CONFINING SPACES, RESISTANT SUBJECTIVITIES: TOWARD A METACHRONOUS DISCOURSE OF LITERARY MAPPING AND TRANSFORMATION IN POSTCOLONIAL WOMEN'S WRITING

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Abstract

This thesis takes as its starting point Chandra Talpade Mohanty's argument that it is the *way* in which "Third World" women's narratives are read and understood that is crucial, together with the need to locate them contextually. My original contribution to knowledge is to develop a deconstructive, cultural analysis through the re–reading of a selection of core postcolonial women's texts written in former colonial societies, at a time prior to the full emergence of *postcolonialism* as a set of theoretical concepts and before *feminism* had developed its major contribution to academic scholarship. These theories are examined in the first three chapters of the thesis. This re–reading is of texts which arguably prefigured in many ways some of the main debates later articulated in postcolonial feminist criticism, thus (re–)interpreting them through a contemporary, critical lens. The objective of the textual analysis, among other things, is to underline the function of literary mapping in postcolonial women's writing and the ways in which this resonates with key issues in postcolonial feminist studies. For example, the texts subvert the figure of the "universal woman" challenged by several critics, undermine images of women's sameness, and transform marginalising spaces such as prison and home into sites of possible resistance. Overall, the main contribution of this thesis is twofold. Firstly, the interpretation of postcolonial women's writing as a metachronous discourse of literary mapping in order to reclaim rather than deny the difference and complexity inherent in women's texts and identities. This lends a wider dimension to the literary representations of women and justifies my attempt to order the texts as following an inverted rite of passage. Secondly, this thesis demonstrates that postcolonial women's writing constitutes a discourse of literary activism and a cultural archive of prismatic female narratives which demands a responsive reading of the texts. This is to form a collective, critical consciousness from which, it is hoped, present and future communities of women can learn to change their lives.

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I thank Allah for completing the research project successfully.

I wish to dedicate this thesis to the dearest person in my life; to Waseela, my late grandmother.

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Contents

Chapter One

Introduction

> The existence of *Third World women's narratives* in itself is not evidence of decentering hegemonic histories and subjectivities. It is the *way* in which they are read, understood, and located institutionally which is of *paramount importance*. After all, the point is not just "to record" one's history of struggle, or consciousness, but how they are recorded; the *way* we read . . . such imaginative records is immensely significant. It is this very question of *reading*, *theorizing*, and *locating these writings* that I touch on. (Mohanty, "Cartographies" 34; emphasis added)

I begin this thesis with Mohanty's words which direct attention to the presence of literature by Third World women. As a female lecturer of English literature in a Third World culture (Syria), I find the strategy of reading women's literature recommended by Mohanty to be a particularly useful one. For this reason, I go beyond Mohanty's argument in order to situate the reading strategy in a contemporary, critical context by engaging with a deconstructive, contextual analysis of a selection of postcolonial women's texts in conjunction with postcolonial feminist debates.

Mohanty's argument foregrounds a specific way of reading postcolonial women's narratives such as Erna Brodber's *Jane and Louisa Will Soon Come Home* (henceforth *JL*, 1980), Mariama Bâ's *So Long a Letter* (*SLL*, 1982 [1979]), Jean Rhys's *Wide Sargasso Sea* (*WSS*, 1982 [1966]), Mahasweta Devi's "Breast–Giver" ("BG," 1987 [1980]), Buchi Emecheta's *The Joys of Motherhood* (*JM*, 1994 [1979]), and Nawal El Saadawi's *Woman at Point Zero* (*WPZ*, 1983 [1975]) which are analysed in this thesis. These texts highlight diverse themes and structural modes of representations which connect with issues of female specificity, marginality, difference, choice, and agency. Moreover, they underline Donna Haraway's concept of "situated knowledges" which argues that there is no one truth to be uncovered and that all knowledge is partial and connected to the variable contexts which create it (583). By this I refer to the point that what it means to be a

woman depends on the narrative contexts which expose rather than mask the powers affecting women. Therefore, how we approach a woman's narrative is important, as will be argued in this chapter.

Accordingly, this thesis develops a deconstructive, cultural reading of the aforementioned texts which are re–read in conjunction with recent theoretical debates through a contemporary, critical lens. The texts are written in former colonial societies and are contextually located and contested. They are brought into a shared conjuncture in this thesis, namely literary representations of women's experiences of oppression. However, the analysis of the texts underscores women's potential to articulate their situations in order to defy obstacles and to be agents of change. This underlines women's aspiration toward something new, which relates to the present time—toward changing their lives and coming to terms with their bodies and voices. As such, the selected texts share another (revisionary) layer, namely female resistance. This suggests that resistance is a complementary part of oppression and is inseparable from the intertwined subject–object position of the female characters. The layer does not link female oppression to powerlessness as a fixed condition in women's lives; rather, it articulates agency out of confining spaces and practices.

Locating moments of resistance has encouraged my analysis of the female characters' varied responses to what oppresses them through spatial mapping. This, in some instances, has helped develop sites of agency from uncommon actions such as posthumous silence, madness, and imprisonment. The objective of the textual analysis, among other things, is to map spaces of female resistance and agency. These spaces vary between prison (El Saadawi's *WPZ*), motherhood (Bâ's *SLL*, Emecheta's *JM*, and Devi's "BG"), sexuality (Brodber's *JL*), madness (Rhys's *WSS*), and female writing (Bâ's *SLL* and El Saadawi's *WPZ*), out of which oppression and resistance are mapped thematically and structurally. In doing so, I attempt to avoid the pitfalls of homogenising the subject(s) of the research.

