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Meera Syal's "The Traveller": Its Feminist Allegory and Later Echoes

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Committed to the exploration of the female experience—specifically the South Asian female experience—Meera Syal has often woven a feminist subtext into the fabric of her works. This is probably nowhere more evident than in “The Traveller” (1988), an allegorical short story that constitutes Syal’s more sustained effort to produce a feminist text *per se*. However, whereas Syal’s novels and screenplays have been accorded considerable critical attention, “The Traveller” has been largely overlooked. This article aims to help rectify this imbalance by reassessing the importance of this text within Syal’s oeuvre. Drawing on feminist discourse, it also provides a detailed analysis of the story, unveiling and examining its feminist allegory. As I contend, “The Traveller” provides a critique of the universalising tendencies at the core of much Western feminism, whilst also enunciating the coming into being of Black British feminism in the 1970s and 1980s. This notwithstanding, through the figure of the “traveller,” a strong metaphor throughout, Syal’s story also creates common ground, highlighting the need to recognise both differences and commonalities and to build bridges amongst South Asian women living at both ends of the East-West divide.

Keywords: Meera Syal; short story; “The Traveller”; Black British feminism; sisterhood

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“The Traveller,” de Meera Syal: su alegoría feminista y posteriores ecos

Comprometida con visibilizar la experiencia femenina y, más concretamente, la realidad de la mujer surasiática, Meera Syal es una escritora cuyas obras incluyen a menudo un subtexto feminista. Un claro ejemplo de esto lo encontramos en “The Traveller” (1988), un relato corto de carácter alegórico que incorpora una marcada agenda feminista. Sin

embargo, podría decirse que, frente a otras obras de Syal, este relato ha sido ampliamente ignorado por la crítica literaria. El objetivo de este artículo es contribuir precisamente a rectificar este desequilibrio, reevaluando la importancia de este texto dentro de la obra de la autora. Apoyándose en trabajos críticos de corte feminista, el artículo también pretende proporcionar un análisis detallado del mencionado relato, revelando y examinando la alegoría feminista que encapsula. Como se expone a lo largo del artículo, “The Traveller” se erige como una crítica a las tendencias universalizadoras sobre las que se ha sostenido el feminismo occidental, al tiempo que enuncia la aparición del denominado feminismo negro británico en las décadas de 1970 y 1980. A pesar de esto, a través de sus densas metáforas, el relato de Syal también enfatiza la idea de comunalidad, destacando la necesidad de reconocer tanto las diferencias como los puntos en común, así como la pertinencia de establecer vínculos entre la experiencia femenina en el subcontinente indio y sus diásporas.

Palabras clave: Meera Syal; relato corto; “The Traveller”; feminismo negro británico; solidaridad femenina

Meera Syal (1961-) is one of the most multitalented Asian personalities in contemporary Britain and, according to Yasmin Hussain, "possibly the most influential South Asian woman in the British media" (2005, 15). Nowadays Syal is best known for her work as an actress (Ranasinha 2007), yet her acting career began almost in parallel with her development as a writer. Indeed, as I have noted elsewhere (2018, 114), in her essay "PC: GLC" (1994), Syal acknowledged that her initial impulse to become a writer was in response to her discomfort with the stereotypical roles that most Asian actresses of her generation were expected to play. Writing, she stated, offered her emancipation from such clichéd roles—a medium through which to explode stereotypes by shaping "rounded characters, real people [who] have layers, make mistakes" (124-25) and, in so doing, present a broader and more stereoscopic vision of the British-Asian community in general and of the female British-Asian experience in particular. In effect, as Ana María Sánchez-Arce explains, Syal "may be best known as a comedian, but [in her writing] she asks important questions about what it is to be English, British, Asian, or a combination of the three," placing women at the centre of those disquisitions (2012, 315). To date, Syal's writing output includes, inter alia, the essays "PC: GLC" (1994) and "Finding My Voice" (2000); plays like "One of Us" (1983, unpublished and cowritten with Jacqueline Shapiro), "Auntie's Revenge" (1993a, unpublished) and *My Sister-Wife* (1993b); short stories such as "The Traveller" (1988); screenplays such as *Bhaji on the Beach* (Chadha 1993); the book of the musical *Bombay Dreams* (Pimlott 2002; cowritten with Thomas Meehan); as well as three novels, *Anita and Me* ([1996] 1997), *Life Isn't All Ha Ha Hee Hee* ([1999] 2000) and *The House of Hidden Mothers* ([2015] 2016). All this alongside her participation in cowriting the screenplays of films such as *A Nice Arrangement* (Chadha 1991) and episodes of TV series like *Life Isn't All Ha Ha Hee Hee* (De Emmony 2005), *Black Silk* (Sargeant et al. 1985), *Tandoori Nights* (Amiel et al. 1985-1987), *The Real McCoy* (Jervis et al. 1991-1996) and *Goodness Gracious Me* (Wood and Carrivick 1998-2001), to name but a few.

