Fashioning Women for a Brave New World: Gender, Ethnicity and Evolving Literary Representation

The representation of Caribbean women has changed substantially since the wave of female narratives. This paper explores more recent female representations against the backdrop of earlier portrayals. It emphasises ethnic identity, mothering and sexuality. Given the mimetic and paradigmatic potential of literary representation, the paper also reads the literary representations in relation to the broader feminist objectives of promoting gender equality and positive female representation.
Introduction

Literary representation is problematic. It was problematic when patriarchy institutionalised the power of the gaze to objectify and subordinate the feminine. It was problematic when the imperialistic takeover of subject races was facilitated the projection and internalisation of the gaze which represented subordinate races as sub-human. This issue becomes far more complex in relation to female authored Caribbean literature with its nagging preoccupation of identity construction which must be read through myriad shifting filters of gender and ethnicity.

This paper adds to the ongoing dialogue some cursory considerations on the literary representation of Caribbean women. Related issues include- how has the iconic literary representation of the Caribbean woman altered from period to period? Given the fact that literary representation was a major tool for inscribing otherness and a counter discursive device for recuperating the self from the imprisoning gaze how do the politics of identity, ethnicity and representation play themselves out from period to period? How does representation shift based on the gender and ethnicity of the protagonist in relation to the writer? Can we assume that self representation is necessarily the most authentic? How has the configuration of the representative West Indian writer changed during the period?

The larger work examines the issue of representation

how the literary output of women of the Caribbean was affected by the diversity of the West Indian experience. Race, colour, class, social and economic status effect the woman’s perception of herself and her role in society. This paper will focus on on three key works which appeared at pivotal points
The most significant early voice is that of Jean Rhys. And it was in relation to Rhys that the issue surfaced—on what basis can one identify a literary as piece as a West Indian Novel? And by extension, what criteria will we use to represent a novelist as West Indian? Authored by member of planter class Voyage in the Dark (1934) emphasised the complexity introduced by the interface of gender with race, class, colour and social oppression.

Critics have balked at identifying Rhys as a West Indian writer. She is problematic because of her unapologetic appropriation of the tropes of enslavement and the middle passage for her fictional exploration of the white women under siege. Indeed, it is ironic that the first significant fictional voice emerging out of the planter class the planter announced preoccupation since become endemic for Caribbean writers throughout the diaspora. Rhys maps the spatial frame and the psychic discomfort of the writer with a rooted vision of dislocation—a Caribbean homeland as paradise lost, ghostlike wanderings through adopted lands which can never become home, writing which proceeds out of a liminal transitional space which is psychically uneasy but creatively fertile. It is from the planter class and a white woman writer, that we get the clearest early evocation of what Walcott has since termed homecomings without home.

To-date, the female voices which most decisively represent Caribbean women's writing are those post 1970 voices of black/Afrocentric women writers including Merle Hodge, Erna Brodber, Olive Senioir, Jamaica Kincaid. Timothy identifying the modern feminist movement as a catalyst which called these writers into voice argues:

"despite the hegemonic hierarchy of values which would valorize the white and "high brown" woman above that of the East Indian and African descended woman, the black woman has been to-date the most willing to articulate her unique vision of the world and to reveal the synergy that controls the interlocking relationship between individual and community" (140)
And the earliest the agenda was re-construct and valorize that which had been represented as unlovely, impure and insignificant.

Significantly Hodge’s Crick Crack Monkey in 1970 has been identified as ushering in a new era in the writing of women in the English-speaking Caribbean. Crick Crack Monkey therefore represents one of the earliest attempts on the part of Afro-Caribbean Caribbean women to write our own story books - to transfix onto the written page our role models and developmental paths. Concerned with reversing the process of denigration, disfigurement, self contempt and erasure, Hodge’s agenda has been to validate and authenticate a people by inscribing their mode of being in fiction, lending in the process what Hall terms “an imaginary fullness or plentitude, to set against the broken rubric of our past. They are the resources of resistance and identity, with which the fragmented pathological ways in which that experience has been reconstructed” (Hall 394).

Cultural Identity and Diaspora 392-403

In Crick Crack Monkey and For the Life of Laetitia, Hodge writes with much nostalgia of the warmth and vitality of the afro-centric rural working class- its intimacies, its network of supportive relationships, its adversities and its survival tactics. It is in this context of female headed household in which the women make a living by agriculture and small scale marketing (Ma) or by dependence on a series of male partners (Tantie), that the powerful mothering women of the Caribbean emerge.

In contrast Hodge’s treats with the failure of the imperial mother/land harshly. The failure of the imperialistic system to nurture and impart life and sustenance to a people is captured in the faded and portrait of the white ancestress– the quinessential borrowed image of Senoir’s Colonial Girl’s School. Metonymically frozen into the fixity of a disapproving gaze, like the imperialistic order, the portrait is fading
into antiquity, but resolutely frowning on generations of errant children because their failure to reflect fading glory.

