Confining Spaces, Resistant Subjectivities

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By

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PREFACE

This book takes as its starting point Chandra Talpade Mohanty's argument that it is the *way* in which "Third World" women's narratives are read and understood that is crucial, together with the need to locate them contextually. My original contribution to knowledge is to develop a deconstructive, cultural analysis through the re–reading of a selection of core postcolonial women's texts written in former colonial societies, at a time prior to the full emergence of *postcolonialism* as a set of theoretical concepts and before *feminism* had developed its major contribution to academic scholarship. These theories are examined in the first three chapters of the book. This re–reading is of texts which arguably prefigured in many ways some of the main debates later articulated in postcolonial feminist criticism, thus (re–)interpreting them through a contemporary, critical lens. The objective of the textual analysis, among other things, is to underline the function of literary mapping in postcolonial women's writing and the ways in which this resonates with key issues in postcolonial feminist studies. For example, the texts subvert the figure of the "universal woman" challenged by several critics, undermine images of women's sameness, and transform marginalising spaces such as prison and home into sites of possible resistance. Overall, the main contribution of this book is twofold. Firstly, the interpretation of postcolonial women's writing as a metachronous discourse of literary mapping in order to reclaim rather than deny the difference and complexity inherent in women's texts and identities. This lends a wider dimension to the literary representations of women and justifies my attempt to order the texts as following an inverted rite of passage. Secondly, the book demonstrates that postcolonial women's writing constitutes a discourse of literary activism and a cultural archive of prismatic female narratives which demands a responsive reading of the texts. This is to form a collective, critical consciousness from which, it is hoped, present and future communities of women can learn to change their lives.

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CHAPTER ONE

INTRODUCTION

> The existence of *Third World women's narratives* in itself is not evidence of decentering hegemonic histories and subjectivities. It is the *way* in which they are read, understood, and located institutionally which is of *paramount importance*. After all, the point is not just "to record" one's history of struggle, or consciousness, but how they are recorded; the *way* we read … such imaginative records is immensely significant. It is this very question of *reading*, *theorizing*, and *locating these writings* that I touch on. (Mohanty, "Cartographies" 34; emphasis added)

I begin this book with Mohanty's words which direct attention to the presence of literature by Third World women. As a female lecturer of English literature in a Third World culture (Syria), I find the strategy of reading women's literature recommended by Mohanty to be a particularly useful one. For this reason, I go beyond Mohanty's argument in order to situate the reading strategy in a contemporary, critical context by engaging with a deconstructive, contextual analysis of a selection of postcolonial women's texts in conjunction with postcolonial feminist debates. Mohanty's argument foregrounds a specific way of reading postcolonial women's narratives such as Erna Brodber's *Jane and Louisa Will Soon Come Home* (henceforth *JL*, 1980), Mariama Bâ's *So Long a Letter* (*SLL*, 1982 [1979]), Jean Rhys's *Wide Sargasso Sea* (*WSS*, 1982 [1966]), Mahasweta Devi's "Breast–Giver" ("BG," 1987 [1980]), Buchi Emecheta's *The Joys of Motherhood* (*JM*, 1994 [1979]), and Nawal El Saadawi's *Woman at Point Zero* (*WPZ*, 1983 [1975]) which are analysed in this book. These texts highlight diverse themes and structural modes of representations which connect with issues of female specificity, marginality, difference, choice, and agency. Moreover, they underline Donna Haraway's concept of "situated knowledges" which argues that there is no one truth to be uncovered and that all knowledge is partial and connected to the variable contexts which create it (583). By this I refer to the point that what it means to be a woman depends on the narrative contexts which expose rather than mask the powers affecting women.

Therefore, how we approach a woman's narrative is important, as will be argued in this chapter.

Accordingly, this book develops a deconstructive, cultural reading of the aforementioned texts which are re–read in conjunction with recent theoretical debates through a contemporary, critical lens. The texts are written in former colonial societies and are contextually located and contested. They are brought into a shared conjuncture in this book, namely literary representations of women's experiences of oppression. However, the analysis of the texts underscores women's potential to articulate their situations in order to defy obstacles and to be agents of change. This underlines women's aspiration toward something new, which relates to the present time—toward changing their lives and coming to terms with their bodies and voices. As such, the selected texts share another (revisionary) layer, namely female resistance. This suggests that resistance is a complementary part of oppression and is inseparable from the intertwined subject–object position of the female characters. The layer does not link female oppression to powerlessness as a fixed condition in women's lives; rather, it articulates agency out of confining spaces and practices.

Locating such moments of resistance has encouraged my analysis of the female characters' varied responses to what oppresses them through spatial mapping. This, in some instances, has helped develop sites of agency from uncommon actions and spaces such as widow confinement, posthumous silence, madness, and imprisonment. So, the objective of the textual analysis, among other things, is to map spaces of female resistance and agency. These spaces vary between prison (El Saadawi's *WPZ*), motherhood (Bâ's *SLL*, Emecheta's *JM*, and Devi's "BG"), sexuality (Brodber's *JL*), madness (Rhys's *WSS*), and female writing (Bâ's *SLL* and El Saadawi's *WPZ*), out of which oppression and resistance are mapped thematically and structurally. In doing so, I attempt to avoid the pitfalls of homogenising the subject(s) of the research. The linking point of the selected texts revolves around different stages of women's lives such as adolescence, marriage, motherhood, and widowhood. Although it is shared by the texts, the conjuncture is treated differently by the authors because the texts are culturally located and analysed. This is why the shared conjuncture gets more complicated by the power relations affecting women, and by the fact that degrees of agency and choice of action between the principal female figures also differ.

