-4438-4670-7

The present study 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.

TABLE OF CONTENTS

List of Acronyms	ix
------------------------	----

Introduction	1
--------------------	---

Part I

Chapter One.....	6
Philosophical Contextualization: Modernity and Postmodernity	

Chapter Two	15
Literary Contextualization	

Chapter Three	20
Female as against Male Response to the Challenge of Postmodernity	

Part II

Chapter One.....	26
The Postmodern World as Tragedy or the Burden of Modernity	

Chapter Two	34
Caryl Phillips's <i>The Nature of Blood</i> and <i>A Distant Shore</i>	

Chapter Three	86
David Dabydeen's <i>Our Lady of Demerara</i>	

Chapter Four	99
Fred D'Aguiar's <i>Bethany Bettany</i>	

Part III

Chapter One.....	122
The Postmodern World as Comedy or the Persistence of Hope	

Chapter Two	133
Zadie Smith's <i>White Teeth</i>	

Chapter Three	152
Bernardine Evaristo's <i>The Emperor's Babe</i>	
Chapter Four	165
Meera Syal's <i>Life isn't all ha ha hee hee</i> and <i>Anita and Me</i>	
Part IV	
Conclusion.....	206
Notes.....	225
Bibliography	227

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 the authors' fictional production, affecting their perspective and consequently their characters' lives in profoundly significant 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 have taught them to accommodate by developing the capacity to conceive of a “multidimensional reality” (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 studied in the present work. 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.

The present study 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.

PART I

CHAPTER ONE

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 (1) defines modern times as “the epoch in which simply being modern became a decisive value in itself”. 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 Kovladoff, 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 Kovadloff 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 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 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. (39)

In spite of the apparent disparity in the views above, we can discern some common features such as an insistence on the superposition of modernity and postmodernity, and 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 phallocentric 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 of the subsequent authority, 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 (76), quoting Ardner, 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 achievement¹, 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 and as a consequence partakes of both the social and the biological. We agree with Amy S. Wharton

[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. (15)

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 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 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 nineteenth 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 phallogentric 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 et al. 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 postructuralist 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 postructuralist 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 et al. (89) have 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 such a 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 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. (128)

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 this 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.

CHAPTER TWO

LITERARY CONTEXTUALIZATION

The novels studied in this work were created by writers who were either born abroad and then came to live in Britain or were born in Britain to foreign parents (with the exception of Evaristo who was born of an English mother and a Nigerian father). However, all these writers received an English education. The influence of more than one culture during their upbringing and education made an impact on these writers leaving marks on the themes developed in the novels scrutinized in this study. Written between 1996 and 2004, the novels deal with subjects that concern contemporary Britain such as globalization and hybridity as well as with the socio-cultural influence of feminist ideas in today's society. Although each makes a unique contribution, these fictional pieces can be classed together because of their multi-cultural origin and because they show traces of coincidence as we shall soon see in terms of their stand towards social, philosophical and aesthetic issues. Even when some of the novels studied are only partially set in Britain like Phillips's *The Nature of Blood* and Fred D' Aguiar's *Bethany Bettany* or are set entirely in the past like Bernardine Evaristo's *The Emperor's Babe*, they all deal with circumstances that refer to the crisis provoked by the clash of cultures in the "contact zone" (Pratt 6-7), a fact that directly or indirectly alludes to contemporary Britain.

Although the novels under scrutiny could be classed as making their contribution to Black British literature, this form of identification will be avoided in this work because it is considered objectionable on a number of grounds. In spite of being in general usage, I disagree with the application of this classificatory term because it reinforces a misguided and inaccurate qualification by arbitrarily highlighting one single trait to identify a large, heterogeneous group of people of different origins. Simultaneously, the word "black", unavoidably points back to a long history of racialization which we all agree today should be definitely overcome. On the other hand, there is general consensus these days that identity should be understood in terms of a complex web of social insertion in which gender, class and ethno-cultural traits are articulated. In this sense, in "Necessary

Journeys” Caryl Phillips lucidly and emphatically rejects attempts to reduce identification to stale stereotypes and affirms that

the most dangerous thing we can do to ourselves is to carelessly accept a label that is offered to us by a not always generous society that seeks to reduce us to little more than one single component of our rich and complex selves. (18)

It should also be taken into account that the writers concerned disagree with the epithet Black British to identify their literature. In fact, all the writers studied in this book strongly reject the idea of the label Black Literature since they see themselves as belonging to the mainstream of British art. Insistence on ethnic identification diverts attention from the much more central question of aesthetic value. Consequently, avoidance of classificatory identification should be interpreted as a political gesture in the direction of integration of difference into the mainstream of British cultural production.