_Hodge valorizes instead the maternal ancestress, the African great grand mother. Tee’s greatest loss is loss of naming. Due to her graduation into the sterile aridity of middle class life and aspiration, Tee is absent from the grandmother’s deathbed and loses the opportunity to receive the sacred legacy, the belatedly remembered true- true name of her maternal ancestress. Tee’s naming is associated with her identity as a reincarnation of her great great grandmother famed for her stubbornness and her refusal to be called by anything but her true-true name. The great great grandmother’s spirit never harnessed or broken resurfaces in Tee and marks her as belonging to an ancestral matrilineage with a powerful sense of rootedness and self worth, and an effective resistance to erasure. The naming of Tee was intended like a self fulfilling prophecy to ensure her growth into the tall proud straight ancestress._

In keeping with the African cosmology, the individual belongs to the nurturing community comprising the unborn, the living and the dead. The great grandmother has long migrated to the land of the undead, but remains empowered to impart identity unto successive generations through the power of naming. This impartation erases the denigrating speaking of the European superstructure—it is conveyed through the power of naming. This transference is under threat dues to a collective amnesia induced by the horror of the new world experience.

The emergent Afrocentric Caribbean Writer of the 1970’s, in the battle against erasure and in the response to the imperative recuperation of so called “reluctant matriarchs” asserted the visibility and vocality of a powerful matrilineage rooted in a distinctly Caribbean Afrocentrism rather than in Africa. This parallels the quest of literary daughters throughout the African Diapora to find themselves in search of their mother’s gardens.
It is fundamentally an idealized though often contradictory external portrayal of an older generation—literary genuflection in tribute to the amazing survival strategies exerted by lower strata Afro Caribbean mothers. It is also, it associated with the exalted philosophical position of mothers in traditional African society. The representation of the mother figure verges on idealization and at times approaches deification. The excavation recovery/recuperation/inscription of a matrilineage ensures, in turn, the inheritance of a true true name for the literary daughters. Note though that self representation of mothering as is the case of Jean king’s Sad Mother Ballad is not as generous.

Today the most significant new arrivals on the Caribbean Literary scene have been the Indo Caribbean woman writer. Predictably her expression of voice was constrained by later access to education, predisposition to early marriage and childbearing, the conflation of the woman with pure ethnic identity with the concomitant requirement to maintains a smooth, coherent communal face and thereby protect the purity of an ethnus under siege.

The paper will now shift focus to the representation of gender and ethnicity. The Indo Caribbean Writers many of whom are writing out of Canada all of whom are writing from exile can be positioned along a continuum in relation to gender and ethnicity. Lashkmi Persaud writer of the first full length novel even as she deals with acculturation migrations, locates the voice and subjectivity of her protagonist securely within a revitalized Hinduism, as a gracious oasis and shield against the chaotic disorder of the dominant and adversarial Black dominated Creole society. (Butterfly in the Wind and Sashtra) Janice Shineborne rejects an enforced creolization opting instead for reclamation recuperation of Coolie identity, while Espinet while defining the ambivalent position of the East Indian woman in relation to Creole society, crafts Indian Robber claiming in the process a syncretic creativity and to be afforded by access to the entire West Indian cultural heritage.
I opt to focus here on what the work of Shani Motoo brings to our theme. In terms of ethnic and sexual representation, Motoo, visual artist, filmmaker, Indo-Trinidadian Irish Canadian Lesbian is not kosher. Rather her politicized transgressive fiction is about slaying as many sacred cows as she can level with her broad based fictional weaponry.

In representational terms Motoo "planasses" the iconographical representations of femininity and masculinity. Moreover, she breaks the taboo within Caribbean Literature on explicit representation of the lesbian sex acts. She indulges in a bewildering post modern imaging and representational play of subjectivities. In Out on Main Street, Motoo sets up a range of contradictory discourses in relation to gender and ethnic identities. deal with the relationship between individuals ethnicities migrants, how these interface with cultural artifacts such as language, food, dress.

The first person narrative voice frames a multiplicity of potential responses to issue Who are we? In terms of belonging and ancestry "We ain't good grade A Indians;" in relation to New World acculturation "We is kitchen Indians" Motoo stubbornly refuses to allow her character any fixed gender identity. The protagonist Instead she sketches a butch lesbian who vacillates between a unfemme strong man monkey stance, and is jealous when men eye her excessively femme lover and a femme jiggley wiggley identity geared to attract the same men overlook her as if she was "a gender they forget to classify her."

Clearly Motoo sets out to undermine culturally determined grid of heterosexuality Gender identity she presents may be transgressive but they also remain extremely polarized recreating a reversal of the terms of discourse, structural inequities, poses and the oppressive patterns of maleness and female interaction. The text plays with static role reversal. The narrator puts on and takes off femme and unfemme mannerism like a cloak; apes the jealous husband who owns the sexuality of his partner, tries to restrict her partner's wardrobe based on the level of male
attention that she attracts to herself. And as is the case with traditional male female relationships the Janet responds verbally with quarrelling and nagging.