The linking point of the selected texts revolves around different stages of women's lives such as adolescence, marriage, motherhood, and widowhood. Although it is shared by the texts, the conjuncture is treated differently by the authors because the texts are

culturally located and analysed. This is why the shared conjuncture gets more complicated by the power relations affecting women, and by the fact that degrees of agency and choice of action between the principal female figures also differ. As a result, the selected works offer different narrative conclusions which are not always about (female) liberation as the term "postcolonial" may denote. Such differences denote the metachronous aspect of postcolonial women's writing which neither adopts a monolithic structural mode of representation nor focuses on a single narrative of oppression/transition. They also underline the potential of the narratives to be operative temporarily and spatially in the past, at present, and in the future in order to inspire change, and this justifies my attempt to re–visit the selected texts.

Textual and contextual differences lend a wider dimension to the epistemology of women from developing countries and to the project of postcolonial women's writing. As the textual analysis will demonstrate, the selected authors create several resistant/confining female spaces as a way of speaking and being. Besides, they represent diverse identities and histories and speak with different and even conflicting voices, all of which are acknowledged and heard. This signals a key aspect of the research, namely the need to approach the texts as artefacts constructed from various authorial positions, social contexts, and women's standpoints, thereby developing a rich cultural and literary archive of women's voices and stories.

The thesis also examines how women's texts are sites for the representation, contestation, and reconstruction of female bodies and voices. Gender, class, race, language, and education, among other issues, constitute women's texts and contribute to their complexity and difference.[1] One of my aims is to expose this intersectionality in a woman's text in order to recognise the presence of dynamic, complex relationships between women and their communities, and the fact that knowledge about women is varied, shifting, and situated as are their identities and degrees of agency. This underlines that the selected writers differently position their principal female characters in relation to the texts and that modes of representing women's narratives and the socio–political contestations embedded within them help determine the choice of the reading strategies such as the deconstructive, cultural analysis of this thesis.

Oppositional, instructive, and reconstructive, the texts raise debates which resonate with key issues in postcolonial feminist studies. For example, the texts deconstruct the figure of the "universal woman" challenged by several critics, as will be argued in Chapter Three. Also, they undermine images of women's sameness, interrupt the dominant gaze, and transform marginalising spaces such as prison and home into sites of disruption. This is why the textual analysis accentuates the "insistence on irreducible difference and radical multiplicity of local knowledges" (Haraway 579). However, the focus on particularities is not seen as more emancipatory than other modes of representation because this can constitute an "insurmountable obstacle to building female bonds" within and across cultures (Dubek 201). This acknowledges the presence of similarities and differences between both the texts and the female characters analysed in the coming chapters.

With the above–mentioned points in mind, this chapter introduces the theoretical and methodological debates raised in this thesis. The chapter discusses the usefulness of the deconstructive, cultural approach in order to specify the guiding spirit of this thesis. Indeed, what is important in literary analysis is not only to expound on how we read (women's) texts but also to justify which texts to read and engage with. This explains why a rationale is presented for the choice of the literary texts and of the feminist theoretical debates which have helped formulate the research topic. Finally, the thesis structure is outlined in order to give an idea about the content of the following chapters.[2]

Research methodology

Mohanty's argument in the previous section relates to the deconstructive, cultural methodology of this thesis in so far as it makes me "hear different [female] voices" (McWilliams 255). In other words, a deconstructive, cultural approach to the selected texts undermines interpretative approaches which produce enclosed, homogeneous textual readings.

Homogeneous interpretations blind us as researchers to the varied modes of representing female oppression and resistance which the texts, individually and

collectively, develop. This makes the image of the kumbla that features in Brodber's *JL* useful in describing the selected texts. At times restrictive and at others open, the kumbla is a shell behind which a weak personality hides to avoid "outside threats" (O'Callaghan, "Interior" 107), but when used properly, the kumbla becomes a device of transformation.

Describing postcolonial women's texts as kumblas underlines the potential of the texts to reclaim women's bodies/voices and to restructure society in order to make it more hospitable to women. Inspirational and open kumblas, the selected texts cross identity boundaries in order to expose, destabilise, and transform. This necessitates distinct and interrelated readings which are attentive to the risks of being enclosed in a totalising frame of interpretation. Therefore, deconstruction, according to Jacques Derrida, requires alternative approaches to critical practices because it "put[s] into practice a reversal of the classical opposition and a general displacement of the system. It is on that condition alone that deconstruction will provide the means of intervening in the field of oppositions it criticizes" (qtd. in Emberley xiv). Deconstruction appropriates binaries in order to enable the play of diverse modes of representation.