As a result, the selected works offer different narrative conclusions which are not always about (female) liberation as the term "postcolonial" may denote. Such differences denote the metachronous aspect of postcolonial women's writing which neither adopts a monolithic structural

mode of representation nor focuses on a single narrative of oppression/transition. They also underline the potential of the narratives to be operative temporarily and spatially in the past, at present, and in the future in order to inspire change, and this justifies my attempt to re–visit the selected texts.

Textual and contextual differences lend a wider dimension to the epistemology of women from developing countries and to the project of postcolonial women's writing. As the textual analysis will demonstrate, the selected authors create several resistant/confining female spaces as a way of speaking and being. Besides, they represent diverse identities and histories and speak with different and even conflicting voices, all of which are acknowledged and heard. This signals a key aspect of the research, namely the need to approach the texts as artefacts constructed from various authorial positions, social contexts, and women's standpoints, thereby developing a rich cultural and literary archive of women's voices and stories The book also examines how women's texts are sites for the representation, contestation, and reconstruction of female bodies and voices. Gender, class, race, language, and education, among other issues, constitute women's texts and contribute to their complexity and difference.[1] One of my aims is to expose this intersectionality in a woman's text in order to recognise the presence of dynamic, complex relationships between women and their communities, and the fact that knowledge about women is varied, shifting, and situated as are their identities and degrees of agency. This underlines that the selected writers differently position their principal female characters in relation to the texts and that modes of representing women's narratives and the socio–political contestations embedded within them help determine the choice of the reading strategies such as the deconstructive, cultural analysis of this book.

Oppositional, instructive, and reconstructive, the selected texts raise debates which resonate with key issues in postcolonial feminist studies. For example, the texts deconstruct the figure of the "universal woman" challenged by several critics, as will be argued in Chapter Three. Also, they undermine images of women's sameness, interrupt the dominant gaze, and transform marginalising spaces such as prison and home into sites of disruption. This is why the textual analysis accentuates the "insistence on irreducible difference and radical multiplicity of local knowledges" (Haraway 579). However, the focus on particularities is not seen as more emancipatory than other modes of representation because this can constitute an "insurmountable obstacle to building female bonds" within and across cultures (Dubek 201). This acknowledges the presence

of similarities and differences between both the texts and the female characters analysed in the coming chapters.

With the above–mentioned points in mind, this chapter introduces the theoretical and methodological debates raised in this book. The chapter discusses the usefulness of the deconstructive, cultural approach in order to specify the guiding spirit of this book. Indeed, what is important in literary analysis is not only to expound on how we read (women's) texts but also to justify which texts to read and engage with. This explains why a rationale is presented for the choice of the literary texts and of the feminist theoretical debates which have helped formulate the research topic. Finally, the book structure is outlined in order to give an idea about the content of the following chapters.[2]

Research methodology

Mohanty's argument in the previous section relates to the deconstructive, cultural methodology of this book in so far as it makes me "hear different [female] voices" (McWilliams 255). In other words, a deconstructive, cultural approach to the selected texts undermines interpretative approaches which produce enclosed, homogeneous textual readings. Homogeneous interpretations blind us as researchers to the varied modes of representing female oppression and resistance which the texts, individually and collectively, develop. This makes the image of the kumbla that features in Brodber's *JL* useful in describing the selected texts. At times restrictive and at others open, the kumbla is a shell behind which a weak personality hides to avoid "outside threats" (O'Callaghan, "Interior" 107), but when used properly, the kumbla becomes a device of transformation.

Describing postcolonial women's texts as kumblas underlines the potential of the texts to reclaim women's bodies/voices and to restructure society in order to make it more hospitable to women. Inspirational and open kumblas, the selected texts cross identity boundaries in order to expose, destabilise, and transform. This necessitates distinct and interrelated readings which are attentive to the risks of being enclosed in a totalising frame of interpretation. Therefore, deconstruction, according to Jacques Derrida, requires alternative approaches to critical practices because it "put[s] into practice a reversal of the classical opposition and a general displacement of the system. It is on that condition alone that deconstruction will provide the means of intervening in the field of oppositions it criticizes" (qtd. in Emberley xiv). Deconstruction appropriates binaries in order to enable the play of diverse modes of

representation. This suggests that the research methodology makes room for a renewed vision of reading whose objective of reconstruction and difference "targets not only the fictional domain, the telling of a story and the narration of history … but also the cultural context of the narrative … [which is] *pluralistic*, *polyphonic*, and *intertwined*" (Lionnet 173; emphasis added). The vision relates not only to non–Western women whom the texts represent but also to Western readers. As Cora Kaplan recommends, Western readers of postcolonial women's texts must acquaint themselves with specific cultural contexts as an aspect of postcolonial reading (qtd. in Wisker, *Post–Colonial* 7). This helps readers avoid the trap of cultural relativism and imperialism which makes us teach and think about the texts through "an unintentionally imperialist lens, conflating their progressive politics with our own agendas, interpreting their versions of humanism through the historical evolution of our own" (7). In other words, readers of postcolonial literature need to deal with it as indicative of cultural specificities that may not always reflect or represent their cultures and worldviews. This challenges monolithic, imperialist visions which blind readers to contextual analysis.[3]

Within a deconstructive, cultural reading of postcolonial women's texts, female characters defined by marginality and oppression become agents of change and opposition. The reading necessitates that the protagonists, despite being variably oppressed, can be seen as agents, "never finally as slave to the master that closes off the dialectic in his unique agency and his authorship of 'objective knowledge'" (Haraway 592). In line with Haraway, Peter Hitchcock invites readers to rethink women's stories and places in postcolonial contexts (79). For Hitchcock, readers should "look" at and hear, rather than "gaze" at, "Other" female voices and narratives because the look, unlike the "diabolical" gaze, disrupts hierarchies and connotes solidarity, "reciprocity and a condition of agency" (79). An oppositional, deconstructive weapon, the "look" disrupts the patriarchal and colonial gaze which invents oppressive female spaces/ margins and defines them as ahistorical, fixed, and absolute. Thus, the distinction between the "look" and the "gaze" is a socio–ethical responsibility of critics and writers because it encourages them to undermine any attempt to objectify women (Amireh and Suhair Majaj 6; Katrak 249). For Obioma Nnaemeka, the "look" in postcolonial contexts functions as plural, hybrid "eyes ('I's) … that support me … that watch over, protect and empower me; they are not the eyes that gaze at me in dominance" ("Imag(in)ing" 6). In other words, the "look" instigates acts of challenge, response, and solidarity among women. A practice common in literary studies is to apply theory to texts; nevertheless, it is productive to

see how theory and knowledge arise from literature by women from diverse postcolonial cultures. This refers to the generative function of the selected texts which is integral to their interpretation.