Interested in and committed to the exploration of the female experience—and more specifically the South Asian female experience—Syal has often woven a feminist subtext into the fabric of her works. As Sánchez-Arce notes in this respect, Syal's oeuvre "focuses particularly on women [...] and critiques patriarchy in Britain and, within Britain, in the British Asian community" (2012, 315). This is probably nowhere more evident than in "The Traveller" (1988), a short story that constitutes Syal's most sustained effort to produce a feminist text per se. In fact, "The Traveller" should be contextualised against the backdrop of Black British feminism and its emergence in the mid-1970s—with the term "black" acquiring specific valences in the British context of the period, where it became a political, rather than an ethnic, category (Mercer 1994) and served to bring together all those who fell outside hegemonic notions of "whiteness." Similar to their American counterparts, Black British feminists also sought to "speak of our difference, our uniqueness, our 'otherness'" (Mirza 1997a, 4), whilst questioning the Western-centric and middle-class character of much feminism "under western eyes"

(Mohanty 1988, 65)—and this includes figures such as Amrit Wilson, to whom Syal has declared her indebtedness (Syal 2000a). Other considerations aside, Syal's choice of the short-story form recalls, and seems to support, critical views on the genre as a format particularly suited to the exploration of subaltern experiences: "the short story has been from its inception a particularly appropriate vehicle for the expression of the ex-centric, alienated vision of women" (Hanson 1989a, 3). As Clare Hanson adds, "the short story has offered itself to [...] writers who for one reason or another have not been part of the ruling 'narrative' or epistemological/experiential framework of their society" (2). If, as Julie Brown surmises, the short-story genre has for a long time been somehow excluded from literary criticism (2013a, xx), the study of short stories written by ethnic minorities has been even more so. Whether a matter of coincidence or something symptomatic of what has been said above, the truth is that, whereas Syal's novels and screenplays have been accorded considerable attention, her short story "The Traveller" has been largely overlooked. It is the aim of this article to help to rectify this imbalance, reassessing the importance of this text within Syal's oeuvre and showing how many of the early ideas that Syal explores in "The Traveller" reappear in her later novels—most notably in *Life Isn't All Ha Ha Hee Hee* (hereafter *Life*). Drawing on feminist discourse, this article also intends to provide a detailed analysis of "The Traveller," unveiling and examining its feminist allegory. As I contend, the story provides a critique of the universalising tendencies at the core of much Western feminism, whilst enunciating the coming into being of Black British feminist discourse and political activism. This notwithstanding, through the figure of the "traveller," which becomes a strong metaphor throughout, Syal's short story also creates common ground, highlighting the need to recognise both differences and commonalities and to build bridges between women in general and between South Asian women living at both ends of the East-West divide in particular.

"The Traveller" first appeared in the anthology *Right of Way: Prose and Poetry from the Asian Women Writers' Workshop* (1988). Produced by the Asian Women Writers Workshop (AWWW) and published by The Women's Press, *Right of Way* is a multigenre anthology organised around a clearly marked politics of identity and aimed at promoting ethnic minority women writers at a time when few nonwhite voices had been published in Britain. As the editors of *Right of Way* note in this respect, the "relationship between writing and politics" is central to the pieces collected in the anthology, and the very need of having to establish such a specific group as the AWWW back in the 1980s "enunciated the political realities that normally excluded women like us" (1988, 4). The publication of *Right of Way*—along with other initiatives carried out by the AWWW—certainly served as a springboard for women who, like Syal, became established writers later on. With the benefit of hindsight, *Right of Way* can be said to represent one of the earliest examples of an identity-based anthology produced in Britain, thus featuring as a precursor to the rather prolific number of such anthologies appearing in the new millennium—*Whispers in the Walls: New Black and Asian Voices*

from *Birmingham* (Leone and Brissett 2001), *Kin: New Fiction by Black and Asian Women* (McCarthy 2003), *Walking a Tightrope: New Writing from Asian Britain* (Ahmed 2004), *Too Asian, Not Asian Enough: An Anthology of New British Asian Fiction* (Bhanot 2011) and *The Things I would Tell You: British Muslim Women Write* (Mahfouz 2017) being just some examples. What is more, in many respects, *Right of Way* could be considered the British equivalent of such pioneering multigenre American anthologies as *This Bridge Called My Back* (Moraga and Anzaldúa 1981) and *Home Girls* (Smith 1983), which, as Cynthia G. Franklin aptly showed (1997), have been crucial in shaping political movements, forging connections beyond the world of academia and building communities of women based upon a powerful—yet intrinsically unstable—politics of identity. In the same way, *Right of Way* also served to give voice to a minority ethnic identity which, back in the 1980s, was not as recognisable as it is in present-day Britain; and through its combination of literature and social activism, the anthology also testifies to the efforts of the AWWW to forge a community of women, organised around the category of “Asian” and heavily influenced by the emerging Black British feminism of the period, which would have an impact both within and beyond the academic sphere. Recognising the political background behind this anthology is paramount, not only because it helps to reassess the groundbreaking role played by *Right of Way* within a British literary and cultural scenario, but also because it contributes to a better understanding of the pieces collected therein, including Syal’s short story “The Traveller.”

