

Antonia Navarro-Tejero 2005: *Gender and Caste in the Anglophone-Indian Novels of Arundhati Roy and Githa Hariharan. Feminist Issues in Cross-Cultural Perspectives*. Lewiston, Queenston and Lampeter: The Edwin Mellen Press. iv +172pp. ISBN: 0-7734-5995-2

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Writing often becomes the context through
which new political identities are forged
(Navarro 2005: 23)

Postcolonial and feminist critics of as varied cultural backgrounds as Arif Dirlik, K. A. Appiah, Aijaz Ahmad, Arjun Appadurai, Neil Lazarus, Gayatri C. Spivak, Graham Huggan or Chandra T. Mohanty have argued that it is most crucial to restore to both postcolonial and feminist cultural analyses their political nature since their potential for social reform is being neutralized by global capitalism (see, for instance, Huggan 2001 and Mohanty 2003). The “current intellectual backlash against postcolonial studies” (Huggan 2001: vii) is carried out through, at the least, two major strategies: Orientalist marketing tactics that exoticize ‘ethnic’ literatures in the international markets in order to raise their economic value while devaluating their political ones, and the cooption of resistance discourses such as feminism, anti-imperialism or anti-racism through their domestication within the academic institutions.¹ While some critics propose that “unless postcolonialism can reestablish vital links with Marxism it will not survive nor deserve to survive long into the twenty-first century” (Mishra and Hodge 2005: 388), others have seen that “locally produced theories and methods might prove in the end to be more productive” (Huggan 2001: 3). Antonia Navarro Tejero’s critical practice is deeply rooted in this view of cultural analysis as politics and closely follows Sunder R. Rajeswari in stating that:

Culture . . . is the constitutive realm of the subject. As a result, culture appears as the chief matter and consequence of dominant ideological investment, powerfully coercive in shaping the subject; but since it is also heterogeneous, changing and open to interpretation, it can become the site of contestation and consequently of the reinscription of subjectivities. Therefore cultural analysis both calls forth the critique of ideology, and – given the crucial function of representation in the dialectic of social process – enables political intervention, scenarios of change, theoretical innovation and strategic reinterpretations. (48)

¹ A good example of the relevance of this discussion in postcolonial approaches to Indian culture can be found in Balachandra Rajan’s lengthy review ‘Excess of India’ where he surveys fourteen monographs on (post)colonial India published between 1989 and 1996.

Her study of Githa Hariharan's *The Thousand Faces of Night* and Arundhati Roy's *The God of Small Things* exerts this double task and brilliantly salvages these two popular Indian novels (Commonwealth Prize for Best First Book 1992 and Booker Prize 1997, respectively) from the devouring fauces of cultural commodification by focusing on the textual strategies that inscribe them as effective pieces in feminist, anti-casteist, anti-imperialist struggles. Navarro's approach to the novels from an imbricate combination of Feminist, Postcolonial and Subaltern theories is made explicit in her Introduction when advancing the thesis of her study:

I argue that there are political, social and religious conspiracies against the subaltern, by looking at what I see as the major influences on the formation of gender relations, that is, the development of the patriarchal form of family organization, the formation of the caste hierarchy and politics, and the impact of male domination in religion . . . [To] conclude with the idea that these women's resolutions conform to a re-definition of the lives of women, fulfilling the implicit political aim of these authors, as they are not merely concerned in documenting reality, but they have used their novels as a medium for the exploration of the new reality and a subtle projection of values, by posing questions, by suggesting re-assessment, and re-definition. (3)

Her view of these two famous international figures unwraps them of that trendy aura of the exotic Indian that often surrounds them – especially Roy, the epitome of Indo chic (Huggan 2001: 67) – to focus instead on their relevance as social activists, since both Roy and Hariharan “are engaged – in different degrees – with social reforms, and this is what makes them writer-activists, as they are sensitive to gender and caste experiences. They are not demagogic or prescriptive, but offer alternatives instead of victimizing the oppressed” (19).

