

**Analogies and Contrasts in Roy's *The God of Small Things*,
Mukherjee's *Jasmine* and Syal's *Anita and me***

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This article looks at the analogies and contrasts of the women writers' perception of Indian woman identity, notably as a process of construction / deconstruction through transgression, displacement and hybridity, an ideal to be negotiated in the space between at least two different cultures either at home or in a different geographical setting. The novels of Roy's *The God of Small Things*, Mukherjee's *Jasmine* and Syal's *Anita and Me* based respectively in India, the U.S.A. and England, of which the cross-cultural under-currents are spanning continents, give a new vision of Indian women, pleasing to Western mind and feelings and yet reflecting their Indianness. Diaspora helps Indian woman to come to terms with her self, a process which could not be effected within the Indian socio-cultural setting.

In *The God of Small Things*, *Jasmine* and *Anita and Me*, transgression allows each heroine to assume beyond the adequate performance of the Indian expected feminine roles. While in Roy's *The God of Small Things*, the Indian woman who dares to cross the boundaries of caste is to face the most hideous form of ostracisation and stands on the fringes of Indian society, in Mukherjee's *Jasmine* her transcendence of cultural boundaries in the U.S.A. is worth pursuing since it enables her construction into a free-thinking and acting woman. In *The God of Small Things*, Indian society does not provide any satisfactory choice to women who stand apart of the usual pattern of accommodation to wifhood and integration into the in-laws. Thus, transgression is regarded by patriarchy not enough powerful to disrupt the *natural* established order, though to some extent, particular individual actions affect social reactions, and exclusion / death remain specifically the ultimate punishments. Yet, the philosophy of Hindu women, i.e. passive resistance is disturbing. On the one hand, this supposes that women have no choice, although Western interpretations challenge this deeply socio-religious rooted myth. Western women are to free Indian women from such typecasting and promote more direct actions. Certainly, moral superiority is a myth that could keep women stranger to themselves, judges of other women if not fearful or contemptuous towards their male counterparts. Indeed, Indian women could experience a vast array of human emotions and actions beyond defined Indian traditional women roles.

Yet, in Roy's novel, Jasmine has to negotiate conflicting ideals of woman identities that arise when crossing the national borders. She is not depicted as the Indian traditional woman whose strength lays in quiet servitude, self-sacrifice and suffering, but rather as one with selfish desires to become

physically violent, bloodthirsty, revengeful and uncommon. As such the U.S.A. is presented as the privileged space for the construction of a hybridized woman. The construction of Jasmine's identity passes through her own deconstruction and permanent multiplication of cultural relationships with the men she meets. While sati, bride burnt alive, from the American point of view, symbolizes a reduction of woman's identity to marriage and wifehood, i.e. that women cannot and should not live outside marriage, Jasmine's new shaped identity brings into play an entire range of significant values vs. patriarchal controls on woman's sensuality and individuality.

In Syal's *Anita and Me*, the heroine's transgression seems sweeter, not only because she is younger as compared to Jasmine, respectively about 11 and 14 and born in Tollington (England) and thus having no first-hand knowledge of her Indian parental homeland, but her diasporic Indian family setting is far more liberal and Westernized which encouraged her to the appropriation of English norms and values before antagonistic Indian ones.

In each novel, i.e. *The God of Small Things*, *Jasmine* and *Anita and Me* the concept of hybridity is revealed in its simple sense, i.e. a blending of two cultures and in the interest of individual progressive thinking and social justice. Is it a sign of substantive cultural exchange or a Western appropriation? Though hybridity is open to debateful discussion, one interpretation of the novels assumes that Western culture has reached a phase where culture components are at once accessible and translatable, but, dislocating particularly Indian women within their own home country or culture. In fact, conservative Hindu spreading that set up monolithic cultures has disturbing implications for Indian women who have a stake in challenging patriarchal/traditional Indian behaviour and thinking.

Each woman protagonist leads a life in complete conflict with traditional values. Their identity is intrinsically constructed by their sensitivity to the discourse of the British Empire in *The God of Small Things* and in *Anita and Me* or the American culture, in *Jasmine*. The novels imply the traditional ways of life are changing and women are starting to think in a different way. They are deconstructing stereotyped representations of some aspects of Indian family life and culture which shape them, i.e. a rigid interpretation of the Sacred Book (*The Vedas*), established sexist prejudice, a tight family budget in a society that still privileges dowry and the belief that a Hindu woman belongs to her husband's family. Through the process of construction and deconstruction of the woman protagonist, the novels demonstrate the power of literature to create awareness and sensitivity of Indian women's problems across cultural contexts that divide them. Some of the struggles that the main women characters face are the result of the changing times, notably the inner workings of their minds, their personal perplexities and social confrontations as individuals growing into themselves.