The creative work of writers like D’Aguiar, Dabydeen, Evaristo, Phillips, Smith and Syal make a clear contribution to the re-definition of Britishness in the context of today’s globalized society, showing a courageous disposition and often displaying a revisionary spirit that launches the writers into the exploration of history with the purpose of better understanding the present. These artists’ novels actualize in the readers’ mind a new locus for the term Britain since through their fiction they activate the vivid presence of far-off lands in the very heart of Britain thus re-defining the conceptualization of the British nation at the same time that they tighten the bonds with those diverse ethnicities.

The profound change that British society underwent as a consequence of the large wave of immigration from the Caribbean, South-East Asia and Africa that entered the country after the Second World War was not an easy process since it demanded a huge effort of adaptation from both the in-comers and from the members of the host culture. The first group had to overcome a strong feeling of homelessness, especially when they suffered persecution or were regularly slighted by the social environment where they tried to settle while the second often offered resistance to what was experienced as an irresistible flood of new-comers who threatened the locals socially, culturally or economically. The effort, though, has proved rewarding for both sides involved since the influence of outsiders mixing with the in-put population has given rise to a richer, less parochial, more open-minded society: multi-ethnic, multi-cultural and more conscious of its own complexities. The writers which motivate the present study are

highly aware of the process described and, as Roger Bromley says in his book on diasporic cultural fictions, their works are mostly

...constructed around figures who look in from the outside while looking out from the inside, to the extent that both inside and outside lose their defining contours. They are figures with hyphenated identities, living hybrid realities which pose problems for classification and control, as well as raising questions about notions of essential difference. (5)

The immigrants' efforts to compromise and adapt to the majority culture can produce high levels of strain. The circumstances may be such that the subject may feel the absence of firm ground as absolutely destabilizing. Equally, the members of the majority culture may find the encounter in the multicultural zone shattering to the point of self-distraction. Both positions are well illustrated by the tragic destiny of the protagonists of Caryl Phillips's *A Distant Shore*.

However, the result of encounters in multi-cultural societies should not always be disastrous as seen in the views adopted by theories of hybridity which recognize the possibility of fruitful interaction in the social arena with the purpose of creating something new. As Leusmann (12) states, "[b]y insisting on critical integration, [hybridity] plays down the role of singularities and allows for the redefinitions of identities". The result can then be the rejection of hegemonic and homogeneous conceptualizations of nationhood in preference for heterogeneity and acceptance of diversity.

Both postcolonial and feminist studies have been engaged in radical "debates concerning domination, equality and liberation" (Donnell 3). Within a postmodern perspective of subversion of established distribution of power, feminism and postcolonialism came to redress unjust social situations that gave priority to man over woman and empire over colony. These power struggles which originally centred on the reversal of the precarious status of the endangered feminine/colonial subject have now veered to adapt to the new conditions posed by "globalization, new-liberalism and the new 'Empire'" (Donnell 3). On the common ground of an understanding of identity as in a state of flux and permanent change, these movements theorize the possibility of negotiation of innovative social contracts that achieve successful hybrid conditions. As Avtar Brah (1996) sustains there are two distinct ways to experience diaspora:

The word diaspora often invokes the imagery of traumas of separation and dislocation, and this is certainly a very important aspect of the migratory experience. But diasporas are also potentially the site of hope and new beginnings. (193)

Diasporas as well as personal and social identity formation have been central issues in Britain since the mid-twentieth century. Fiction, being traditionally empathetic with socio-cultural circumstances, could not fail to deal with the subjects discussed above. Furthermore, since narrative is the natural way for the human spirit to give expression to identity, the topic finds extensive treatment in the genre of fiction, much more so in the case of British literary figures that have personally experienced the challenges of being considered different in contemporary Britain. Thus, it is not surprising that both views on diaspora described by Brah should find expression in the novels studied in this book. It is our hypothesis, though, that such a difference is punctuated by a gender perspective as shall be further developed below in the context of forms of expression of contemporary postmodernism.

Both in content and in form, the novels examined in the present book can be identified as belonging to current postructuralist writing, and as such they contain traits that assimilate them not only to the postcolonial spirit but also to the postmodern tradition. These fictional pieces come to reflect the complex philosophical questions that lie at the very basis of postmodernism expressing the paradoxes and contradictions that mark this vast movement. 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 postructuralist 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”. The novels we are concerned with 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 shape 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.

CHAPTER THREE

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 context described in Chapter Two 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 organizing meaning on similar realities which concern the unequal distribution of power within society. A fundamental postmodern theoretical