The selected texts give a fresh dimension to theoretical speculations about women and representation in so far as they theorise and generate knowledge about several female experiences, writing styles, and the societies which the writers represent and criticise. This helps develop a base for analysing postcolonial women's writing as engaged in a quest for interpretative knowledges about women and for strategies of change. As Elleke Boehmer argues, postcolonial women writers use such strategies in order to challenge the dominance of Western theory, where "a way of reading or a theory is suggested in the form of the story … a text may invite an oppositional reading by wrenching colonialist conventions, or reworking Europe's defining narratives" (*Colonial* 249). For instance, the thread uniting the texts analysed in this book is women's plural experiences of oppression and resistance. However, this thematic link is treated differently by the writers because it signals diversity, specificity, and connection among women. Besides, it reconceptualises race, class, gender, and other discourses which are under–theorised by many Western feminist and nationalist studies (Grewal and Kaplan 5; Boehmer, *Stories* 7).

In sum, a deconstructive, cultural analysis encourages me to "look" at the selected texts; that is, to engage with a plural reading of the texts which function as vehicles moving across borders, with diverse female experiences and standpoints as their fuel. This highlights the multipositionality of female identities and the synthetic nature of postcolonial cultures which engender plural readings and, in some cases, re–readings of women's texts, thereby allowing a dialogic process of reading to occur between the texts and the reader/the researcher.

Choice of theories and literary texts

The focus on feminist debates developed from the 1980s onwards, and on postcolonial women's narratives written between 1966 and 1980, does not mean "primarily to reason one's way back into the past, but to have a present involvement in what is said" (Gadamer 393). Returning to the selected debates and texts in this book does not suggest that they have become textbooks of the past which readers and students can simply read. Although the debates and the texts are specific to their times and cultures, they are texts which still need to be considered by present and future generations as relevant today, and in a sense, to be re–read in conjunction

with recent theoretical debates. It is this (metachronous) re–reading which constitutes the principal argument of the book. The selected feminist debates bring to the fore issues of specificity and diversity in the analysis of female oppression which intersects with issues of complexity and difference in representing women. It is important to mention that some of the theoretical debates occur in postcolonial women's writing which has the potential to theorise transformation in literary forms. This justifies the objective of drawing upon a number of feminist debates which also informed the selection of postcolonial women's texts in order to develop the research subject, as will be discussed in Chapter Three.

The texts to be analysed are of value because they still speak to us today. They are culturally specific; nonetheless, they are related to each other through the interlocking of identity layers, concerns, and writing objectives. This interrelatedness locates differences and inequalities not only between men and women but also among women, thereby stressing that the female characters analysed in the coming chapters do not neatly align with a fixed, coherent female image or experience. Another aspect of the texts is their potential to theorise a multitude of women's stories. Some of the selected texts such as Rhys's *WSS* (1966) date from a period which precedes or anticipates most of the theoretical discussions. Rhys's *WSS*, which is an example of revisionary writing, shows that the act of telling the unspoken text shifts from the Western female self in Charlotte Brontë's *Jane Eyre* (*JE*) to the white Creole woman (Antoinette) in Rhys's text. This example stresses that Rhys's *WSS* as a postcolonial text anticipates Edward Said's theoretical debates regarding how the perspective of the "Other" is absent from texts which are deemed valid and normative because they reflect the European Self and culture (*Orientalism* 66). It also suggests that the texts have been selected to demonstrate that literature can be seen as a pioneer, in some respects, to the extent that it raises in narrative forms many of the issues which were to later form the basis of theoretical debates. Therefore, literature not only reflects philosophical ideas but also can be a forerunner of "explicit" theory.

The selected texts also narrate different stories of female oppression and resistance and come from diverse geographical and cultural locations such as Africa, South Asia, and the Caribbean; nonetheless, they are not confined to their time and space and this highlights the metachronous aspect of postcolonial women's writing. Furthermore, the texts differ in their language as a medium of writing because Brodber's *JL*, Emecheta's *JM*, and Rhys's *WSS* are originally written and read in English, whereas Bâ's *SLL*, El Saadawi's *WPZ*, and Devi's "BG" are read as English translations in this book because they are written in foreign languages such

as French (*SLL*, first published as *Une si longue lettre* in 1979), Arabic (*WPZ*, first published as *Imra'a 'ind Nuqtat El Sifr* in 1975), and Bengali ("BG," first published as "Stanadayini" in 1980). In the first instance, the texts have been approached by several critics and scholars as discrete, individual texts; however, I bring the texts together in an overall argument that is deconstructive and culturally situated. This highlights the metachronous aspect of postcolonial women's narratives and its potential to constitute a rich reservoir of diverse female voices through acts of literary mapping. Because the textual analysis situates women in a "heterospace … replete with social, political, racial, sexual, economic, religious, and spatial diversity and inequalities" (Robolin 84), it resists a discursive production whose dehistoricising and universalising tendencies claim to speak for the whole. These tendencies reduce socio–cultural conflicts to a "Manichean" binary opposition of coloniser/colonised and male/female (JanMohamed 19). The result of these oppositions will be the erasure of female narratives and voices that are constitutive of that whole. For example, while Bâ's and Brodber's texts end with female empowerment and transformation, Devi's and El Saadawi's texts end with female death despite instances of agency which the protagonists show. The significance arising from this example relates to the fact that the writers focus on the complex experiences and identities of women, out of which their narratives and visions emerge. Besides, several themes and modes of representation are inspired by the writers' revisionary impulse which Emecheta insists on as "integral … in the decolonization project" (qtd. in Japtok xxv).