In their encounter with a post-colonial, English or American culture, the anti-colonial attitudes are also powerfully expressed which reveal the Indian social and political scene. In *The God of Small Things* political considerations take a secondary place, the primary purpose being to highlight the isolation of the individual soul, particularly of woman. In *Jasmine* and *Anita and Me* the diasporic characters are struggling with forces beyond their control, through the resistance of woman spirit and strength vs. Hindu submissive values, modernity vs. plight of tradition. These novels seek to define the many voices of the previously marginalized *other* and establish a claim to woman cultural identity. Woman's selfhood has been subordinated, diminished when it has not been outrightly denied. An important step in recognizing the interconnections between the local (India) with the global (diasporic) is exploding cultural stereotypes that determine a *self* in terms of an *other* by locating India and the U.S.A. / England on opposite sides of the tradition vs. modernity dichotomy. Particularly in *Anita and Me*, Meena's hybrid cultural identity depends on the condition of being somewhat detached from the Indian family culture due to English school education and not being able to take English cultural assumptions for granted. Meena's cultural construction is imbued with emotional significance which generates desires to learn more about parental history and to feel a sense of belonging. She receives conflicting messages from her parents and the English society regarding woman's behaviour and mainstream success expectations that may be extremely difficult to reconcile quite often. Growing up in an immigrant family is harsh, Meena is thus torn by different socio-cultural demands while meeting challenges into an unfamiliar and frequently hostile world. She has to make up her mind as to what degree she will retain her Indian culture and language and to which extent she will assimilate into the English host culture. Belonging to an Indian sub-culture with visible identifying features in England exposes Meena to psychological perplexities and social confrontations leading to identity crises but inevitably a way of forging a personal identity. While straddling the cultural boundaries, she is forced to choose between Indian identifications and alliances supporting other identities.

Yet, no Indian woman writer refers to the Anglo Indian woman in the novels concerned. The Anglo Indian woman has an in-between space in the post-colonial debate *which allows for much diversity and flexibility in identity* (Bhaba 1990: 211). The Anglo-Indian community was one of the result of British colonization of India. So, how is the Anglo-Indian woman room in terms of the colonizer vs. the colonized? What about her hybrid identity? Anglo Indian woman has been relegated to an in-between space in theoretical discourse which allows for a creative construction of identity. Criticism of colonialism on an ideological basis and the stress on the colonized/colonizer dichotomy exclude hybrid groups. But, hybrid groups that developed as an impact of colonialism represent a fundamental sign of domination and exploitation. They are neither British nor Indian. They have

to create their own identity between both of them. Racial hybridity is extremely important since they do not define themselves as either Anglo or Indian solely. This biological factor challenges the binary opposition West vs. East and self vs. other. They resist complete identification with the Indian and the British and claim their own space and subjectivity. *Anglo Indian women have a generous space of culturality within which they can operate as individuals* (Ibid).

A homogeneous or static identity cannot be applied to Anglo-Indian women; instead they identify with both the self and the other: the resultant identity is one that recognizes both in varying differences for different women. *They seem to be a little of this a little of that and not quite one or the other* (Rosaldo 1993: 209).

In a sense, they are not given the choice of crossing boundaries since they do not live within an actual physical borderland and lack a geographical space that they can label home.

However, Anglo Indian women are ignored when theorists such as Visweswaran (1994: 20) speak of women of the colonizer vs. women of the colonized. On the one hand they were subjected to the domination of British power. On the other hand, the dismantling of such oppositions which are hard makes difference prevailing. It is one that remains flexible and opens up possibilities for choices since they perceive themselves as adaptable.