In contradistinction to the realism that dominates Syal’s novelistic output, “The Traveller” is an allegorical ten-page narrative that revolves around a nameless winged woman destined to become a traveller and thus spread the seeds of freedom amongst those women who, unlike her and the rest of women from her homeland, have been forced to “fold their wings”—in other words, women whose freedom has historically been curtailed by patriarchal structures. Syal’s choice of the allegorical mode is significant, as it highlights the strategic use of metaphor that frequently surfaces in much feminist writing (Forsas-Scott 2014). In fact, it is almost impossible to read “The Traveller” without being reminded of Angela Carter’s fiction, Suniti Namjoshi’s feminist fables or the allegorical short stories produced by New Women writers in fin-de-siècle Britain. In this sense, one could even argue that Syal’s story is redolent of Olive Schreiner’s “Three Dreams in a Desert” (1887), principally in regard to the three temporal dimensions that structure Schreiner’s piece and that, albeit less prominently, also appear in Syal’s text: an imagined, primitive phase that predates women’s historic subjugation—“[they] gave up their wings a long time ago” (1988, 99)—the present, where women are burdened by “the weight of many centuries of conditioning” (99); and an envisioned future, where “the wingless ones would be in the minority” (103).

Interestingly, as in Schreiner’s seminal piece, in “The Traveller” the use of allegory, coupled with the story’s imaginary setting, uproots the text from any specific cultural bearing and at times endows it with a universal projection. However, in both works, the inclusion of certain cultural and religious references—more overt in some cases than in

others—simultaneously allows us to recover the specific cultures from which and about which the authors write. Thus, in “The Traveller,” the protagonist comes from a kind of mythical land which, separated from the rest of the world in temporal and spatial terms, is never explicitly named, but is certainly embedded within South Asian culture: the protagonist of the story is given a name—though this is never mentioned in the text—in a ceremony involving a *thali*, a metal plate used in certain Hindu naming ceremonies; on various occasions, she refers to her “Dadima” (96, 97), the Hindu word for “grandmother”; and proper names such as “Asha” and “Manju” (96) can be related to Sanskrit etymology. Likewise, the first land visited by the protagonist in her sojourn across the lands of the wingless conveys us to the Indian subcontinent through sartorial references—she is indirectly compelled to wear “open-toed sandals” and wrap her body “in folds” (99-100), which calls to mind the way in which the sari is worn—as well as through a number of cultural, religious and literary concepts such as *izzat* and *ghazal*, the former roughly translating as “honour” and the latter alluding to a love poem closely associated with Muslim Sufi culture. Later in the story, the protagonist decides to cross the “ocean” that surrounds her native land, thus exchanging “temperate winds and balmy skies for the sharp angles and muted shades of far-off, built-up foreign cities” (101). Judging by these details, it is plausible to suggest that Syal is here evoking the diasporic route from the Indian subcontinent to Britain—the “rainy land” that the winged woman describes afterwards (102)—the same route followed by Syal’s parents and many other South Asians since the postwar period, and even before. Consequently, although the story lends itself to being read in universal terms, it is certainly devised so as to articulate the plight of South Asian women at both ends of the East-West divide.

Narrated in the first person and ostensibly told in retrospect, “The Traveller” begins on the day its protagonist is born, that is, “hundreds of moons ago,” in her by now “almost-forgotten land” (96). This land, as noted earlier, is pictured as a mythical place, where women have been able to retain the freedom allegedly enjoyed by their primitive ancestresses living in a gender-balanced utopia or, as the text seems to imply at times, in a purely matriarchal society—and hence, they are all winged beings. Indeed, it is even tempting to suggest that Syal is here portraying an Amazonian society, as men are absent from the narrative of this land or are severely punished when they do appear. The text provides further evidence in this respect when the protagonist goes on to detail the presents that she receives on the day of her naming ceremony. One of them is an urn with “the tears of the crying blue mountain” (97). This mountain, we are informed, is in love with a cloud, “a monsoon cloud” that “only passes over the mountain range twice a year” (97), and thus the cloud’s long absences explain the mountain’s lament. Significantly, the cloud is feminised in the text through the pronoun “she” and the blue mountain is ostensibly made to stand for a male entity. Their love, which might represent a wide variety of relationships, not only that between the sexes, is generous and undemanding, and never restricts the agency of either. Despite his yearning for the cloud, the mountain does not stand in her way as she travels back and forth; nor

does the cloud ever cover the peak of the mountain on her journey across: "on the first journey she [the cloud] is black, full, and heavy with rain; on the return journey she is light, emptied and smiling. But she never sees the blue mountain below her, and she never will" (97). Probably, Syal is here relying on a parable attributed to Zen master Tozan Ryokai (807-869) and later included in Shunryu Suzuki's seminal work *Zen Mind, Beginner's Mind* (1970), one that also appears in Toni Morrison's *Song of Solomon* (1977), as Jean Wyatt aptly shows. This parable speaks, in Wyatt's words, about an ideal love that is "nonpossessive and nonintrusive" (2017, 15), the sort of love that is given to the protagonist of Syal's story as a gift and, potentially, as an instructive tool. Revealing a complex network of intertextual allusions, the story behind this gift can also be traced back to Kālidāsa's "Megh Doot," a staple of Sanskrit poetry in which an exiled lover persuades a passing cloud to drift towards Mount Kailash—sacred to Hindus and Buddhists alike—and deliver a message to his beloved wife.

