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"I'm British But ..."—Explorations of Identity by Three Postcolonial British Women Artists[1]

In an age when metropolitan centres such as London, New York, Tokyo or Paris offer everything from Chinese and Samoan rap to Finnish tango bands, and from Chinese Cuban to Cambodian Swiss cuisine, not to mention popular ethnic crossovers in fashion, design, and the entertainment industry, amazement at the afore-mentioned—once startling—juxtapositions has become rare. Sitting in a small arthouse cinema in

In view of the undeniably multi-ethnic nature of society on the one hand, and the renewed national, xenophobic, and racist tendencies (not only in Britain) on the other, this article aims to explore the lives and works of three contemporary British women artists of different national and cultural heritage and the way they perceive themselves in terms of their British, bicultural and/or postcolonial identity. By examining if, and how, this finds expression in the work of the Pakistani writer and playwright Rukhsana Ahmad, the Nigerian sculptor Sokari Douglas Camp, and the Indian British writer and actress Meera Syal, I will also address questions about the convergence of ethnic, gender, and class identities.

But why these artists? First of all, it should be noted that trying to define any specific characteristics of any given group can be misleading and dangerous and any critic of multi-ethnic literature and art knows only too well that, as Paul Lauter puts it, “neither separation nor integration provide wholly satisfactory methods for representing

> inconsequential. The only thing of consequence is the quality of the mind of the writer.[13]

At the same time, however, every writer inevitably speaks from a specific historical, socio-cultural position which is influential on her/his work. Certain similar conditions, generated by similar experiences, in turn lead to the possibility of theorising, as Salman Rushdie puts it,

> common factors between writers from these societies—poor countries, or deprived minorities in powerful countries—and to say that much of what is new in world literature comes from this group...a "real" theory, bounded by frontiers which are neither political nor linguistic but imaginative.[14]

For a long time discourses on the changed notions of "Britishness" and Britain as a multicultural society in regard to its immigrant population have been dominated by what Paul Gilroy describes as the idea of blacks as

> disadvantaged, and dispersed. And yet, they look as if they own the territory....I do feel a sense of—dare I say—envy surrounding them. Envy is a funny thing for the British to feel at this moment in time—to want to be black![18]

Zygmunt Bauman explains that whereas the problem in modern times was how to stabilise one's identity, postmodern times demand the opposite: a continuous attempt at

hop culture, points out the performative nature of these subcultures and "cultural crossings" and emphasises the fact that these identity negotiations do not result in a "wider systematic change."[25] With similar caution regarding the celebration of hybrid and unstable identities, Heinz Antor notes:

> Postcolonial resistance theorists and practitioners...are worried by the consequences they see....If the subject is such a decentred and dispersed one as postmodernists try to make us believe, they ask, how then can it resist the *status quo* and contribute to an improvement of the situation in the postcolonial world? Does the poststructuralist dynamic re-interpretation of identity preclude intentionality and political activity?...Postmodernism, in such a view, becomes a hegemonic practice that is to be rejected as a dangerous trap into which critics such as Bhabha and Spivak regrettably have already fallen....How do we take sides in such disputes? The answer is that we don't.[26]

On the whole, both discourses refer mainly to a male migrant's position. The three women artists discussed here provide us with yet another, different, perspective of identity formation within a globalised, metropolitan environment (in this case London). By pursuing the question of a potential central experience shared by non-white women in a metropolitan context they challenge traditional notions of concepts such as "multiculturalism," "ethnicity" and "hybridity" and their supposed virtues, as well as the outmoded notion of a migrant's identity as "being caught between two worlds." Based on my argument that notions of identity, and the promotion of an uncritical concept of hybridity[27]—as well as the seemingly unbridgeable differences between different cultural identities—fall short of accounting for present day diversity as it is lived, I wish to show how Ahmad, Camp and Syal perceive, construct and deconstruct modes of identity by presenting characters, scenarios and images where a migrant identity neither produces an automatic dilemma nor is seen as entirely beneficial. References to the artists' own,

sociopolitical content (as in discriminatory acts, violence, prejudices, unequal treatment, whether positive or negative, enacted legislation and so on)—was and remains an active cultural yeast, virus if you will, in American civilization."[32]