In understanding the complexity of cultural identity, one could analyze critically the in-between spaces which lead to *new signs of identity and innovative sights of collaboration and contestation in the act of defining the idea of society itself* (Bhabha 1994: 2). The novels, i.e. *The God of Small Things*, *Jasmine* and *Anita and Me* challenge static notions of identity, specifically the construction of third world or post-colonial women. Indian women are located in terms of underdeveloped, oppressive, highly illiterate and religious fanaticist. Post-colonial Indian writers, as feminists argue that they need to engage critically with the historically specific and dynamic location of women in India (as well as in Africa) so as to not participate in cultural reproductions that reduce women's lives to a particular fixed patriarchal pattern and to avoid overcreating binary appositions between modern, educated, free, Western women, and oppressed, poor, traditionally bound third world women. In an attempt to reclaim and write against the representation of third world women as the exoticised other, the Indian women writers Roy, Mukherjee and Syal consciously serve political aims by writing against patriarchy. Yet, they write in the context of a society / community whose members do not have the luxury skills to read and write but are nevertheless the ones who represent and speak for these women.

However, *writing back* (Said 1978) may more prove to be a Western idea. Whose resistance is at stake in literature and for what reasons? How can

writers and theorists who are geographically and socio-culturally located in the West offer theories that *write back to the center* when they have become members of the centers at least partly? In each novel, the heroine's struggle exists in both Western, British, Indian worlds where she is neither liked or wanted and must reconceptualize home to find a place where she belongs. Emotionally, socially and financially she must navigate the terrain of race, gender, class/caste and sexuality in order to survive and succeed.

While Arundhati Roy deals with the mental aspect of displacement, Mukherjee and Syal focus on its physical / geographical aspect. The heroines of each novel are rooted in the new post-independent India, their aspirations and attitudes translate the confusion and search for self identity that has become the distinguished feature of the generation. With one foot in India and the other in the West, i.e. the U.S.A. or England, the women characters have one common preoccupation, the globalisation of the Indians as they aspire for Western type of freedom. The novels of Roy, Mukherjee and Syal based in India, the U.S.A. and England of which the cross-cultural undercurrents are spanning continents, give a new vision of Indian women, pleasing to Western mind and feelings and yet, reflecting partly Indian values and flavour, i.e. their Indianness. Probably diaspora helps the Indian woman to come to terms with her *self*, a process which would certainly have not been affected within the particular socio-cultural location. Women who play the part of sita are depicted as the ideal and pure wives and this specific Hindu representation keeps on influencing gender relationship expectations between Hindu men and women. However, the displacement of Indians in a Western / American milieu generates some difficulties for women to retain their ancestral heritage as far as gender identities are concerned. Hindu symbolism has a powerful impact on the construction of femininity (and masculinity) within Indians. As it has been revealed in Roy's *The God of Small Things*, Indian women who resisted to Hindu traditions are accused of transgressing and violating the oppressive patriarchal patterns within Indian family structure and therefore are condemned to ostracisation up to death.

As to the post-colonial diaspora, it is not solely immigration into Great Britain / the U.S.A. or elsewhere from other countries, but it is indeed a constant reminder that pre-colonized subjects are in the colonizers'land because they were in their own homeland. The specific phenomenon of immigration transgresses Western British sense of fixed boundaries and challenges the cultural identity of the White Englishman / woman as being homogeneous. It is perceived probably as a threat to British national cohesion. The choice of Indian diasporic women, in particular, is not only *colonisation* in reverse and the voice of the *other*, but also the voice of hybridity.

In these diasporic novels, *Jasmine* and *Anita and Me*, the surpassed part of patriarchy is marked by the emerging roles of new constructed women

identities and cultural commitments. The diasporic novels struggle with patriarchy. Particularly diasporic women need not solely define themselves in terms of their difference from the mainstream of their countries of birth, but there is also this urge to differentiate from the country that lies behind them. This crucial need to escape, takes place in the context of differentiating and making a space for the Indian woman writer. It is especially the presence of various contradictory and sophisticated ideologies within the diasporic communities that renders Indian women's works so fruitful for queries of women identity and existence at a micro level from steady examinations of family life and negotiations within the confines of the home depicted by Syal, to the ideological religious imperatives that features Roy's novel or the liberating myth of Americanisation as mirrored by Mukherjee.

Each novel gives the reader the opportunity to meet characters and explores places that challenge and expand notions of home, of England and the U.S.A. as a place, and Indian/English/American as an identity. Displacement is built as a move and its subsequent refashioning of identity as free Indian, English or American. Places are connected to identities through relations of power and social practices that provoke unequal conditions for engagement in the production of space. In this regard divisions between public and private affect Indian women's sense of self and identity.