This suggests that the research methodology makes room for a renewed vision of reading whose objective of reconstruction and difference "targets not only the fictional domain, the telling of a story and the narration of history . . . but also the cultural context of the narrative . . . [which is] *pluralistic*, *polyphonic*, and *intertwined*" (Lionnet 173; emphasis added). The vision relates not only to non–Western women whom the texts represent but also to Western readers. As Cora Kaplan recommends, Western readers of postcolonial women's texts must acquaint themselves with specific cultural contexts as an aspect of postcolonial reading (qtd. in Wisker, *Post–Colonial* 7). This helps readers avoid the trap of cultural relativism and imperialism which makes us teach and think about the texts through "an unintentionally imperialist lens, conflating their progressive politics with our own agendas, interpreting their versions of humanism through the historical evolution of our own" (7). In other words, readers of postcolonial literature need to deal with it as indicative of cultural specificities that may not always reflect or represent their cultures and worldviews. This challenges monolithic, imperialist visions which blind readers to contextual analysis.[3]

Within a deconstructive, cultural reading of postcolonial women's texts, female characters defined by marginality and oppression become agents of change and opposition. The reading necessitates that the protagonists, despite being variably oppressed, can be seen as agents, "never finally as slave to the master that closes off the dialectic in his unique agency and his authorship of 'objective knowledge'" (Haraway 592). In line with Haraway, Peter Hitchcock invites readers to rethink women's stories and places in postcolonial contexts (79). For Hitchcock, readers should "look" at and hear, rather than "gaze" at, "Other" female voices and narratives because the look, unlike the "diabolical" gaze, disrupts hierarchies and connotes solidarity, "reciprocity and a condition of agency" (79).

An oppositional, deconstructive weapon, the "look" disrupts the patriarchal and colonial gaze which invents oppressive female spaces/ margins and defines them as ahistorical, fixed, and absolute. Thus, the distinction between the "look" and the "gaze" is a socio–ethical responsibility of critics and writers because it encourages them to undermine any attempt to objectify women (Amireh and Suhair Majaj 6; Katrak 249). For Obioma Nnaemeka, the "look" in postcolonial contexts functions as plural, hybrid "eyes ('I's) . . . that support me . . . that watch over, protect and empower me; they are not the eyes that gaze at me in dominance" ("Imag(in)ing" 6). In other words, the "look" instigates acts of challenge, response, and solidarity among women. A practice common in literary studies is to apply theory to texts; nevertheless, it is productive to see how theory and knowledge arise from literature by women from diverse postcolonial cultures. This refers to the generative function of the selected texts which is integral to their interpretation.

The selected texts give a fresh dimension to theoretical speculations about women and representation in so far as they theorise and generate knowledge about several female experiences, writing styles, and the societies which the writers represent and criticise. This helps develop a base for analysing postcolonial women's writing as engaged in a quest for interpretative knowledges about women and for strategies of change. As Elleke Boehmer argues, postcolonial women writers use such strategies in order to challenge the dominance of Western theory, where "a way of reading or a theory is suggested in the

form of the story . . . a text may invite an oppositional reading by wrenching colonialist conventions, or reworking Europe's defining narratives" (*Colonial* 249).

For instance, the thread uniting the texts analysed in this thesis is women's plural experiences of oppression and resistance. However, this thematic link is treated differently by the writers because it signals diversity, specificity, and connection among women. Besides, it reconceptualises race, class, gender, and other discourses which are under–theorised by many Western feminist and nationalist studies (Grewal and Kaplan 5; Boehmer, *Stories* 7). In sum, a deconstructive, cultural analysis encourages me to "look" at the selected texts; that is, to engage with a plural reading of the texts which function as vehicles moving across borders, with diverse female experiences and standpoints as their fuel. This highlights the multipositionality of female identities and the synthetic nature of postcolonial cultures which engender plural readings and, in some cases, re–readings of women's texts, thereby allowing a dialogic process of reading to occur between the texts and the reader/the researcher.

Choice of theories and literary texts

The focus on feminist debates developed from the 1980s onwards, and on postcolonial women's narratives written between 1966 and 1980, does not mean "primarily to reason one's way back into the past, but to have a present involvement in what is said" (Gadamer 393). Returning to the selected debates and texts in this thesis does not suggest that they have become textbooks of the past which readers and students can simply read. Although the debates and the texts are specific to their times and cultures, they are texts which still need to be considered by present and future generations as relevant today, and in a sense, to be re–read in conjunction with recent theoretical debates. It is this (metachronous) re–reading which constitutes the principal argument of the thesis.

The selected feminist debates bring to the fore issues of specificity and diversity in the analysis of female oppression which intersects with issues of complexity and difference in representing women. It is important to mention that some of the theoretical debates occur in postcolonial women's writing which has the potential to theorise transformation

in literary forms. This justifies the objective of drawing upon a number of feminist debates which also informed the selection of postcolonial women's texts in order to develop the research subject, as will be discussed in Chapter Three.

The texts to be analysed are of value because they still speak to us today. They are culturally specific; nonetheless, they are related to each other through the interlocking of identity layers, concerns, and writing objectives. This interrelatedness locates differences and inequalities not only between men and women but also among women, thereby stressing that the female characters analysed in the coming chapters do not neatly align with a fixed, coherent female image or experience. Another aspect of the texts is their potential to theorise a multitude of women's stories. Some of the selected texts such as Rhys's *WSS* (1966) date from a period which precedes or anticipates most of the theoretical discussions.