From another perspective, the continued, purposeful engagement with theories and texts about women from developing countries is central to this book. It points to a politicised female urgency which still finds in political, socio–cultural, and academic spheres a context of durability and relevance. This underscores the potential to handle female transition in a contemporary world that is still, in many cases, (neo)colonial and patriarchal. Therefore, the choice of the texts does not point to their unquestioned sameness but is tied to specific contexts and to different meanings of the postcolonial experience. Besides, the texts provide insights into women's subjective experiences and standpoints which cannot be provided by male texts, journalism, news, or science. This is due to the fact that postcolonial writing by women represents them as speaking subjects and agents of change and negotiation despite their oppression. These insights are about the presence of women (writers) as having different experiences and stories to share, "all moving under pressures, undergoing becomings, and venturing new belongings … driven more by

desires than needs, in the directions of accumulations and excesses" (Reynolds v).

While socio–political and cultural realities shape and circumscribe a woman's life, literature by women works against the confines of these realities in order to map spaces of agency and negotiation. As a result, Brodber, Bâ, Rhys, Devi, Emecheta, and El Saadawi write back to a literary tradition and to a society which construct them as "Other" due to their gender (and mixed race as in the case of Rhys). They share a colonial history, however different in its formation, and a project of literary decolonisation which deploys different themes and structural styles. These shared aspects provide another connection point. Although Western colonisation has affected women differently in various locations, the authors/texts share the similarity of criticising several modes of internal or local colonisation, however differently treated. This helps identify other factors of female oppression such as tradition, patriarchy, sexuality, gendered national roles, employment, and colonial education. Female transition and resistance can be attained through the written word where subversive practices and elements reside. By recourse to writing with its complexity and heterogeneity, the selected authors are united by their transformative vision and commitment; that is, by the constructive link between writing and activism which their narratives make. Borrowing Cheryl McEwan's words, I argue that "What holds these [women writers/texts] together are similarities in their commitment to challenging cultural hegemony (be that from the West or from post–colonial elites), their commitment to anti–racism and anti–colonial politics, and their focus on matters of culture" (35). These commitments construct women's texts, experiences, and, more importantly, the type of responsive reading approach which the texts invite, such as the selected methodology of this book.

Integral to the choice of the texts is "the unashamed presentation of the woman's point of view" as an outlet for the expression of diverse female voices which seek transformation (Palmer 94). This comes out not only in the expression of the protagonists' experiences of oppression but also in their potential to reflect upon their situations against the systems oppressing them. This potential is manifested in Ramatoulaye's epistolary voice in Bâ's *SLL*, in Firdaus's commanding narrative voice in El Saadawi's *WPZ*, and in the process of unveiling which Jashoda and Nnu Ego undergo in Devi's "BG" and Emecheta's *JM* respectively. These examples underline the possibility of making women come to terms with their voices in order to challenge the restrictive spaces and circumstances under which they are confined, literally and figuratively. At this point, it is

possible to see the authors speaking through their principal female figures such as Emecheta's Nnu Ego, Bâ's Ramatoulaye, and El Saadawi's Firdaus. Thus, the contextual interpretation of the texts in this book provides answers to questions of agency which emanate from the margins of society (women). This underscores the argument that postcolonial women's lives and texts, in Jacqueline N. Glasgow's words, are not "static areas of oppression, but ones that can be contested … They [the texts] show that women can effectively reshape gender relations … [because] they are no longer left in the shadows of their male counterparts" ("Struggle" 74).

Therefore, the selected writers share a desire to decolonise, recuperate, and reclaim through their female protagonists and the various modes of representation. These modes include rewriting Western texts and histories, reconstructing women's identities and bodies, revisioning the relation between women and men, and disrupting colonial and racial practices of oppression. This authorial focus on related concerns for the benefits of women makes it possible to group the aforementioned writers together in an overall argument in this book. Although each work has its own distinctive features, together the texts share a common goal. They give a multivocal and multifocal voice to Third World women and question the global sisterhood model developed by some white, middle–class women (Chapter Three discusses this model). Rather than constructing a homogeneous narrative of women's oppression, the texts are variably engaged in positing a nexus of socio–political, cultural, economic, and sexual forces which structures society and "elucidates how such forces bear upon the [female] individuals within it" (Robolin 77). Stéphane Robolin's words show that postcolonial women's narratives do not always end with female characters celebrating their agency and liberation. As will be argued in the coming chapters, female spaces and experiences are differently lived and represented.

For example, a narrative may end with empowerment and transition such as Bâ's *SLL*, with death such as Devi's "BG" and El Saadawi's *WPZ*, or with madness and ambivalence such as Rhys's *WSS*. This diversity in representing female experiences and spaces undermines the assumption of a shared female experience of oppression/transition. Accordingly, Brodber, Bâ, Devi, Emecheta, Rhys, and El Saadawi do not seek passive conformity to their cultures. Instead, they attempt to fill a cultural, literary, and theoretical void by making women speak and narrate their experiences. Bâ's *SLL*, with its epistolary form and emerging feminist consciousness, is a case in point. It empowers Ramatoulaye to come to terms with her voice in order to narrate her experiences of betrayal and polygamy. The presence

of a female narrator such as Ramatoulaye is productive for (non–Senegalese) readers of Bâ's text. It introduces them to the various values and practices of Senegalese culture and to a woman's identity that is shaped by society. This means that the selected texts re–scribe diverse female voices in history through writing in order to construct culturally specific narratives which society, traditions, the colonial legacy, and patriarchy de–scribe or fail to acknowledge and understand.