Roy, Mukherjee and Syal outline the critical location of Indian women who are caught in the tenuous locations of crossing various borderlands related to imaginary, symbolic and real migrations while caught between the limits of a white feminist sisterhood which takes up their crucial struggle against the manifest forms of patriarchy and racially marked Indian/American / British men. Given this specific location or racial and gender *othering* or alterity, diasporic Indian-American/ British women are placed in a tenuous position to choose their sites, i.e. specific cultural and social battles that are complex to negotiate within the prevailing socio-cultural fabric of Western/American liberalism. Identity is a social complex issue (see table) that inevitably gets related with compromises that can be favorable or not. Indeed, when one gives oneself different identities in various contexts, one inevitably reshapes the socio-political atmosphere in the geographical settings within which one is only assuming role-playing, as it is the case for each heroine.

Each novel presents, therefore, the life of an Indian woman rethinking and reconstructing her identity. Each woman protagonist feels marginalized in her own socio-cultural location and ultimately tries to locate herself in the central position. The legacy of British colonialism has meant that Indian women now live outside their native land with different perspectives on post-colonial issues, raising specific voices which are powerfully articulated in their own defence.

Indeed, post-colonial Indian women novels, as is the case with Roy, Mukherjee and Syal, emerged as a process that gathered space as political independence was acquired and cultural decolonisation intensifies. Given that writing in English by women has developed greatly for obvious historical reasons, Indian women writing could be described as *writing back* to the dominant English (*The God of Small Things*) or the U.S.A. canon (*Jasmine*), i.e. as a quest for the establishment of woman cultural authority. English serves as an ideological purpose and propagates Western culture among the colonised. But, Indian women writers have illustrated the power by which language with its signification of authority have been wrested from the dominant culture. Roy, Mukherjee and Syal are writing from positions between or across cultures and revalorising marginalised cultural women identities. The construction / deconstruction of hybrid diasporic women identity related to gender and caste are among the social concerns shaping the work of these women writers. Certainly, they share an outstanding secret of psychic survival in a milieu that militated against uncensored expression of inner emotion and rebellious instinct. These powerful written testimonials mirror the power of writing and literacy to free women lives from the chains of a restrictive real-life milieu.

Even if Western women, i.e. feminists have spoken for their pre-colonial sisters, Indian women writers beside Desai, the Kambles, are speaking of their own experiences in their own voices. Probably, they find it hard to set up a balance between their femininity and autonomy, their Hindu traditions and Western modernity, their Indianness and their living in Western / American states. Even if they fit, both as women and as racially different, into the receiving / host societies, their writing reflects certainly their disagreement with the officially accepted construction of correct feminine behaviour, aware of the problems of traditionally structured disadvantages.

While Roy criticizes traditional networks which remain active in India to repress women's ideas, impulses and feelings in conscious and unconscious ways, Mukherjee and Syal privilege the liberal cultural space offered by the U.S.A. and England to argue for Indian women's realisation which is impossible to achieve in the homeland. Their writing in English is undoubtedly an inward thought as well as a personal release from Indian socio-cultural and political boundaries though shared by Indian feminist writers.

Table: Complexity of Identity Process

Concepts	<i>The God of Small Things</i>	<i>Jasmine</i>	<i>Anita and Me</i>
Woman identity (1)	X	X	X
Hybridity (2)	X	X	X

Construction/deconstruction(3)	X	X	X
Displacement (4)		X	X

1. It refers to the traits of behaving and thinking in ways considered typical for women. In the *The God of Small Things* Indian woman identity has to conform to the socio-religious norms, while in *Jasmine* it is possible to transgress the Indian socio-religious laws in the U.S.A. liberal nation as well as in *Anita and Men*, it is a requirement to better integrate into English mainstream culture

2. Hybridity which is a cross-cultural exchange is not advisable for a man but not acceptable for an Indian woman in *The God of Small Things*. In both diasporic novels, *Jasmine* and *Anita and Me* it is a must for self-fulfilment.

3. The de/construction of fixed identities by socio-cultural norms is forbidden in *The God of Small Things* where Indian laws jealously maintained the status quo. In the other novels the identity process is an inevitable step to achieve self-defined woman identity in a foreign country.

4. Displacement occurs when a specific cultural population is moved from its original homeland and relocated to a different setting, as it is case in *Jasmine* and *Anita and Me* , but in the *The God of Small Things*, it refers to a mental displacement. In each case, displacement frees the heroine from Hindu constraints.

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