Rhys's *WSS*, which is an example of revisionary writing, shows that the act of telling the unspoken text shifts from the Western female self in Charlotte Brontë's *Jane Eyre* (*JE*) to the white Creole woman (Antoinette) in Rhys's text. This example stresses that Rhys's *WSS* as a postcolonial text anticipates Edward Said's theoretical debates regarding how the perspective of the "Other" is absent from texts which are deemed valid and normative because they reflect the European Self and culture (*Orientalism* 66). It also suggests that the texts have been selected to demonstrate that literature can be seen as a pioneer, in some respects, to the extent that it raises in narrative forms many of the issues which were to later form the basis of theoretical debates. Therefore, literature not only reflects philosophical ideas but also can be a forerunner of "explicit" theory.

The selected texts narrate different stories of female oppression and resistance and come from diverse geographical and cultural locations such as Africa, South Asia, and the Caribbean; nonetheless, they are not confined to their time and space and this highlights the metachronous aspect of postcolonial women's writing. Also, the texts differ in their language as a medium of writing because Brodber's *JL*, Emecheta's *JM*, and Rhys's *WSS* are originally written and read in English, whereas Bâ's *SLL*, El Saadawi's *WPZ*, and Devi's "BG" are read as English translations in this thesis because they are written in foreign languages such as French (*SLL*, first published as *Une si longue lettre* in 1979), Arabic

(*WPZ*, first published as *Imra'a 'ind Nuqtat El Sifr* in 1975), and Bengali ("BG," first published as "Stanadayini" in 1980).

In the first instance, the texts have been approached by several critics and scholars as discrete, individual texts; however, I bring the texts together in an overall argument that is deconstructive and culturally situated. This highlights the metachronous aspect of postcolonial women's narratives and its potential to constitute a rich reservoir of diverse female voices through acts of literary mapping. Because the textual analysis situates women in a "heterospace . . . replete with social, political, racial, sexual, economic, religious, and spatial diversity and inequalities" (Robolin 84), it resists a discursive production whose dehistoricising and universalising tendencies claim to speak for the whole. These tendencies reduce socio–cultural conflicts to a "Manichean" binary opposition of coloniser/colonised and male/female (JanMohamed 19). The result of these oppositions will be the erasure of female narratives and voices that are constitutive of that whole. For example, while Bâ's and Brodber's texts end with female empowerment and transformation, Devi's and El Saadawi's texts end with female death despite instances of agency which the protagonists show. The significance arising from this example relates to the fact that the writers focus on the complex experiences and identities of women, out of which their narratives and visions emerge. Besides, several themes and modes of representation are inspired by the writers' revisionary impulse which Emecheta insists on as "integral . . . in the decolonization project" (qtd. in Japtok xxv).

From another perspective, the continued, purposeful engagement with theories and texts about women from developing countries is central to this thesis. It points to a politicised female urgency which still finds in political, socio–cultural, and academic spheres a context of durability and relevance. This underscores the potential to handle female transition in a contemporary world that is still, in many cases, (neo)colonial and patriarchal. Therefore, the choice of the texts does not point to their unquestioned sameness but is tied to specific contexts and to different meanings of the postcolonial experience.

Besides, the texts provide insights into women's subjective experiences and standpoints which cannot be provided by male texts, journalism, news, or science. This is

due to the fact that postcolonial writing by women represents them as speaking subjects and agents of change and negotiation despite their oppression. These insights are about the presence of women (writers) as having different experiences and stories to share, "all moving under pressures, undergoing becomings, and venturing new belongings . . . driven more by desires than needs, in the directions of accumulations and excesses" (Reynolds v). While socio–political and cultural realities shape and circumscribe a woman's life, literature by women works against the confines of these realities in order to map spaces of agency and negotiation.

As a result, Brodber, Bâ, Rhys, Devi, Emecheta, and El Saadawi write back to a literary tradition and to a society which construct them as "Other" due to their gender (and mixed race as in the case of Rhys). They share a colonial history, however different in its formation, and a project of literary decolonisation which deploys different themes and structural styles. These shared aspects provide another connection point. Although Western colonisation has affected women differently in various locations, the authors/texts share the similarity of criticising several modes of internal or local colonisation, however differently treated. This helps identify other factors of female oppression such as tradition, patriarchy, sexuality, gendered national roles, employment, and colonial education.

Female transition and resistance can be attained through the written word where subversive practices and elements reside. By recourse to writing with its complexity and heterogeneity, the selected authors are united by their transformative vision and commitment; that is, by the constructive link between writing and activism which their narratives make. Borrowing Cheryl McEwan's words, I argue that "What holds these [women writers/texts] together are similarities in their commitment to challenging cultural hegemony (be that from the West or from post–colonial elites), their commitment to anti–racism and anti–colonial politics, and their focus on matters of culture" (35). These commitments construct women's texts, experiences, and, more importantly, the type of responsive reading approach which the texts invite, such as the selected methodology of this thesis.

Integral to the choice of the texts is "the unashamed presentation of the woman's point of view" as an outlet for the expression of diverse female voices which seek transformation (Palmer 94). This comes out not only in the expression of the protagonists' experiences of oppression but also in their potential to reflect upon their situations against the systems oppressing them. This potential is manifested in Ramatoulaye's epistolary voice in Bâ's *SLL*, in Firdaus's commanding narrative voice in El Saadawi's *WPZ*, and in the process of unveiling which Jashoda and Nnu Ego undergo in Devi's "BG" and Emecheta's *JM* respectively. These examples underline the possibility of making women come to terms with their voices in order to challenge the restrictive spaces and circumstances under which they are confined, literally and figuratively.