Beneath ironic humour is a total recreation/pretend reversal of male female inequities which the feminist agenda seeks to demolish. The issue is why break oppressive structures in order to reverse/recreate them? Does the centrality of the oppressive patterns of interaction dictate that to validate alternative sexuality she must recreate it in the old image? Is Moottoo deconstructing the assumption that female/female liaisons are as a matter of course free of the tired unproductive power based games people play? Does the recreation point to a failure in her artistic vision of the potentiality of any liaison to transcend the oppressive parameters. Perhaps, but I believe that there is more to it.

Moottoo buys into the post modern play of identities signs and subjectivities with a vengeance. She represent identity as an with an infinite play of representations, ceaselessly duplicated until the signs themselves masks the absence of basic substance/reality at the core. The artistry then answers not to an impulse to represent reality through fiction; rather it becomes what Baudrillard terms, an impulse to create fictional simulations to ever proliferating identities which demonstrate the impossibility of ever arriving at conclusive meaning. In other words it appears that Mootoo's characters will never be able to answer to the question who am I? The writer produces instead a highly self conscious fictive labyrinth, a hyper representation which preserves the fiction of identity formation, which serve to defer the psychically intolerable admission that referentiality and meaning have ceased to exist.

CONCLUSIONS
The complexity of the Caribbean milieu frustrates easy classification. Indeed, we have come to accept as fact the existence of a discursive category termed Caribbean literature and presumably an even more cohesive category termed Caribbean women literature. Is this category truly cohesive?

From the inception to date, female authors have functioned as visionaries—crafting progressive identities, pushing back the boundaries to create new of paradigms for gender representation. The fictions testify to a strong underlying assumption in relation to community. I read into the literature of each period a strong sense of women writing to, about, and for women, yet the diverse ethnic and socio-cultural configuration of Caribbean dictate that women write primarily out of ethnic and cultural communities and write into their fictions, the ambiguous politics of identity and belonging.

Gender has created a strong sense of commonality in terms of the women writers but it has not always been sufficient to override othering generated by ethnic dissociation. Note too that successive waves of migration have served to strengthen rather than weaken identity formation based on ethnicity.

The literary representations also represented the subject location of the ethnicity of each writer. The slave owners wrote apologetics for their group even while demonstrating a peculiarly female perspective on the issue. In the case of a Rhys, this subject location has been contradictory and problematic, but most of all it has been prototypically West Indian.

The Afro Caribbean women writers, responding to the urgent agenda of restoring personhood of the African set out to redress hatred and denigration of white black racism, in terms which positively laid claim to West Indian selfhood landscape and social reality. However their Caribbeaness was rooted in an Afrocentric matrilineage
which was then perceived as crucial for the forging an authentic rooted social order and self-hood.

The Indo Caribbean voices echo the prototypical exilic condition of Caribbean Writers. Significantly all these voices write home into the Caribbean socio-cultural landscape grappled to define Caribbean identity along with a quest for integration into for the most part unaccommodating host cultures. Much ink has been spilt over issues of homelessness, nostalgia, the centrality of the natal place and the creative schizophrenia and the aesthetic fertility of the exilic condition. Significantly, this stance was has been echoed repeatedly work of the now cannonized male and female West Indain writers (Walcott, Lamming Naipaul, Selvon Kinskiad, Marshall, Cliff) was first announced in 1934 by Jean Rhys. In other words, arguably, one of our earliest major representative West Indian literary foremothers, by virtue of birth, stylistic innovation and thematic focus was a member of the planter class.

The most recent new voices Indo-Caribbean writers tend to embrace Caribbeanness but thold even more tightly to ethnic identification the primary determinant of self-hood. As always blazing new trails Women traversing new ground in the case of Mootoo positioning as lesbian overrides positioning as East Indian Mootoo puzzle write frankly of a highly eroticised homoerotic domain in which carefully recreates all of the tired strictures of male female inequity. At each stage the writers were fashioning women for brave new worlds but the more things changed the more they remain the same. The jury remains out...the verdict is pending. Speaks of need for critical approaches and conceptual approaches ‘seek to explore black women’s lives through techniques of analysis which suspend the variable of race, class and gender in mutually interrogative relation” (176) Valerie Smith Black Feminist Theory

Caribbean female identity based on belonging to place is losing ground although the nostalgia in relation to a lost homeland is not. The Caribbean landscape is
hauntingly incarnated again and again, even by the persons of Caribbean parentage who interpellate themselves as Caribbean Writers.

O Callaghan argues for a vision of Caribbean identity that is not rooted in sense of lost place and in a Manichean polarized order but which reads worlds and is fundamentally most at home in the test that is in the womb/or generating chamber which appropriates and interweaves multiple worlds and self hybridities, syncreticisms. Argues this may be a more liberatory stance from which to view issues of Caribbean identity in the beyond year 2000.

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