I argued earlier that the oppression of the protagonists is treated differently by the writers. Sometimes, it is read as a gesture or threshold toward change and empowerment as in the texts of Bâ and Brodber. At other times, it leads to exploitation and suffering as in the texts of El Saadawi, Devi, Rhys, and Emecheta. In both cases, the writers do not always allow their protagonists to passively accept their oppression. Rather, they offer them the possibility to embark on diverse processes of reconstruction, negotiation, and unveiling, even if these processes fail. This stresses the different narrative conclusions because there is no neat commensurability between women (writers) in postcolonial locations. It also justifies my argument that postcolonial women's writing is not a simple, homogeneous response to the feminist model of us/them. In short, the selected texts weave diverse female stories of oppression in order to inspire change in a postcolonial world that is not always hospitable to women. The texts create alternative, resistant female spaces that counter oppressive ones, thereby arguing that postcolonial women writers and critics share feminist concerns about decolonising Third World women and envisioning a better world. Their texts and visions are relevant to our societies and to the present time because they inspire change and mobilise affect, thereby highlighting the metachronous function of the texts highlighted in this book. They do so through adopting different perspectives that refer to the diversity of postcolonial writing and of the female characters represented there, as will be argued in the next section.

A discussion of key terms

Because there are numerous debates regarding the usages of the terms "postcolonial," "Third World," and "feminism," I find it useful to briefly discuss the usage of these contested terms in this book. Neil Lazarus argues that the term "postcolonial" was used as a historical concept in the 1970s in order to refer to the period which immediately followed decolonisation which "spoke no political desire or aspiration, looked forward to no particular social or political order" (2). Politically charged terms such as imperialism, Third–World, self–determination, and

periphery were present, but "postcoloniality" did not partake in these debates (2). In this sense, the "postcolonial" was used in the 1970s as a static, historical and apolitical concept.

But things have changed since the 1970s, as have the connotations of the term "postcolonial." As Homi K. Bhabha argues, postcolonial writing challenges "holistic forms of social explanation" in order to "force … a recognition of the more complex cultural and political boundaries that exist on the cusp of these often opposed political spheres" (*Location* 173). Bhabha highlights the fact that the "postcolonial" has ceased to be a term that mainly denotes a historical period or category. This emphasises that ambivalence, dialogues across boundaries, and cultural differences characterise postcolonial societies and texts such as the ones explored in this book. Consequently, the term "postcolonial" does not always point to what it designates; that is, the time after colonialism which is implied by the prefix "post." Following Bhabha, I use the term "postcolonial" in this book as a dynamic discourse which explores pre–, neo–, and post–colonial cultures and relations rather than as a static, discrete historical period. This usage consolidates the metachronous condition or function of postcolonial women's texts, where past female narratives, such as the selected texts which were written in the twentieth century, and future visions of change are operative at present. This metachronous aspect, which is a particular feature of Brodber's *JL*, questions the concept of linear time and progress indicated by the term "postcolonial" or by the suffix "post." It also justifies the description of postcolonial women's narratives as a metachronous discourse of transformation which enables us, scholars and critics, to look back to women's texts as they teach and motivate us, and forward in order to envision a positive future. Here I refer to the function of postcolonial women's writing as a vehicle of change and to the ambivalence inherent in the term "postcolonial" which does not always signal a movement forward in order to achieve decolonisation.

Moreover, the term "postcolonial" refers to an intersubjective, plural space where dialogue becomes possible. This space is constructed by active female subjects who resist, contest, and write against the colonial moment and its discourse of domination (Lionnet 5; Sinha 1). The textual analysis and the different narrative conclusions in this book suggest that the "postcolonial" does not always have a shared, single meaning. As I read it, the term simultaneously denotes three inseparable meanings: a reconstructive discourse of literary mapping by postcolonial women writers, a temporal era, and an illusory condition expressed by the varied forms of female exploitation. In other words, the "postcolonial" which I read in women writers' visions expressed by recourse to writing is not

always the same as the "postcolonial" they represent in their narratives, thereby pointing to the texts' metachronous aspect, as argued earlier. For example, Bâ develops in *SLL* a strong, self–conscious female figure who is different from the weak, hesitant female figure in Rhys's *WSS* and from the traditional, submissive one in Emecheta's *JM*, although the three texts are postcolonial. This example denotes the ambivalence of the "postcolonial" as a literary discourse on the one hand, and a lived reality on the other. Besides, it shows that women's experiences and cultures are different and so are the powers which affect them. Therefore, the experiences or circumstances in which women live do not always have the potential to empower and heal them. All this suggests that "there should be a term better than 'postcolonial' that can describe the dynamic of this collective heritage stretching across many time frames, cultures, and geographical boundaries" (Reyes, *Mothering* 2–3).

The term "postcolonial" also intersects with the terms "Third World" and "developing" in this book in order to negate the assumption of a homogeneous, ahistorical construct of non–Western cultures and women, thereby underlining women's differences and specificities. "Third World" is a contested term which is used interchangeably with the terms "non–Western" and "developing countries" in this book. Locking these terms into static categories gives a sense of monotony and fixity as well as erases the diverse social relations and meanings of women's identities, thus turning these terms against the transformative potential they ask us to acknowledge and search for when we use them (Valovirta, "Kumbla" 139). This potential can be related to the texts explored in this book. Coming from diverse cultures and authorial attitudes, the texts add variety to women categorised as "Third World women" in order to counter any static sense of signification and grouping. I do not totally reject the above terms; rather, I problematise the exclusion and bias inherent in acts of categorising if they signal female homogeneity.