At this point, it is possible to see the authors speaking through their principal female figures such as Emecheta's Nnu Ego, Bâ's Ramatoulaye, and El Saadawi's Firdaus. Thus, the contextual interpretation of the texts in this thesis provides answers to questions of agency which emanate from the margins of society (women). This underscores the argument that postcolonial women's lives and texts, in Jacqueline N. Glasgow's words, are not "static areas of oppression, but ones that can be contested . . . They [the texts] show that women can effectively reshape gender relations . . . [because] they are no longer left in the shadows of their male counterparts" ("Struggle" 74).

Therefore, the selected writers share a desire to decolonise, recuperate, and reclaim through their female protagonists and the various modes of representation. These modes include rewriting Western texts and histories, reconstructing women's identities and bodies, revisioning the relation between women and men, and disrupting colonial and racial practices of oppression. This authorial focus on related concerns for the benefits of women makes it possible to group the aforementioned writers together in an overall argument in this thesis. Although each work has its own distinctive features, together the texts share a common goal. They give a multivocal and multifocal voice to Third World women and question the global sisterhood model developed by some white, middle–class women (Chapter Three discusses this model).

Rather than constructing a homogeneous narrative of women's oppression, the texts are variably engaged in positing a nexus of socio–political, cultural, economic, and sexual

forces which structures society and "elucidates how such forces bear upon the [female] individuals within it" (Robolin 77). Stéphane Robolin's words show that postcolonial women's narratives do not always end with female characters celebrating their agency and liberation. As will be argued in the coming chapters, female spaces and experiences are differently lived and represented. For example, a narrative may end with empowerment and transition such as Bâ's *SLL*, with death such as Devi's "BG" and El Saadawi's *WPZ*, or with madness and ambivalence such as Rhys's *WSS*.

The diversity in representing female experiences and spaces undermines the assumption of a shared female experience of oppression/transition. Accordingly, Brodber, Bâ, Devi, Emecheta, Rhys, and El Saadawi do not seek passive conformity to their cultures. Instead, they attempt to fill a cultural, literary, and theoretical void by making women speak and narrate their experiences. Bâ's *SLL*, with its epistolary form and emerging feminist consciousness, is a case in point. It empowers Ramatoulaye to come to terms with her voice in order to narrate her experiences of betrayal and polygamy. The presence of a female narrator such as Ramatoulaye is productive for (non–Senegalese) readers of Bâ's text. It introduces them to the various values and practices of Senegalese culture and to a woman's identity that is shaped by society. This means that the selected texts re–scribe diverse female voices in history through writing in order to construct culturally specific narratives which society, traditions, the colonial legacy, and patriarchy de–scribe or fail to acknowledge and understand.

I argued earlier that the oppression of the protagonists is treated differently by the writers. Sometimes, it is read as a gesture or threshold toward change and empowerment as in the texts of Bâ and Brodber. At other times, it leads to exploitation and suffering as in the texts of El Saadawi, Devi, Rhys, and Emecheta. In both cases, the writers do not always allow their protagonists to passively accept their oppression. Rather, they offer them the possibility to embark on diverse processes of reconstruction, negotiation, and unveiling, even if these processes fail. This stresses the different narrative conclusions because there is no neat commensurability between women (writers) in postcolonial locations. It also justifies my argument that postcolonial women's writing is not a simple, homogeneous response to the feminist model of us/them.

In short, the selected texts weave diverse female stories of oppression in order to inspire change in a postcolonial world that is not always hospitable to women. The texts create alternative, resistant female spaces that counter oppressive ones, thereby arguing that postcolonial women writers and critics share feminist concerns about decolonising Third World women and envisioning a better world. Their texts and visions are relevant to our societies and to the present time because they inspire change and mobilise affect, thereby highlighting the metachronous function of the texts highlighted in this thesis. They do so through adopting different perspectives that refer to the diversity of postcolonial writing and of the female characters represented there, as will be argued in the next section.

A discussion of key terms

Because there are numerous debates regarding the usages of the terms "postcolonial," "Third World," and "feminism," I find it useful to briefly discuss the usage of these contested terms in this thesis.

Neil Lazarus argues that the term "postcolonial" was used as a historical concept in the 1970s in order to refer to the period which immediately followed decolonisation which "spoke no political desire or aspiration, looked forward to no particular social or political order" (2). Politically charged terms such as imperialism, Third–World, self–determination, and periphery were present, but "postcoloniality" did not partake in these debates (2). In this sense, the "postcolonial" was used in the 1970s as a static, historical and apolitical concept.

But things have changed since the 1970s, as have the connotations of the term "postcolonial." As Homi K. Bhabha argues, postcolonial writing challenges "holistic forms of social explanation" in order to "force . . . a recognition of the more complex cultural and political boundaries that exist on the cusp of these often opposed political spheres" (*Location* 173). Bhabha highlights the fact that the "postcolonial" has ceased to be a term that mainly denotes a historical period or category. This emphasises that ambivalence, dialogues across boundaries, and cultural differences characterise postcolonial societies

and texts such as the ones explored in this thesis. Consequently, the term "postcolonial" does not always point to what it designates; that is, the time after colonialism which is implied by the prefix "post."