Navarro's study is neatly structured into four distinct thematic sections. Chapter 1 contextualizes the two authors to be discussed within an Indian tradition of feminist writing in English. It is followed by a chapter on the genre employed by both authors, the female *Bildungsroman*, which is understood by Navarro-Tejero as representative of the socialization process. The core section of the book – Chapters 3, 4 and 5 – studies the major forces operating in that process: Family, Religion and State, respectively. Finally, Chapter 6 compiles a catalogue of the strategies of feminist dissent provided in the novels: from the rebellion of the womb and widowhood, to androgyny and abjection.

The introductory chapter touches upon the unavoidable questions that any analysis of contemporary Indian fiction in English must face, even if briefly, as a demanded preliminary: a comment on the authors' use of English; a comment on the market forces fomenting the international boom of Indian fiction; and an analysis of the stereotyping of 'traditional' Indians offered for Western consumption. Navarro does not skip any of these three issues, though she aptly prevents their taking more space than the strictly necessary for contextualization, in order not to lose track of her main objective: a feminist analysis of the gender and caste systems and their intersection within political, social and religious structures as represented and subverted in Roy's and Hariharan's novels. However, it is important to ponder here the relevance of these aspects in the reception of these literary pieces in our cultural context, in order to better understand the value of Navarro's critical work.

In this age of globalized consumerism, the taste for Indian narratives constitutes an outstanding branch of the renewed Orientalist fashion that poses any approach by a Western reader/critic under suspicion.² The Rushdie affair and Roy's Booker Prize were two main catalysts for the contemporary success of Indian fiction in English, a field that Padmini Mongia has described as "a domain well served by media attention and financial success from all quarters of the globe" (2004). Rushdie's and Roy's frequent appearances on the media served to promote Indian fiction in English all over the world, and most especially in the West, a success confirmed by V.S. Naipul's Nobel Prize in 2001 and the more recent Man Booker Prize awarded to Kiran Desai in 2006, together with the important number of Indian novels translated into other languages in recent years.³

The use of English by Indian authors has been fiercely debated within the Indian intellectual circles, especially after Rushdie's (in)famous assertion that Indian writing in English is in fact "the most valuable contribution India has yet made to the world of books" (Rushdie and West 1997: x). Despite the recent increase in translations from other Indian languages, there is no question that the Indian literature predominant in Western markets is written in English, and translated into other languages from English. The success of these Indian writers – conveniently labeled in our literary system as 'diasporic', 'muticultural' or 'ethnic' – is in part due to the arduous work for visibilization of subaltern cultural production by diverse activist groups. However, the commercial exploitation in the cultural market of this privileged group – as compared to other literatures of the post-colonial world (Young 1995: 165) – has exposed the strong vigor of a renewed colonial desire for the exotic that some postcolonial theorists diagnosed decades ago, most notably Edward Said (1978).

Navarro comments briefly on the boom of Indian diasporic fiction: "Expatriate representation has been questioned on several counts and a lot can be said in favor and against. Most expatriate writers have a weak grasp of actual conditions in contemporary India, and tend to recreate it through the lens of nostalgia, writing about 'imaginary homelands'. Alongside this, there is a considerable amount of work which is aimed at the western audience and engages primarily with western theory written by both the expatriate and the stay at home writer" (17). Navarro has chosen two complex novels in this aspect, written by 'stay at home' authors in which the protagonists, Devi and Rahel, are hybrid migrants with a Western education who return 'home'. Reading these novels as *Bildungsromane*, Navarro employs the pervasive nationalist trope of the Mother-land in her description of the protagonist's quest: "These main characters return from the USA to their native land in India, feeling the ambivalence that results from the clash of voices, provoking mental and emotional states of perplexity. Only when they recover their mother's history and their own, their internal strife comes from insecurity and

² See, for instance, Gita Mehta's *Karma Cola. Marketing the Mystic East*, and Graham Huggan's chapter 'Consuming India' in *The Postcolonial Exotic*.