Even more "dramatic" (Syal 1988, 91), though, is the present the winged protagonist receives from her Dadima: "the nose, lips and earlobes of a lying man," whose throat the matriarch had cut in the market, where he was selling "mangoes whose worms had worms" and "asking so much, too" (97). This is the only time a male figure appears in this part of the narrative and, significantly enough, his presence is quickly, and violently, erased. His "offence" seems to lie in his selling of rotten fruit, a fact aggravated by the high price he is demanding—and yet, one wonders whether his very presence represents a threat to the status quo. As Barbara E. Reid contends, the "metaphor of 'fruit' for a person's deeds is a familiar one" in religious parables (2000, 260), and in the context of Syal's story, it can be understood in similar terms. The rotten fruit this man is selling comes to stand for the social and moral corruption he might bring into the protagonist's utopian homeland and its gender balance; just as rotten fruit spoils other fruits, so too can this man spread corruption in endless ways. The old matriarch consequently has no qualms about slitting his throat with "one graceful wing" (Syal 1988, 97), thus proclaiming her status within the social order of the community. That she cuts the body of the dishonest seller—removing his "nose, lips and earlobes" (97)—is also telling, as this can be interpreted against a backdrop of "honour mutilations," i.e., bodily mutilations aimed at punishing "the transgression of social and moral norms due to a[n] [allegedly] shameful act" (Frembgen 2006, 243), very often sexual transgressions. As Jürgen Wasim Frembgen points out, this practice has a long tradition in many cultures, including South Asian culture; though not exclusively, it often impinges on women and their bodies, being connected to notions of "family honour" and "shame" (Frembgen 2006, 245). In "The Traveller," Syal provides a reversal of gender roles by having the old matriarch mutilate the face of the male fruit seller and, in so doing, she also produces a countermyth closely linked to an ancient Indian epic: Maharshi Valmiki's *Ramayana*, where the nose and ears of Ravana's sister Surpanakha are cut. What is more, considering that the nose is associated with much sexual innuendo (Frembgen 2006, 255), the act of nose-cutting can also be viewed as

a symbolic form of castration, one that reacts to a figurative violation of the female body—the mangoes being penetrated by worms—and, more straightforwardly, to a violation of the body politic.

In this mythical land, as we are told at the beginning of the text, “to be both a traveller and a woman was not considered a paradox” and, in effect, the protagonist has been destined to “become a traveller” (Syal 1988, 96) since the day she was born. Travelling and flying are well-known metaphors for (female) freedom and, in this short story, Syal combines and exploits these metaphorical nexuses to their full extent, echoing and reworking earlier feminist assessments such as those offered by Carter in *Nights at the Circus* (1984) and Namjoshi in “Bird Woman” (1981, 18), two texts that also feature female protagonists that become winged women at some point. Interestingly, the figure of the traveller, which Syal first introduces here, reappears in much of her later work, at times standing for the idea of female freedom that it embodies in “The Traveller,” and at others, being reconfigured so as to evoke the hybridity inherent to the diasporic experience that Syal also shares. Thus, as I have argued elsewhere (2018, 115, 144), in Syal’s *Anita and Me*, Meena, the protagonist and narrator of the novel, succeeds in overcoming the process of self-rejection that afflicts her for most of the narrative and, by developing a transcultural subjectivity, she eventually pictures herself as a traveller whose persona traverses cultural and geographical frontiers: “I now knew I was not a bad girl, a mixed-up girl, a girl with no name or no place. The place in which I belonged was wherever I stood and there was nothing stopping me simply moving forward and claiming each resting place as home” ([1996] 1997, 303). Likewise, the last chapter in *Life*, where the three protagonists and friends Sunita, Chila and Tania are eventually brought together, is full of metaphors that hinge on the idea of travelling and flying as representing the process of self-realisation experienced by each of the three heroines: Sunita plans to travel to Spain, Chila maps out a trip to India and Tania urges the sparrows to fly and spread their chants of freedom—“‘Go on ... go!’ Tania said [...] scattering the sparrows [...] who fluttered [...] singing their journey as they flew” ([1999] 2000b, 334). Additionally, at one point in the novel, Tania refers to Sunita and Chila as her “fellow travellers” (319), that is, as her comrades on the arduous journey growing up as British-Asian women, and thus being subjected to “the ‘triple’ oppression of gender, race and class” (Carby 1997, 45). Similarly, in Syal’s latest novel, *The House of Hidden Mothers*, Shyama’s daughter, Tara, finds a sense of self by becoming part of a global sisterhood, constantly sharing with her “fellow travellers” ([2015] 2016, 288) the particular burdens women are saddled with across the globe. Both in these later pieces and in the short story under scrutiny here, Syal turns the figure of the traveller into a rich metaphorical palimpsest. Most obviously, it stands for the idea of female freedom mentioned above, but it also evokes the journey towards its achievement; and, as the phrase “fellow travellers” implies, this journey involves, in turn, an underlying process of female solidarity—a sorority of women in Irigarayan terms (1993), but also one that takes into account, or rather focuses on, other than