"democratic, 'civilised,' open and non-racist" societies cultivated even in times of colonisation and decolonisation and—particularly in the case of Britain—manifested through its victory over the fascist states during the Second World War.[35] Minority and anti-racist organisations (such as the British *Institute of Race Relations*) eventually managed to draw attention to these racist incidents as social problems. Ruud Koopmans and Paul Statham observe that the increasing politicisation of migration over the last two decades has also been followed by an increasing mobilisation of xenophobic as well as anti-racist groups.[36] In Britain these racist and anti-racist demonstrations clashed most violently during the late seventies and early eighties (for exampl

Alibhai-Brown calls Gordon Brown's vision of "a multi-ethnic and multinational Britain" as nothing more than "almost entirely rhetorical," and she goes on to say that

> Racism is a brutal, live beast with teeth....Discrimination, racial hatreds, deliberate and unconscious exclusion are the reality.... Hardly anyone has had the foresight to see, as Bhikhu Parekh describes, that diverse immigrants "bring in

Syal remembers that her early acting ambitions were thwarted by the fact that in auditions she was usually asked to portray the stereotypical roles reserved for actresses and actors of South Asian descent: victims of arranged marriages, downtrodden shopkeepers' wives or harassed NHS doctors.[42] In view of these statements it can be assumed that the experience of xenophobia and racism is a common experience and influence on the work of all three artists. Paradoxically, however, "racism violates selectively," as Pnina

linguistic groups—for now gathered under the "Asian" label—can also be seen as a development analogous to the one undergone by American ethnic communities. Looking, for example, at the history of Asian-American political activism, Lisa Lowe remarks:

> The articulation of an "Asian American identity" as an organizing tool has provided a concept of political unity that enables diverse Asian groups to understand unequal circumstances and histories as being related....To the extent that Asian American culture dynamically expands to include both internal critical dialogues about difference and the interrogation of dominant interpellations, however, Asian American culture can likewise be a site in which the "horizontal" affiliations with other groups can be imagined and realized. In this respect, a politics based exclusively on racial or ethnic identity willingly accepts the terms of the dominant logic that organizes the heterogeneous picture of differences into a binary schema of "the one" and "the other."[48]

Or, as the Nuyorican poet and playwright Jack Agüeros once put it even more pragmatically, "just as in New York cultures [are] mixing when they feel like it, when it's convenient to them, and when it's not, withdrawing again."[49]

In the same way race needs to be explored theoretically as well as through the prisms of individual communities. Recent black feminist theory understands not only race but class and gender as "simultaneous forces" all in need of historical contextualisation.[50] The latter point is particularly emphasized by Avtar Brah who argues that "the search for grand theories specifying the interconnections between racism, gender and class has been less than productive. They are best construed as historically contingent and context-specific relationships."[51] Thus I would like to examine how the three women artists portrayed in this article are further marked by gender and class. Apart from dealing with the racialisation of their gender and class identities within British society, both Ahmad and Camp also stress the role of women in their countries of origin. Ahmad explains:

intellectuals" should be seen "as a special class of cosmopolitans" significantly different from transnational migrants whose life abroad is mainly determined by hard work, poverty and racism.[57] One example of Friedman's claim that these cosmopolitan intellectuals "look elsewhere than the street for its realities,"[58] is the debate within African and Middle Eastern women's organizations regarding the circumcision of women. Francoise Lionnet observes that even though some of the texts critical of this ritual practice are written by African and Middle Eastern women these are all Western-trained. Thus they are arguing "from the vantage point of the educated elite...and thus alienated from the common people who would neither read them nor sympathize with their views....There is...a dissymmetry of class and ideology between them and the uneducated masses."[59]

It is these ambivalences caused by their status as racialised British citizens, on the one hand, and educated, urban women from a non-western background, on the other, that are taken up by all three artists. Ahmad, for example, coming from a conservative middle-class Pakistani household, is acutely aware of the widening gap between the Pakistani elite and "the people on the street" and has dealt with these problems extensively in her fictional as well as her journalistic work:

> I think that class is a bigger divider than all those other things. There is in fact an emphasis on the universality, the so-called globalisation of culture which is in its own way quite enervating for indigenous cultures...completely insensitive to the poverty around. And Americans are doing that very consciously in the Third World....They have international executives for organisations like *City Bank* and *Bank of America*. And they employ Pakistanis but not the ordinary Pakistanis but those who've been educated abroad. So then you have this pocket of people whose income bears no relationship to the rest....The class barriers are kind of deepening and that wasn't there before. Pakistan was socially a very mobile society.[60]

Also, despite her being multilingual, Ahmad knows of and is affected by the dominance of literature written in English, compared to other literary traditions such as Urdu or even Punjabi:

> My parents were both Punjabis but they taught us Urdu because Punjabi is considered rather a crude language, a peasant language....I love Urdu as a language. I grew up with a sense of shame about being a Punjabi. I think I've got over that. I mean, Punjabi is a very rich language. It's also an older language....We use a mixture of the languages at home. Actually, I think I dream in both languages....I write in English. I've written very little in Urdu. I've translated from Urdu.[61]

Ahmad's work is marked by her efforts to expose the intricate links between racial, religious, gender, and class identities. In her play *Song for a Sanctuary* produced by the Kali Theatre Company (founded in 1990 by Rita Wolf under the auspices of the pioneering Asian British theatre company Tara Arts to promote new writing by Asian women) she tackles the long-standing taboo of domestic violence among Asian families. According to Ahmad the play was sparked off by the murder of a Punjabi woman who was living in an Asian shelter (which happened to be close to Ahmad's home) by her own husband. Ahmad recalls that "there was a huge quarrel between residents and workers and it was an Asian refuge. And I think those two things troubled me greatly. So it became a play not directly about domestic violence but about differences within the refuge. I suppose I'm always preoccupied by that subject of divisions between people."[62]

Divisions without and within families and communities are also the theme of her first novel, *The Hope Chest* (1996), in which she traces the journey of three girls with very different backgrounds from childhood to womanhood. Rani, who comes from a

wealthy Pakistani family, is sent to London for treatment of her anorexic depression. In the hospital she shares a room, and eventually her thoughts, with the English Ruth who has suffered a nervous breakdown. The second storyline evolves around Rani's childhood friend Reshma, whose parents belong to an underprivileged class of Pakistani farmers and whose life in

contemporary women writers such as Ahmad, however, differences do not mainly stem from assumed "generational gaps" but much more from their gendered experiences.

Thus Ahmad portrays the harsh conditions, especially for women, in both countries. As she remarks herself, "It's not that the past is some kind of heaven that one must always return to or that the past identity is in some way richer."[64] When, for example, a locust storm ruins Reshma's family's crop, "the family's income and rations for the whole year,"[65] Reshma is forced to face the prospect of an arranged marriage at age thirteen for the pure survival of the family. The issue of an arranged marriage (a central element of traditional Muslim Pakistani culture) does not only determine Reshma's but also Rani's life. On her wedding night the groom only reluctantly approaches her bedroom, while thinking that "Rani's person is so un-woman like! Almost

three artists to have been born in Britain, she might also be the one best known to a wider audience due to her work as an actress, novelist, screenwriter and comedian. Syal describes her own memories of the material conditions she grew up in as follows:

> People are often suprised when I say that I grew up in a place where some houses actually didn't have running water even, or none of the houses had inside toilets or bathrooms....And they go, "Oh my God, where were you living, in the depths of the Punjab?" And I say, "No, no, it was Wolverhampton, or pretty near there."[75]

Syal's mocking recollection of her childhood days is emblematic of her use of irony, her

also economically less advantaged segments of British (and Pakistani or Indian) society, as illustrated by the following passage from *Anita and Me*:

> According to the newspapers and television, we simply did not exist. If a brown or black face ever did appear on TV, it stopped us all in our tracks. "Daljit! Quick!" papa would call, and we would crowd round and coo over the walk-on in some detective series, some long-suffering actor in a gaudy costume with a goodness-gracious-me accent...and welcome him into our home like a long-lost relative.[76]

These aims and interests link Syal's works, whether in her black feminist reworking of *Jane Eyre* called *My Sister-Wife* (1992), produced for BBC2;[77] her screenplay for Gurinder Chadha's movie *Bhaji on the Beach* (1994), dealing with the racial incidents encountered by a disparate group of Indian women on a trip to Blackpool; her work as actress and writer in the first all-Asian British sit-com *Goodness Gracious Me* (first aired on BBC radio in 1996, before being broadcast on BBC2 a year later); or in her novels *Anita and Me*, and most recently *Life Isn't All Ha Ha Hee Hee* (1999), which portrays three very different second-generation Indian women in London. Again, like Ahmad and Camp, Syal's answer to Western misconceptions (here of Indian and Indian British

Coming full circle to my initial reference to Chadha's documentary "I'm British But...," I would like to refer to a series of interviews conducted by Wenonah Lyon in Oldham (near Manchester) which underlines Syal's statement about "moving very fluidly from one culture to another," as well as Dyke's observation regarding the young people for whom "multiculturalism is...simply a part of the furniture of their everyday lives." Interviewing British people of Pakistani, Indian and Bangladeshi descent Lyon discovered that for them "being Pakistani is just another way of being British, in the same way that one is English and British or Scottish and British or Irish and British or Welsh and British."[80] This perception can partly be explained by the fact that in all three cases it is *young* people who—as second- or third-generation British of various cultural descents—move more fluidly between different influences. Once again, however, it has to be emphasized that despite their increased ability to move between different cultural communities, second- and third-generation youth inevitably have to continue negotiating their social identities within constraints such as class, material differentiation, gender, religion, sexuality, and the national origin of the parent-generation. As Maira emphasizes, "Cultural theorists ... have sometimes privileged notions of fluid, fragmented identities without paying sufficient attention to how actors may negotiate both shifting identities and reified ideals in their everyday lives; the contradictions on the ground are sometimes more complex than theorists acknowledge."[81]

Returning to Ahmad and Camp, who were not born in Britain, I would argue that in comparison to the "indigenous" British minorities, their experiences as British citizens of non-white national descent still feature prominently in their lives and in their work. Also, Ahmad's and Camp's resort to the cultural traditions of their country of birth

University Teachers of English, Anglistentag 1999 Mainz (Trier: WVT Wissenschaftlicher Verlag Trier, 2000), 255.

[27] See, for instance, Robbins, "Race, Gender, Class, Postcolonialism," 565, where he observes that "the hybrid identity asserted against such simplifications [against the "humanist self" as well as against pure, authentic Otherness] looks and smells like a new universal ideal. And like other universal ideals, it privileges some at the expense of others—migrants to the metropolis, for example, at the expense of nonmigrants." See also Arif Dirlik, "The Postcolonial Aura: Third World Criticism in the Age of Global Capitalism," *Critical Inquiry*, 20 (Winter 1994), 328-356. For a theoretical analysis of hybridity see Nikos Papastergiadis, "Tracing Hybridity in Theory," in Pnina Werbner and Tariq Modood, eds., *Debating Cultural Hybridity: Multi-Cultural Identities and the Politics of Anti-Racism* (London, New York: Zed Books, 1997), 257-281.

[28] Personal interview with Rukhsana Ahmad, London, 14 April 1999. Further references are given with the abbreviation PIA.

[29] Personal interview with Sokari Douglas Camp, London, 25 May 1999. Further references are given with the abbreviation PIC.

[30] Robert Miles, *Racism* (London: Routledge, 1991), 37, 71.

[31] Ania L

[51] Avtar Brah, quoted in: Solomos and Back, *Racism and Society*, 140. See also Avtar Brah, *Cartographies of Diaspora* (London: Routledge, 1996).

[52] PIA. Loomba concurs by stating that "the alliance between fundamentalism and the State has resulted

[74] PIC.