Therefore, it is useful to deploy the terms as plural reading methods which deal with female narratives and identities in more inclusive and strategic manners. As the analysis of the female characters in this book will show, Third World women create a spectrum of realities, identities, and worldviews which are different, similar, and incompatible. This prismatic spectrum implies a "less 'pure' subject position than that offered in feminist discourses that simply oppose masculinity to femininity" (Blunt and Rose 7). An example of this position is the global sisterhood model which is challenged by several critics, as will be argued in Chapter Three. The model, unlike women's narratives, unifies women within one group of analysis because it attributes their oppression to patriarchy.

In order to counter this model, my analysis of the female characters underlines that women's lives cannot be contained within one form of oppression. Women are interlocked within multiple power axes such as race, class, and gender, all of which constitute their identities and responses to the surrounding world. As I argued earlier, the strategic usage of the term "Third World" to denote a dialectical encounter provides a way out of cultural homogeneity in order to challenge the attempt to locate women within fixed, ahistorical groups. In addition, it intersects with the terms "postcolonial" and "developing" in this book in order to construct women's narratives as historically specific yet shifting and contestable in interrelated ways. This helps avoid reductionist approaches to women's narratives and identities which interpret them as made up by one power vector such as gender. Therefore, it is necessary to theorise the connections between multiple powers and inequalities constructing women's texts. In this regard, the meaning of a woman's text and identity is "infinite and perpetually deferred, always subject to other interpretations in other socio–political contexts" (Dhamoon 26).

Also, the term "feminism" intersects with the terms "postcolonial" and "Third World women." Just as there are diverse meanings of the terms "postcolonial" and "Third World," there are several ways to practise feminism. The latter is used in this book to denote the presence of different women and multiple feminist concerns which are imperative in theorising Third World women's narratives. This signals the presence of several feminisms that are described as local due to their emphasis on women's specificities and differences (see Chapter Three which discusses the notion of several feminisms in relation to women's texts). As a result, the intersection of the terms "postcolonial," "feminism/feminist," and "Third World" women is a feature of the selected literary works. This intersection, to borrow Jane Bryce's words, suggests "our arrival at another point of transition, led there … by the proliferation in textual strategies offered by the accumulation of [postcolonial] women writers' narratives. [Their] work of reclamation, of forcibly shifting the perspective which marginalises and excludes whatever is not amendable to the dominant discourse is valuable, essential and ongoing" (621). Taken together, the above terms create a resistant, dialogical discourse. The objective of this discourse is to acknowledge and strengthen the links between postcolonial women's writing and feminism as a route toward female transformation.

In sum, I use the terms "postcolonial," "Third World," and "feminism" in this book in order to develop a more nuanced conceptualisation of female narratives and experiences which emerge from resistant margins and subjectivities. This underlines the "intercategorical complexity" and

specificity of women (McCall 1773). Moreover, it points to the variable vectors which oppress, empower, and connect women, as well as to the inequities and differences between oppressed women, thereby stressing differences and similarities in modes of representing female oppression and resistance.

Book structure

This chapter introduces the theoretical and methodological perspectives of this book. Chapter Two presents the research objective: why postcolonial women's writing is selected as the research subject. I begin Chapter Two with a personal statement regarding my reading of postcolonial women's writing. I then review several debates about postcolonial women's narratives in order to elaborate on their connection with the selected texts. Mainly, postcolonial women's writing is discussed as a practice which maps diverse female spaces in order to empower women while being literally and figuratively confined, thus underscoring the complexity of women's identities and narratives.

Chapter Three discusses several feminist debates which have helped inform the choice of postcolonial women's writing as the research topic. It is important to mention that this choice does not assume the dependence of postcolonial women's writing on theory in order to represent Third World women. Rather, it envisions future possibilities of meshing theory and literary writings in order to acknowledge female differences without dehistoricising them. Because writing can function as a conduit for activism and change, the chapter underlines the potential of women's writing to theorise decolonisation through a reconstructive narration of women's experiences. This explains why the model of global sisterhood which homogenises women's oppression is appropriated. Also, the chapter discusses some terminological issues such as feminism, womanism, and feminism with a small 'f' to denote differences between Western and non–Western modes of theorising women. Finally, the chapter explores some reconstructive models in order to acknowledge women's plurality and difference as possible routes of solidarity and change.

Chapters Four to Eight engage with a deconstructive, cultural analysis of the selected texts. Before outlining the central argument of each chapter, it is necessary to rationalise the way in which the texts are ordered. Unlike other engagement with the selected texts, I borrow the concept "rites of passage" from Katrin Berndt in order to arrange the texts but with some purposeful modification, especially as the texts offer different narrative conclusions about female transition and oppression (4). Following Arnold

van Gennep's characterisation of this concept, Berndt argues that rites of passage in an individual's life follow a triple sequence: "separation, when the initiates withdraw or are isolated from their relatives and/or community; transition, when they are in some kind of limbo or in–between space; and incorporation or re–integration … when the initiates have completed the ritual and return to their families" (4).

Nevertheless, as I can infer from the different narrative conclusions of the texts, the course of a woman's life is not always a smooth, direct experience or passage toward transition and incorporation as indicated by the aforementioned triple sequence. Rather, it is affected by diverse power structures that disrupt this sequence and complicate a woman's attempt to challenge oppression. A good example here is El Saadawi's *WPZ*, where the protagonist undergoes multiple experiences of exploitation as a daughter, as a wife, as an employee, and even as a prostitute, all of which deny her identity as a free human being. Besides, not all the female characters analysed in this book successfully complete the tripartite ritual or journey because some of them end up dying as in the texts of El Saadawi, Emecheta, and Devi, or going mad as in the text of Rhys. Also, the texts, in some respects, focus on specific female rites of passage such as motherhood in Devi's "BG" and Emecheta's *JM*, widowhood and motherhood in Bâ's *SLL*, adolescence in Brodber's *JL*, and marriage in Rhys's *WSS* and El Saadawi's *WPZ*. These rites function in this book as (metaphorical) spaces mapped by the writers from which particular themes, in a sense, are represented and challenged. These issues, combined with my reconstructive vision, have encouraged me to order the discussion of the texts as an inverted rite of passage. I invert the above triple rite of passage in order to start with incorporation which is read as empowerment and transformation (Brodber's *JL* and Bâ's *SLL*), transition which is read as complexity and liminality (Rhys's *WSS*), and separation which is read as death (Devi's "BG," Emecheta's *JM*, and El Saadawi's *WPZ*).