Following Bhabha, I use the term "postcolonial" in this thesis as a dynamic discourse which explores pre–, neo–, and post–colonial cultures and relations rather than as a static, discrete historical period. This usage consolidates the metachronous condition or function of postcolonial women's texts, where past female narratives, such as the selected texts which were written in the twentieth century, and future visions of change are operative at present. This metachronous aspect, which is a particular feature of Brodber's *JL*, questions the concept of linear time and progress indicated by the term "postcolonial" or by the suffix "post." It also justifies the description of postcolonial women's narratives as a metachronous discourse of transformation which enables us, scholars and critics, to look back to women's texts as they teach and motivate us, and forward in order to envision a positive future. Here I refer to the function of postcolonial women's writing as a vehicle of change and to the ambivalence inherent in the term "postcolonial" which does not always signal a movement forward in order to achieve decolonisation.

Moreover, the term "postcolonial" refers to an intersubjective, plural space where dialogue becomes possible. This space is constructed by active female subjects who resist, contest, and write against the colonial moment and its discourse of domination (Lionnet 5; Sinha 1). The textual analysis and the different narrative conclusions in this thesis suggest that the "postcolonial" does not always have a shared, single meaning. As I read it, the term simultaneously denotes three inseparable meanings: a reconstructive discourse of literary mapping by postcolonial women writers, a temporal era, and an illusory condition expressed by the varied forms of female exploitation. In other words, the "postcolonial" which I read in women writers' visions expressed by recourse to writing is not always the same as the "postcolonial" they represent in their narratives, thereby pointing to the texts' metachronous aspect, as argued earlier.

For example, Bâ develops in *SLL* a strong, self–conscious female figure who is different from the weak, hesitant female figure in Rhys's *WSS* and from the traditional, submissive one in Emecheta's *JM*, although the three texts are postcolonial. This example denotes the

ambivalence of the "postcolonial" as a literary discourse on the one hand, and a lived reality on the other. Besides, it shows that women's experiences and cultures are different and so are the powers which affect them. Therefore, the experiences or circumstances in which women live do not always have the potential to empower and heal them. All this suggests that "there should be a term better than 'postcolonial' that can describe the dynamic of this collective heritage stretching across many time frames, cultures, and geographical boundaries" (Reyes, *Mothering* 2–3).

The term "postcolonial" also intersects with the terms "Third World" and "developing" in this thesis in order to negate the assumption of a homogeneous, ahistorical construct of non–Western cultures and women, thereby underlining women's differences and specificities. "Third World" is a contested term which is used interchangeably with the terms "non–Western" and "developing countries" in this thesis. Locking these terms into static categories gives a sense of monotony and fixity as well as erases the diverse social relations and meanings of women's identities, thus turning these terms against the transformative potential they ask us to acknowledge and search for when we use them (Valovirta, "Kumbla" 139).

This potential can be related to the texts explored in this thesis. Coming from diverse cultures and authorial attitudes, the texts add variety to women categorised as "Third World women" in order to counter any static sense of signification and grouping. I do not totally reject the above terms; rather, I problematise the exclusion and bias inherent in acts of categorising if they signal female homogeneity. Therefore, it is useful to deploy the terms as plural reading methods which deal with female narratives and identities in more inclusive and strategic manners. As the analysis of the female characters in this thesis will show, Third World women create a spectrum of realities, identities, and worldviews which are different, similar, and incompatible. This prismatic spectrum implies a "less 'pure' subject position than that offered in feminist discourses that simply oppose masculinity to femininity" (Blunt and Rose 7). An example of this position is the global sisterhood model which is challenged by several critics, as will be argued in Chapter Three. The model, unlike women's narratives, unifies women within one group of analysis because it attributes their oppression to patriarchy.

In order to counter this model, my analysis of the female characters underlines that women's lives cannot be contained within one form of oppression. Women are interlocked within multiple power axes such as race, class, and gender, all of which constitute their identities and responses to the surrounding world. As I argued earlier, the strategic usage of the term "Third World" to denote a dialectical encounter provides a way out of cultural homogeneity in order to challenge the attempt to locate women within fixed, ahistorical groups. In addition, it intersects with the terms "postcolonial" and "developing" in this thesis in order to construct women's narratives as historically specific yet shifting and contestable in interrelated ways. This helps avoid reductionist approaches to women's narratives and identities which interpret them as made up by one power vector such as gender. Therefore, it is necessary to theorise the connections between multiple powers and inequalities constructing women's texts. In this regard, the meaning of a woman's text and identity is "infinite and perpetually deferred, always subject to other interpretations in other socio–political contexts" (Dhamoon 26).

Also, the term "feminism" intersects with the terms "postcolonial" and "Third World women." Just as there are diverse meanings of the terms "postcolonial" and "Third World," there are several ways to practise feminism. The latter is used in this thesis to denote the presence of different women and multiple feminist concerns which are imperative in theorising Third World women's narratives. This signals the presence of several feminisms that are described as local due to their emphasis on women's specificities and differences (see Chapter Three which discusses the notion of several feminisms in relation to women's texts). As a result, the intersection of the terms "postcolonial," "feminism/feminist," and "Third World" women is a feature of the selected literary works. This intersection, to borrow Jane Bryce's words, suggests

> our arrival at another point of transition, led there . . . by the proliferation in textual strategies offered by the accumulation of [postcolonial] women writers' narratives. [Their] work of reclamation, of forcibly shifting the perspective which marginalises and excludes whatever is not amendable to the dominant discourse is valuable, essential and ongoing. (621)

Taken together, the above terms create a resistant, dialogical discourse. The objective of this discourse is to acknowledge and strengthen the links between postcolonial women's writing and feminism as a route toward female transformation.