³ Translation constitutes an important marker of status in the economic and cultural global system as it determines the range for the circulation of texts and therefore its span of reception. The two novels under scrutiny in Navarro's work have been translated into Spanish, among other languages.

indecisiveness to understanding and liberation. The return to the mother that the protagonists experiment goes parallel to the return to their native country to find their roots, a culture that is now hybridized” (21). However, contrary to patriarchal common usage of the identification of nation and woman as repositories of tradition (see Yuval-Davis 1997 and Layoun 2001, for example), Navarro reads Hariharan’s and Roy’s use of the trope in feminist subversive ways, since, instead of a sign of purity and authenticity, here “India becomes a metaphor for a renovated land, a space in-between . . . Both of the female protagonists focus their testimony on the figure of their mother, through which they are able to denounce oppressions in the family grounds” (21). By analyzing in great detail the crucial influence of Religion and State on the family, Navarro dismantles that nationalist trope of the pure Motherland that in the case of India is very much supported by a caste system that heavily relies on taboos “about purity and pollution” (152). Feminist transgression in the novels operates against these interrelated power structures, Family, State and Religion, all of them inserted within an oppressive frame of caste difference. According to Navarro, both authors’ aim at “the reinterpretation and re-writing of history” as their main objective (19), and both use memory as a key tool “used either as a way to denounce cultural behaviors that repress women and impose the division of classes or as a way of reclaiming a lost cultural identity” (21). When Navarro affirms that “These novels – as many other works of the so-called Third World – focus on the significance of memory and testimony” (21), she is locating them within postcolonial and feminist traditions that value the confessional and the private testimony, these being characteristic forms of expression of the subaltern communities.

While reading Navarro’s prose one can perceive her awareness of the risks at stake when a white academic deals with ‘Third World Women’. Her vast readings in Indian feminism show her acute perception that there is much abuse and exploitation in a market scene that does not hesitate to sell women’s victim narratives for massive consumption in the West. In the case of Indian women authors, trendy Indo chic wraps beautiful bodies of spectacular South Asian women in silk and cotton saris that become appealing bait for the Western consumer (Rahman 1999: 88). The *woman in sari* has become a sort of trademark, where we can once more identify the old nationalist trope of woman as the embodiment of the motherland. Henna painted hands and feet and beautiful saris appear in almost every single book from Indian writers,⁴ and Indian women authors are, perhaps, the most photographed of all, Arundhati Roy’s being the best-known face, as Saadia Toor has exposed:

Marketing for the book [GOST] has been dominated by glossy photographs of a very photogenic Roy, wispy tendrils of hair framing eyes that stare dreamily out. One publicity poster for the book has a four-foot image of Roy’s face, beneath which is the caption ‘Set to be the publishing sensation of the year’, leaving much ambiguity as to whether the referent is Roy or her book, which is not mentioned even by name. The strategy is clearly one which plays into the Indian beauty myth. (2000: 13)

⁴ A quick visit to the South Asian Women’s Net’s (www.sawnet.org) section Bookshelf, specialized on South Asian women, will provide plenty of examples.

In this commercial strategy the body of the author herself becomes an object of exhibition: “feminize and racialize the author to make her a suitable object of consumption” (Beaugard 1999: 191). These paratextual elements reveal the exploitation of the Indian woman as a sign of sexual exoticism that commodifies these women’s narratives in English for massive consumption (see Martín Lucas 2005). The literary value of these novels is thus paradoxically put into question by the very system that promotes them, depoliticizing the voices of the marginalized and silenced subalterns that the fictions present.

Chandra Mohanty’s incisive criticism of the stereotype of the *Third World Woman* in her ‘Under Western Eyes’, intelligently quoted by Navarro (23-24) as a banner of her feminist agenda, lists the expectations conjured up by this cliché in Western readers: “The ‘third world difference’ includes a paternalistic attitude toward women in the third world . . . [T]hird world women as a group or category are automatically and necessarily defined as religious (read ‘not progressive’), family-oriented (read ‘traditional’), legal minors (read ‘they-are-not-still-conscious-of-their-rights’), illiterate (read ‘ignorant’), domestic (read ‘backward’), and sometimes revolutionary (read ‘their-country-is-in-a-state-of-war; they-must-fight!’). This is how the ‘third world difference’ is produced” (Mohanty 1991: 72). These stereotypes are still now predominant in the dominant culture of the West and severely affect cultural expectations on Indian women. Those narratives that tell a woman’s story of courage and defiance in an old-fashioned context of barbaric oppressive traditions make it soon to the best-sellers list. That many of these texts are conveniently used to perpetuate racist stereotypes of non-white cultures as primitive and barbaric is not often part of their critical acclaim; on the contrary, they are often praised for their positive examples of individual heroism, thus fomenting internal divisions within a given community in order to “further demonize and stereotype third-world peoples, reinforcing a view that, as Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak (1999) reminds us, seeks to free brown women from brown men” (Khan 2005: 2018).