Accordingly, Chapter Four analyses Brodber's *JL* as a vivid articulation of female sexuality which is a site of physical, emotional, and intellectual tensions in the Caribbean. The tensions overlap with the linguistic and historical hybridity of Jamaica as a possible route of rebirth. The chapter also analyses the possibility of representing gender–oriented issues such as adolescence and sexual fragmentation and transformation through thematic–stylistic concerns, all of which shift from disjointed into meaningful in ways which resonate with the fragmented and recuperated personality of the protagonist. Chapter Five analyses Bâ's *SLL* and continues to focus on contextual, stylistic, and thematic issues which relate to modes of representing female oppression and empowerment. The

chapter examines the strategies adopted by women in order to defy oppressive practices such as polygamy, marital betrayal, and woman–woman oppression. These strategies include female writing, friendship, motherhood, and the selection of positive aspects of tradition and modernity. Accordingly, the chapter opens up the possibility of mapping resistant female spaces out of confining ones such as mirasse and widow confinement.

Chapter Six analyses Rhys's *WSS*, where the experience of female oppression is attributed to Antoinette's white Creole lineage. The chapter engages with a discussion of *WSS* as a postcolonial female text which acknowledges the voice of the white Creole woman silenced in Brontë's *JE*. The discussion also highlights the function of revisionary writing, the disruption of binaries and the male gaze, the plurality of narrative voices, and liminality, with emphasis on the latter because it constructs Antoinette's in–between position and leads to her madness. The chapter reads Antoinette's madness as a mode of representation and a space of rebellion which signals a woman's reaction against her composite presence as a double outsider. The role of the mother (land) is also important because the protagonist's insecure relationship with her mother parallels her uncertainty regarding her mother country. Identity confusion is thus mediated through the use of different themes and structures such as symbols which include colours, dreams, and mirrors, all of which contribute to the artistic structure of *WSS*.

Chapter Seven analyses Devi's "BG," with an inter–thematic analysis of Emecheta's *JM* because both texts conjoin in representing motherhood as a complex site of female oppression and agency. The chapter analyses the deconstructive function of "BG" in order to represent the female body and labour as spaces of disruption which challenge specific gender–blind narratives of nationalism, Marxist feminism, and Marxist models of social change. The chapter also underlines the ambivalence attending the representation of motherhood in postcolonial women's texts. This focuses on how the anguish and the misfortune of some mothers are inflicted through the deformation of motherhood ideals and through women's adherence to traditions, hence, the notion of individual responsibility arises, where some women re–enact oppressive cultural practices. However, the chapter traces instances of resistance mapped by spaces of agency such as female labour, silence, and feminist consciousness.

Chapter Eight analyses El Saadawi's *WPZ* as a controversial representation of a rebellious woman in a patriarchal society. It examines Firdaus's oppression as tied to patriarchy, womanhood, female excision, employment, marriage, and prostitution. Nonetheless, the chapter focuses

on how *WPZ* defies fixed images of female subjugation. This is illustrated by the fearless, commanding narrative voice of Firdaus which resonates with that of El Saadawi as a woman, a writer, and an ex–prisoner. Also of importance is that instances of Firdaus's resistance denote a change in the signification of prison from a patriarchal institution of female oppression into a space of enunciation and defiance, where challenging diverse modes of patriarchies are made possible. Chapter Nine summarises the main points of each chapter and brings together the various findings from the different case study chapters. It concludes by suggesting possible future paths for pedagogical research inspired by both my position as a lecturer of English Literature in Syria, and the value of the chosen texts for this. The selected texts and the diverse perspectives they offer, plus the different readings of them which I have explored in this book, are of particular value to *students of women's literature*.

Conclusion

The central argument of this chapter links the appropriateness of the deconstructive, cultural analysis approach to the overall argument of this book. The approach invites readers and researchers of postcolonial women's texts to reclaim different female voices through engagement with a range of texts such as outlined above. It also acknowledges the multidimensionality and specificity of women and their stories. Critical of cultural essentialism because it blinds readers to contextualised readings, the selected texts accommodate a mixture of female experiences, themes, and structural modes of representation grouped together as Third World: this is why the meanings of the terms "postcolonial," "Third World," and "feminism" are discussed. The theme of women's plural experiences of oppression and resistance is the main thread linking the texts, and this justifies bringing them together in an overall argument in this book. However, this linking point is differently treated by the writers because it signals specificity, diversity, and connection between and among women/texts. This develops complex and intersectional modalities of women, as argued in this chapter.

The next chapter discusses the points raised in this chapter, namely why postcolonial women's writing continues to be read today. A personal statement is provided in order to rationalise the engagement with women's narratives at present. The justification, in a sense, resonates with the attitudes of women writers and critics to whom women's writing creates several female spaces out of which oppression and resistance are articulated. The potential of female spaces to deconstruct and reformulate

within the body of the text encourages me to describe postcolonial women's writing as a practice of literary mapping of female spaces that is metachronous, dynamic, and prismatic.

Notes

1. I use "race" in this book as a form of power and a social construct in order to denote the presence of differences between women from different locations and of relationships of (masculine) domination and (female) subordination in different socio–literary and historical contexts.
2. This book follows the MLA style of referencing. See *MLA Handbook*.
3. For useful strategies of reading and teaching postcolonial women's writing, see Aegerter 142–50 and McWilliams 252–83.