In sum, I use the terms "postcolonial," "Third World," and "feminism" in this thesis in order to develop a more nuanced conceptualisation of female narratives and experiences which emerge from resistant margins and subjectivities. This underlines the "intercategorical complexity" and specificity of women (McCall 1773). Moreover, it points to the variable vectors which oppress, empower, and connect women, as well as to the inequities and differences between oppressed women, thereby stressing differences and similarities in modes of representing female oppression and resistance.

Thesis structure

This chapter introduces the theoretical and methodological perspectives of this thesis. Chapter Two provides a literature review which presents the research objective: why postcolonial women's writing is selected as the research subject. I begin Chapter Two with a personal statement regarding my reading of postcolonial women's writing. I then review several debates about postcolonial women's narratives in order to elaborate on their connection with the selected texts. Mainly, postcolonial women's writing is discussed as a practice which maps diverse female spaces in order to empower women while being literally and figuratively confined, thus underscoring the complexity of women's identities and narratives.

Chapter Three discusses several feminist debates which have helped inform the choice of postcolonial women's writing as the research topic. It is important to mention that this choice does not assume the dependence of postcolonial women's writing on theory in order to represent Third World women. Rather, it envisions future possibilities of meshing theory and literary writings in order to acknowledge female differences without dehistoricising them. Because writing can function as a conduit for activism and change, the chapter underlines the potential of women's writing to theorise decolonisation through a reconstructive narration of women's experiences. This explains why the model

of global sisterhood which homogenises women's oppression is appropriated. Also, the chapter discusses some terminological issues such as feminism, womanism, and feminism with a small 'f' to denote differences between Western and non–Western modes of theorising women. Finally, the chapter explores some reconstructive models in order to acknowledge women's plurality and difference as possible routes of solidarity and change.

Chapters Four to Eight engage with a deconstructive, cultural analysis of the selected texts. Before outlining the central argument of each chapter, it is necessary to rationalise the way in which the texts are ordered. Unlike other engagement with the selected texts, I borrow the concept "rites of passage" from Katrin Berndt in order to arrange the texts but with some purposeful modification, especially as the texts offer different narrative conclusions about female transition and oppression (4). Following Arnold van Gennep's characterisation of this concept, Berndt argues that rites of passage in an individual's life follow a triple sequence: "separation, when the initiates withdraw or are isolated from their relatives and/or community; transition, when they are in some kind of limbo or in–between space; and incorporation or re–integration . . . when the initiates have completed the ritual and return to their families" (4).

Nevertheless, as I can infer from the different narrative conclusions of the texts, the course of a woman's life is not always a smooth, direct experience or passage toward transition and incorporation as indicated by the aforementioned triple sequence. Rather, it is affected by diverse power structures that disrupt this sequence and complicate a woman's attempt to challenge oppression. A good example here is El Saadawi's *WPZ*, where the protagonist undergoes multiple experiences of exploitation as a daughter, as a wife, as an employee, and even as a prostitute, all of which deny her identity as a free human being.

Besides, not all the female characters analysed in this thesis successfully complete the tripartite ritual or journey because some of them end up dying as in the texts of El Saadawi, Emecheta, and Devi, or going mad as in the text of Rhys. Also, the texts, in some respects, focus on specific female rites of passage such as motherhood in Devi's "BG" and Emecheta's *JM*, widowhood and motherhood in Bâ's *SLL*, adolescence in Brodber's *JL*, and

marriage in Rhys's *WSS* and El Saadawi's *WPZ*. These rites function in this thesis as (metaphorical) spaces mapped by the writers from which particular themes, in a sense, are represented and challenged. These issues, combined with my reconstructive vision, have encouraged me to order the discussion of the texts as an inverted rite of passage. I invert the above triple rite of passage in order to start with incorporation which is read as empowerment and transformation (Brodber's *JL* and Bâ's *SLL*), transition which is read as complexity and liminality (Rhys's *WSS*), and separation which is read as death (Devi's "BG," Emecheta's *JM*, and El Saadawi's *WPZ*).

Accordingly, Chapter Four analyses Brodber's *JL* as a vivid articulation of female sexuality which is a site of physical, emotional, and intellectual tensions in the Caribbean. The tensions overlap with the linguistic and historical hybridity of Jamaica as a possible route of rebirth. The chapter also analyses the possibility of representing gender–oriented issues such as adolescence and sexual fragmentation and transformation through thematic–stylistic concerns, all of which shift from disjointed into meaningful in ways which resonate with the fragmented and recuperated personality of the protagonist.

Chapter Five analyses Bâ's *SLL* and continues to focus on contextual, stylistic, and thematic issues which relate to modes of representing female oppression and empowerment. The chapter examines the strategies adopted by women in order to defy oppressive practices such as polygamy, marital betrayal, and woman–woman oppression. These strategies include female writing, friendship, motherhood, and the selection of positive aspects of tradition and modernity. Accordingly, the chapter opens up the possibility of mapping resistant female spaces out of confining ones such as mirasse and widow confinement.