white middle-class women. Syal first developed these ideas in "The Traveller" and, as the quotations above reveal, she has elaborated on them in her later novels, particularly in *Life*. In fact, as shown later in this article, *Life* repeatedly enters into dialogue with "The Traveller," redeploying its phraseology almost verbatim and giving corporality to some of the silenced female voices that appear in this short story, as the protagonist begins her sojourn across the lands of the wingless.

In fact, a few months after her naming ceremony, and with her wings now fully grown, the protagonist of "The Traveller" sets out on her journey. For her, moving outside the microcosm of her homeland does not simply mean fulfilling her childhood "wanderlust" (Syal 1988, 96). It also represents a rite of passage—her first foray into a world that, unlike hers, is ruled by patriarchal structures—and the beginning of a mission she should accomplish discreetly: "Remember," her mother tells her, "you go as a traveller, not as a leader" (98)—a piece of advice she does not always follow, eager as she is to shine a light on the lives of the women she comes across in the land of the wingless. At this point, and before initiating the narration of her sojourn, the protagonist and narrator of the story goes on to itemise her "travelling clothes":

sturdy, thick-soled boots would protect my feet from the potholes and sharp stones of the dusty roads [...] my mother improvised a garment from a length of cotton cloth, winding it around my body and between my legs so that it offered both protection and freedom of movement [...]. And of course I wore, strapped tightly around my waist, my travelling belt, from which hung cooking pots, utensils, a double-edged dagger, herbs that would heal and poison, and the nose, lips and earlobes of a lying man. (98)

The travelling clothes she dons are, therefore, practical and functional, allowing her freedom of movement and protecting her from the inclement weather. At the same time, it is obvious that these clothes confer on her an androgynous appearance that destabilises gender categories and precludes any clear-cut association between gender and apparel. No matter how ubiquitously dress is used to reinforce the gender binary, Syal's text thus underlines its border-crossing potential—perhaps nowhere better illustrated than in Judith Butler's discussion of drag (1990)—as well as its ability to expose the arbitrariness of gender and its socially constructed, rather than ontologically determined, nature. What is more, although sporting long hair, which is more generally associated with the feminine, the protagonist of the story wears her mane loose and uncovered, thus making a symbolic departure from the rules of modesty that have traditionally governed most South Asian cultures. Additionally, and by no means incidentally, the protagonist describes the "curls of [her] thick black hair" as "unruly snakes" (Syal 1998, 98) and this calls to mind the Greco-Roman figure of Medusa and, more importantly, feminist reassessments of this figure as a liberatory female icon (Cixous [1975] 1976). Intriguingly, snakes are also central to Hindu iconography and, considering Syal's recurrent use of Indian intertexts in "The Traveller," it is plausible

to link the appearance of the winged protagonist to some representations of the Hindu Goddesses Kali and Chamunda—the serpent tends to be part of their iconography and they are often garlanded with items and tokens similar to those hanging from the belt worn by the protagonist of Syal's story.

Thus arrayed, the winged protagonist begins her journey across the lands of the wingless and her dressed body soon creates havoc in the first land she comes to—and here one cannot but be reminded of Qaisra Shahraz's seminal short story "A Pair of Jeans" (1988), where Miriam's body, dressed in a pair of tight jeans and revealing vest, creates gender and ethnic trouble (Pereira-Ares 2019, 152-61). In this first land, ostensibly located somewhere in the Indian subcontinent, the winged protagonist finds a society that upholds a deeply entrenched patriarchal system, where the seeds of feminism have not yet sprouted and women remain silent, their dressed bodies turned into passive receptacles of male-inscribed meanings. As the protagonist pictures it, this land is inhabited by women "whose wings had been clipped by the blind slavekeepers many centuries ago" (Syal 1988, 100); women who do not dare to venture out from their doorways, for outside there are men ready to "throw stones and shout in their deep, gruff voices" (100). Coerced by fear, these women do not listen to the songs of freedom intoned by the protagonist and, consequently, her voice goes largely unheard in this land. Her chants are deemed "poisonous, subversive, unwomanly" (100) and, derided as a "half-man devil" (100), she is also accused of dressing immodestly: her walking boots are deemed "too masculine," her dress "too vulgar" and her hairstyle "too provocative" (99). To the detriment of her mobility, she is impelled to change or rearrange her clothes: she ties up her hair, substitutes her "boots for ordinary open-toed sandals" and rearranges her robe "so that my legs were entirely covered" (99-100). Wishing to continue her sojourn across this territory, the winged protagonist gives in to the policing of her dressed body and Syal's story thus exposes the sartorial strictures often imposed on women and their clothed bodies. At the crux of this matter, as different scholars have already pointed out (Chatterjee 1993; Kandiyoti 1994), is the construction of the female (dressed) body as the cultural signifier par excellence, one on which notions of tradition, culture and even family honour have been written and rewritten over the course of history. Indeed, in Syal's "The Traveller," the supposedly immodest clothes of the protagonist are said to pose a challenge not just to a certain ideal of womanhood, but also to the whole culture of the land in general and to someone's "izzat" in particular (Syal 1988, 100). The concept of *izzat* is thus presented in the text as a regulatory mechanism that patriarchal discourse effectively deploys to exert control over women and their bodies, being ultimately aimed at discouraging women "from crossing patriarchal boundaries and breaking out of prescribed moulds of femininity" (Wilson 2006, 12). Interestingly, the conflation between patriarchy and tradition that Syal denounces here also surfaces in her second novel, *Life*, equally being conveyed through reference to the female dressed body (Pereira-Ares 2018, 139). For example, in a sartorially evocative passage, Chila, who is a priori the most naïve character in