CHAPTER TWO

WHY POSTCOLONIAL WOMEN'S WRITING?

As I argued in the previous chapter, this book develops a deconstructive, cultural analysis of a selection of postcolonial women's texts which constitute a metachronous discourse of literary mapping and transformation.[1] The chapter elaborated on the usefulness of the selected research methodology in order to engender deconstructive readings of the texts and justified the selection of texts and relevant theories. Simultaneously different and related, the texts are read in this book as contextualised encounters which contribute to the ambivalent representations of women's narratives and of the terminological connotations of the terms "postcolonial" and "Third World." This chapter continues to provide more insights into the state of postcolonial women's writing in order to justify its choice as the research subject. I begin the chapter with a personal statement about reading postcolonial women's writing today as a metachronous discourse which reclaims multiple female voices through a variety of writing styles and concerns. The statement is further developed by a discussion of relevant literatures on postcolonial women's writing. The latter is described as a practice of literary mapping in order to accommodate women in history and literature and to complicate textual modes of representing female oppression and resistance, as will be argued later in this book.

A personal perspective

Being a woman and a lecturer of English Literature from a patriarchal, Third World culture (Syria), I have always had an interest in women's issues and rights. This has offered me the possibility of (metaphorically) traversing diverse literary and geo–cultural locations in order to read postcolonial women's writing in a special way, as argued in the previous chapter. Such a way of reading the texts in this book foregrounds the potential of postcolonial women's writing to function as a metachronous, complex discourse of speaking and being. The complexity of women's texts is attributed to the different themes and styles deployed in order to

narrate women's stories and to the presence of women as subjects and objects of representation.

The aforementioned points highlight the intersection of several forms of power such as race and gender which I shall examine in the construction of women's narratives and identities in the chosen texts. These, it will be argued, politicise and theorise the issues raised by the authors in order to acknowledge the function of the written word as an outlet for the expression of women's voices and for the disruption of the practices which oppress women. These voices and issues are literarily mapped because they function as "a substitute for decontexualised, ungendered, disembodied, so–called 'objective knowledge'" (Sharp 116–17). This explains why the textual analysis in the coming chapters confronts colonial issues and legacies to a greater or lesser extent and postcolonial theory is of value in analysing these features. It is also why the textual analysis focuses extensively on race, class, and gender issues which, although they may derive from colonial ideologies and positions, are lived out through other non–postcolonial practices and conditions, such as patriarchy and tradition in El Saadawi's *WPZ*, polygamy and tradition in Bâ's *SLL*, and race and gender in Rhys's *WSS*. Hence, the texts are not merely returns to the literary and are not depoliticised; rather, they treat issues of race, gender, and class within the body of the narrative, as becomes clear from my later analysis of them. This suggests that writing by women challenges the gap created between "fiction" versus "philosophy"/"theory;" that is, the complicated situation of literature which creates fictional characters and situations located in real places and real events.

Therefore, engaging with the selected texts from various postcolonial locations buttresses my pedagogical position as a lecturer and a researcher that dependence on theory exclusively in order to promote activism and transition (among women) has its limitations. It distances us—researchers and critics—from women's experiences of exploitation and resistance, from diverse ways of representing and reclaiming the female body (for example, through widow confinement and imprisonment), and from the desire for liberation which is integral to socio–political agendas of change. This underlines the constructive link between women's writing and activism. Besides, the selected works do not merely express new forms of domination or female margins which replace European colonialism after the alleged independence. Rather, the texts, in the words of Amal Amireh and Lisa Suhair Majaj, are not "viewed primarily as sociological treatises granting Western readers a glimpse into the 'oppression' of Third World women … [and] hailed as 'lift[ing] the veil' from what one reviewer called

the 'unimaginable world of [Third World] women'" (7). Even when there is no clear or direct engagement with politics, postcolonial women's writing is not to be seen as less politically engaged.

The women writers under consideration in this book share a common objective. As literary activists, they have chosen to speak through their works of challenge and reclamation in order to defy dominant centres and narratives and to recuperate diverse female voices and bodies. For Sunita Sinha, the writers' choice signals the shift from "silence into speech [in order to create] … a gesture of defiance that heals, that makes new life and new growth possible. It is that act … 'talking back' that is no mere gesture of empty words, that is the expression of a movement from object to subject—the liberated voice" (xii). In other words, postcolonial women's writing extends my understanding of women as objects of knowledge in disciplines such as psychology and anthropology in order to deal with women as agents of change and with their varied perspectives on the postcolonial experience (Chapter Three discusses feminist models of women as agents).[2]

Besides, historical, political, and, to some extent, theoretical writings on oppression can miss out or downplay female experiences of oppression and resistance. However, the subjective form of knowledge generated by women's narratives can counter this masculinist blind–spot. This touches on questions of literary representation or how literature by women can testify to specific suffering of women under various forms of colonisation such as sexism in postcolonial societies. It also relates to the presence of postcolonial women writers as literary activists and of their writing as an ethico–political project of ongoing emancipation from the legacies of colonialism and patriarchy, among other power structures. As a result, the textual analysis in this book aims to construct a literary discourse or archive about the multifaceted epistemology of women from developing countries. Within this discourse, postcolonial women's writing emerges as a non–linear or metachronous project which deals with change and empowerment as a movement not only forward but also backward; that is, back to multiple times and locations in which (past) women's narratives are operative at present and in the future as they teach and inspire us. This non–linear shift is evident in Brodber's *JL* which deals with female recuperation as a metachronous process determined by a woman's return to her past and her body.

These issues justify the attempt to revisit the selected texts through a contemporary lens in this book. The texts and the diverse readings of them explored in this book are of particular value to literary critics and to students of women's literature. Revisiting the texts is a matter of