The cumulative effect of these marketing and critical devices, with their promotion of tragic and violent stories set in a remote place and/or time, reifies female resistance to specific patriarchal practices in specific cultures and to imperialism as a product for quick consumption that obliterates very real and both historical and contemporary injustices. The partition wars, the religious prosecutions and massacres, and gendered violence of all kinds, including rape war, institutional rape, incest and homicide for ‘crimes of honor’ figure in many of these narratives. However, that they may be understood as ‘natural’ or ‘normal’ in ‘those cultures’ and, by contrast, as monstrous exceptions in the ‘civilized’ West does only confirm the racism and sexism that permeate the dominant ideology of the publishing industry and its targeted audience, since, as Navarro reminds us, “The issue of the raped woman as the subject of narrative is recurrent in literature in canonical English texts as well as in contemporary narratives, including Indian texts written both in the vernacular and in English” (70). While some of the forms of gendered violence are specific to determined cultural communities, all patriarchal cultures exert violence on women in different ways justified on moral, religious or ethic grounds. Any feminist writer will denounce in her works the many forms of violence women experience in their different cultural and

cross-cultural settings. That the patriarchal ideology dominant in the global culture industries (which include academic critical appraisal as an important instrument) attempts to neutralize feminist vindications of the rights of women by saturating audiences with the victim cliché should not deter us from insisting on the denunciation of violence to women. Antonia Navarro's study is respectful in this sense. She is well aware of the many traps of Eurocentric Orientalism and artfully exposes them: "Organized violence by the dominant castes against the Dalits in India, systematic silencing of the women by fundamentalist organizations, and child abuse, are disturbing evidence of the growing intolerance in highly aggressive, competitive, masculinized, militarized societies. The exoticism about it is mere coincidence as that is the natural world that surrounds these writers" (150). As an expert mine detector, she carefully deals with 'sensitive' material that might easily gain her negative criticism from all fronts with strong determination and conviction, firmly supporting her arguments with a good number of theoretical resources. Thus, she frames her study with an opening chapter on Indian feminist theory that, while attempting to appease "a latent fear [in India] that western models of feminism might be indiscriminately imposed" (145-46), comes indeed to contest the extended accusation that Indian feminists are agents of Western colonization (see Narayan's brilliant dismantling of this fallacy in *Dislocating Cultures*, 1997) and therefore enemies to the Indian nation (Nabar 1995: 16). Contrary to this dominant view, Indian feminists address culture specific issues "such as dowry deaths, the problems of divorce, inheritance and abortion laws, and the practice of *satee*" (11) that have their roots in the ideologies determined by a Hindu world view since, "while there are other religious communities within the Indian subcontinent, each in turn has been influenced historically and culturally by the other . . . There is a certain image conjured up by the nomenclature *Bhāratīya nārī* [the Indian woman], which cuts across religious boundaries, and which women by and large conform to or question in varying degrees of defiance and revolt" (Nabar 1995: 21-22). Navarro studies in depth the weight of mythical prototypes on Indian women's minds and the modes of defiance presented in Roy's and Hariharan's texts, focusing on a specific local/regional context, the neighboring states of Tamil Nadu and Kerala in South India.

Navarro's insistence on the need to avoid generalization and look at "specific cultural politics" (2), to criticize gender and caste/class division "within a specific framework" (23) and "to locate the novels [...] into a specific political agenda" (145) is one of the main assets of her analysis. At a time when the terms *ideology* and *political agenda* seem to have been severed from academic discourse – though not from the realm of politics in the academia – it is most rewarding to encounter such a serious and well-grounded feminist postcolonial critique. Navarro's study of Roy and Hariharan constitutes, undoubtedly, an important contribution to the field of Indian Studies, as well as to the fields of Postcolonial and Feminist Studies and it attests to the strength of this critical practice in our country.

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