the novel, vividly exposes the burden that this conflation has always imposed on her: "[Chila felt] her dupatta heavy on her shoulders, yoke of ages, transparent as air, heavier than iron, a woman's modesty symbolised by a scrap of silk, izzat [...] a family's honour is carried by its daughter" ([1999] 2000b, 202). A crucial moment in Chila's feminist awakening, this episode provides further evidence of the points of continuity that exist between "The Traveller" and *Life*; this stresses, in turn, the importance of reassessing the traces that this short story has left on Syal's later work.

The parallels between the feminist agenda underlying "The Traveller" and *Life* are even more prominent if we examine the situation that the protagonist of Syal's short story encounters in the second land she visits. As mentioned earlier, this land is arguably located in Britain in an unspecified area of South Asian diasporic settlement—the South Asian cultural notion of "shame" and the related concept of "gossip" providing evidence in this respect. Thus, "The Traveller" compares and contrasts the plight of women in the Indian subcontinent and the situation of South Asian women in the diaspora, whilst simultaneously allowing other women to identify themselves with the female characters that populate the narrative. In this second land, the protagonist of "The Traveller" finds a situation that is different, more varied and, a priori, more positive in terms of female empowerment: here, women are part of the public sphere and they work side by side with men. However, on closer inspection, she realises that the shoulders of these women are "not arched to support the span of two wings but hunched to bear up the weight of their guilt" (1988, 101). This guilt, she goes on to surmise, has its roots in "a wingless man, a father, a brother, most often a lover, [who] would bleat out for the comfort of a female hand, [who] would point accusing fingers at neglected children, [who] would issue warnings about the gossip going on behind closed doors" (101). Being more subtle and indirect, this form of patriarchal control is more difficult to detect and, as a result, the protagonist of "The Traveller" judges the plight of these women as being "the hardest of all" (101). Interestingly, there is a conspicuous parallelism between the allusion to "neglected children" in the above quotation and Sunita's fear of becoming the "absent mother in the scarlet dress" in *Life* ([1999] 2000b, 72), with this "scarlet dress" conjuring up the notion of the "fallen" or "loose" woman (Pereira-Ares 2018, 133). Both Sunita and the unnamed woman in "The Traveller" live under the guise of a false egalitarianism that proves, deceptively, to be both welcoming and, equally, constraining. In the end, both characters are subjected to a patriarchal schema whereby the female body is mainly associated with nourishment and domesticity—hence the "accusing fingers at neglected children" (1988, 101). Any challenge to the prescribed roles of wifehood and motherhood triggers a patriarchal response whereby notions of deviant female behaviour are adduced, with each of these female characters being likely to appear as "the bad Indian woman" within the Asian community ([1999] 2000b, 21) and thus become the target of malicious gossip.

Such complexities are further explored in *Life* through the character of Tania, the most feminist-aware of the three protagonists; more importantly, they are explored

in such a way that it is impossible to ignore the traces left by “The Traveller” in the novel. Thus, while criticising the institution of marriage, Tania claims that, “in the outside world,” many of her British-Asian friends “fly on home-grown wings,” but their “Armani suit shrinks and crumples away” as soon as they reach the domestic sphere (146). As I have argued elsewhere (2018, 139), Syal thus intertwines a sartorial metaphor with the metaphorical pairing flying/freedom, the same nexus that drives the development of “The Traveller.” The home-grown wings represent the alleged freedom these female characters enjoy as British Asian women nurtured in an ostensibly liberal society, Britain. But the fact that their Armani suit—their public side—dwindles at home suggests that in their private marital lives their individuality is overtaken, if not annihilated, by their roles as wives and mothers. Of course, these conflicting demands are also problematic for women other than those from South Asia and, in this respect, *Life* reveals a certain myopia. Focused as it is on the South Asian female experience and being so specifically denunciatory, Syal’s novel passes over the multiple ways in which South Asian patriarchy intersects with, for instance, Western patriarchal ideologies. In contrast, due to its allegorical mode and its strategic mechanism of simultaneously giving and reining in cultural details, “The Traveller” allows for a broader spectrum of identifications, even though the South Asian experience is obviously placed at the centre of the text.

Going back to “The Traveller,” in the second territory she visits, the nameless protagonist does find women who are willing to listen to her songs of freedom, and some of them even make “plans for a future flying career” (1988, 101). During the month she spends here, the winged protagonist befriends a young woman who is more than eager to listen to her chants, albeit clandestinely. This nameless girl—a South Asian girl, as we later find out—has always felt “the longing to explore, grow, [and] fly” (103). Yet, she has kept this longing a secret, fearing her mother’s reaction and, even worse, the possibility of being punished by her “father and brothers” (103), who represent the embodiment of patriarchal authority. In a passage that reveals some lesbian innuendo and thus recalls Namjoshi’s lesbian fables, the protagonist of Syal’s story “massage[s]” her disciple’s “shoulder blades,” where “two perfect brown stumps” begin to sprout (103). Eventually, the protagonist manages to dissipate this young woman’s fears and reassures her that, in the near future, she will not be alone: “the wingless ones” will be “in the minority” (103)—it is even tempting here to discern an echo to John Lennon’s chant for hope in “Imagine” (1971). When her time to depart finally arrives, the protagonist of “The Traveller” says farewell to her disciple, promising to return one day in order to see her progress. In so doing, she transgresses two of her main maxims: in disregard of her mother’s advice, she does act as a “leader,” and she also contravenes the “unwritten rule that I would not visit any place more than once” (101). The narrative then jumps in time, and the protagonist tells of her return to this very same spot, where her old friend, now a grown woman, has become an outcast. As she explains, soon after the protagonist’s departure, she was forced into

an arranged marriage to "a sixty-year-old tailor" (105). For years, she stoically stayed with her husband, but one day she realised that her shoulders had become "hunched to carry the weight of [her] duties instead of being arched to support the span of [her] wings" (105). So she left and rumours soon spread that she had brought "shame" on her family (104). Now she lives in the woods, away from her family and community, and it is precisely there, in the liminal space of the wilderness, that she meets the protagonist again, but now she reemerges defiant, combative and Black:

"You go," she said. "Go and sing your songs and wait for the miracle to happen. I fly by night to other towns and sometimes even the cities and I sing my own songs and over the time we have been apart I have met and trained one hundred others like me. We do not wait [...]." In one single fluid leap she was up and gone; the last I saw of her were the *black* sails of her glorious wings as she crossed the impassive face of the moon. (105; italics added)

Unravelling the allegory, one could argue that the ending of "The Traveller," for all its ambiguities and metaphors, is intended to enunciate the coming into being of Black British feminism, with the black sails of the protagonist's former disciple being all the more meaningful in this respect. This argument gains strength when one considers the period in which Syal wrote the story—the 1980s—and the anthology in which it appeared—*Right of Way*, edited by the AWWW. For, in effect, as Ruvani Ranasinha explains (2015, 247), the AWWW—later renamed as the Asian Women Writers Collective—was not simply interested in feminist politics; its members also forged connections with a number of antiracist and antisexist collectives formed by Black and Asian feminists, most notably the Southall Black Sisters (1979). What is more, the militant action and combative attitude espoused by the protagonist's former disciple also commune with the "grassroots political action" (Ranasinha 2015, 231) adopted by Black and Asian feminists in Britain during the 1970s and 1980s. In effect, both Ranasinha and Wilson (1978) read the period and, in particular, the strike at the Grunwick Film Processing Laboratories (1976-1978) as having marked a turning point in the (re)presentation of South Asian women in Britain. During this strike, for the first time, these women stood up for their rights as both workers and citizens, abandoning their previous stoicism and resilience and thus exploding the stereotype of the passive Asian woman. Tellingly, the protagonist's former disciple has also set aside her stoic wait and taken action—"We do not wait" (1988, 105). Furthermore, in a text where the personal and political are inherently linked, the ideological metamorphosis undergone by this nameless woman can even be read alongside Syal's own process of self-discovery as regards identity politics:

Having started off with the accepted landmarks of feminist thought: Germaine Greer's *Female Eunuch*, Kate Millet's *Sexual Politics* and Simone de Beauvoir's *Second Sex*, I finally located works which dealt specifically with the Asian woman's experience. Such as Gail

Omvedt's *We Will Smash This Prison* and the brilliant and painful *Finding My Voice* by Amrit Wilson [...]. Fired by this process of self-discovery I had found my cause and my creativity with it. (2000, 254)

As Syal acknowledges in “Finding My Voice”, the essay from which the above excerpt is taken, as well as in an interview entitled “Influences” (1996), becoming acquainted with Black feminism, both its British and American versions, was crucial for her development as a woman and a writer—“it made me realise feminism was not a western invention” (1996, 1).

When examining the ending of “The Traveller,” one cannot overlook the words of reprobation that the protagonist's former disciple addresses to her mentor at one point: “You massaged my wings into being but you left me no map to your land. You filled my head with dreams of soaring free but you left me living here amongst the wingless ones” (1988, 104). Underlying these powerful words is arguably a critique of the universalising tendencies behind much Western feminist discourse as well as a cautionary remark regarding the limits of a “global sisterhood” (Morgan 1984a, 4). Just as Ien Ang does, this nameless woman foregrounds the “communication barriers” amongst feminists as well as the existence of cultural specificities that should be acknowledged rather than obviated “in the name of an idealised unity” (2001, 181). Acting both as a mentor and a leader to this nameless woman, the protagonist of the story chanted to her songs of female freedom that came from an idealised and far-away place, songs that were also intoned from the vantage point she occupied. Her disciple absorbed these songs willingly and hopefully, but she soon realised they did not provide answers to the particularities of her experience as a British-Asian woman—a woman on whose body issues of gender, class and ethnicity intersect, and who is subjected to at least “two sets of gender relations, that of the host country and that of the ethnic community” (Kalra et al. 2005, 51). The text makes this apparent through the inclusion of certain cultural practices that are embedded in South Asian culture and that the winged protagonist seems to have glossed over, most notably the custom of arranged marriages, which is often disparaged as a “feudal residue” by Western liberalism, rather than being addressed as one of the ways “in which a particular sex/gender system organizes the ‘exchange of women’” (Carby 1997, 50-51).

The text thus exposes the lacunae of the protagonist's feminist project, a project which, emerging from a privileged centre and adopting a highly universalising stance, stands for Western feminism and its often inherent Western-centrism. Indeed, in none of the lands does the winged protagonist succeed completely, and part of her failure seems to stem from the fact that she simply divides women into two monolithic groups—the winged and the wingless—without considering the particular complexities and the different “sex/gender systems” (Rubin 1975, 167) that affect the lives of the various women she comes across. Furthermore, the winged protagonist practices a feminism that is highly theoretical and she seldom takes into account the level of community and

the way patriarchal structures operate within it. As the protagonist's former disciple highlights in this respect, her head was once filled with "dreams of soaring free," but she "was left living amongst the wingless ones" (1988, 104) who stand for a South Asian diasporic community that continues to live by patriarchal values and ossified notions of Asian womanhood. Redefining these notions *from within*, the text implies, is crucial in order to achieve female liberation and thus avoid confining women to fettered existences from which escape might result in ostracism, as indeed happens to the protagonist's disciple—she has become a feminist activist, but she has to carry out her activism clandestinely, in the woods and under a sky always presided over by the "moon" (105). All this notwithstanding, and as we have seen, her condition as an outcast is endowed with a liberating potential in the text: she has freed herself from patriarchal structures as well as from the patronising indoctrination of her mentor, and is now able to "sing my own songs" and "train [...] one hundred others like me" (105). From this perspective, the protagonist's feminist project has not been entirely unsuccessful, as it has ploughed the soil in which new seeds have grown. Likewise, the text does not utterly reject the notion of a global sisterhood, but it certainly questions its limits—especially in view of its often Western-centric basis—and advocates the need to forge more particularised bonds of solidarity amongst women and, in particular, amongst South Asian women living on both sides of the East-West divide.

As Hazel V. Carby asserted, allowing for "specificity, whilst at the same time providing cross-cultural reference points—not based on assumptions of inferiority—are urgently needed [gestures] in feminist work" (1997, 51) and, both ethically and aesthetically, this is arguably the final message underlying Syal's "The Traveller." Of course, this observation might seem too obvious, or even dated, in a postmodern context where the existence of multiple feminisms is recognised, at least in theory, though not always in practice. However, back in the 1980s, when Syal wrote "The Traveller," many of these multiple feminisms were still in their infancy, including what is known as Black British feminism. At that time, and in addition to the work of academics and activists such as Wilson (1978) and Carby (1997), Black and Asian women writers played a fundamental role, not only because of their involvement in feminist politics, but also because their writings often crisscrossed the boundary between literature and social activism. Syal's "The Traveller," like the anthology in which it was published, *Right of Way*, certainly occupies this liminal space between theory and practice, literary creativity and political activism. However, literary criticism has so far failed to assess the importance of this short story both within Syal's oeuvre and beyond it. As this contribution has attempted to demonstrate, rescuing "The Traveller" from critical neglect does not simply throw some light on the multiple traces that this short story has left on Syal's novelistic output—in particular on her second novel, *Life*—it also implies recovering one of those missing links to the social and political history of Black women's writing in Britain. For, whilst exposing the limits of a sisterhood grounded on a Western-centric universalism, the feminist allegory in "The Traveller" also emerges as

a site of enunciation, dramatisation and theorisation of Black British feminism. This is so much so that its ending even lends itself to being read as a call for social activism; in this respect, “The Traveller” certainly communes with the ethos behind the anthology in which it appeared. Suffice it to quote here the last lines in the introduction to *Right of Way*: “We [AWWW] could share the skills we have picked up over the last few years with women who want to start groups in other parts of the country. Some of us are willing to *travel* to help in any way we can” (1988, 6; italics added).¹

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