Chapter Six analyses Rhys's *WSS*, where the experience of female oppression is attributed to Antoinette's white Creole lineage. The chapter engages with a discussion of *WSS* as a postcolonial female text which acknowledges the voice of the white Creole woman silenced in Brontë's *JE*. The discussion also highlights the function of revisionary writing, the disruption of binaries and the male gaze, the plurality of narrative voices, and liminality, with emphasis on the latter because it constructs Antoinette's in–between

position and leads to her madness. The chapter reads Antoinette's madness as a mode of representation and a space of rebellion which signals a woman's reaction against her composite presence as a double outsider. The role of the mother (land) is also important because the protagonist's insecure relationship with her mother parallels her uncertainty regarding her mother country. Identity confusion is thus mediated through the use of different themes and structures such as symbols which include colours, dreams, and mirrors, all of which contribute to the artistic structure of *WSS*.

Chapter Seven analyses Devi's "BG," with an inter–thematic analysis of Emecheta's *JM* because both texts conjoin in representing motherhood as a complex site of female oppression and agency. The chapter analyses the deconstructive function of "BG" in order to represent the female body and labour as spaces of disruption which challenge specific gender–blind narratives of nationalism, Marxist feminism, and Marxist models of social change. The chapter also underlines the ambivalence attending the representation of motherhood in postcolonial women's texts. This focuses on how the anguish and the misfortune of some mothers are inflicted through the deformation of motherhood ideals and through women's adherence to traditions, hence, the notion of individual responsibility arises, where some women re–enact oppressive cultural practices. However, the chapter traces instances of resistance mapped by spaces of agency such as female labour, silence, and feminist consciousness.

Chapter Eight analyses El Saadawi's *WPZ* as a controversial representation of a rebellious woman in a patriarchal society. It examines Firdaus's oppression as tied to patriarchy, womanhood, female excision, employment, marriage, and prostitution. Nonetheless, the chapter focuses on how *WPZ* defies fixed images of female subjugation. This is illustrated by the fearless, commanding narrative voice of Firdaus which resonates with that of El Saadawi as a woman, a writer, and an ex–prisoner. Also of importance is that instances of Firdaus's resistance denote a change in the signification of prison from a patriarchal institution of female oppression into a space of enunciation and defiance, where challenging diverse modes of patriarchies are made possible.

Chapter Nine summarises the main points of each chapter and brings together the various findings from the different case study chapters. It concludes by suggesting

possible future paths for pedagogical research inspired by both my position as a lecturer of English Literature in Syria, and the value of the chosen texts for this. The selected texts and the diverse perspectives they offer, plus the different readings of them which I have explored in this thesis, are of particular value to *students of women's literature*.

Conclusion

The central argument of this chapter links the appropriateness of the deconstructive, cultural analysis approach to the overall argument of this thesis. The approach invites readers and researchers of postcolonial women's texts to reclaim different female voices through engagement with a range of texts such as outlined above. It also acknowledges the multidimensionality and specificity of women and their stories. Critical of cultural essentialism because it blinds readers to contextualised readings, the selected texts accommodate a mixture of female experiences, themes, and structural modes of representation grouped together as Third World: this is why the meanings of the terms "postcolonial," "Third World," and "feminism" are discussed.

The theme of women's plural experiences of oppression and resistance is the main thread linking the texts, and this justifies bringing them together in an overall argument in this thesis. However, this linking point is differently treated by the writers because it signals specificity, diversity, and connection between and among women/texts. This develops complex and intersectional modalities of women, as argued in this chapter. The next chapter provides a literature review of postcolonial women's writing in order to further discuss the points raised in this chapter, namely why postcolonial women's writing continues to be read today. A personal statement is provided in order to rationalise the engagement with women's narratives at present. The justification, in a sense, resonates with the attitudes of women writers and critics to whom women's writing creates several female spaces out of which oppression and resistance are articulated. The potential of female spaces to deconstruct and reformulate within the body of the text encourages me to describe postcolonial women's writing as a practice of literary mapping of female spaces that is metachronous, dynamic, and prismatic.

Notes

1. I use "race" in this thesis as a form of power and a social construct in order to denote the presence of differences between women from different locations and of relationships of (masculine) domination and (female) subordination in different socio–literary and historical contexts.

2. This thesis follows the MLA style of referencing. See *MLA Handbook*.

3. For useful strategies of reading and teaching postcolonial women's writing, see Aegerter 142–50 and McWilliams 252–83.

Chapter Two

Literature Review: Why Postcolonial Women's Writing?

As I argued in the previous chapter, this thesis develops a deconstructive, cultural analysis of a selection of postcolonial women's texts which constitute a metachronous discourse of literary mapping and transformation.[1] The chapter elaborated on the usefulness of the selected research methodology in order to engender deconstructive readings of the texts and justified the selection of texts and relevant theories. Simultaneously different and related, the texts are read in this thesis as contextualised encounters which contribute to the ambivalent representations of women's narratives and of the terminological connotations of the terms "postcolonial" and "Third World."

This chapter continues to provide more insights into the state of postcolonial women's writing in order to justify its choice as the research subject. I begin the chapter with a personal statement about reading postcolonial women's writing today as a metachronous discourse which reclaims multiple female voices through a variety of writing styles and concerns. The statement is further developed by a discussion of relevant literatures on postcolonial women's writing. The latter is described as a practice of literary mapping in order to accommodate women in history and literature and to complicate textual modes of representing female oppression and resistance, as will be argued later in this thesis.

A personal perspective

Being a woman and a lecturer of English Literature from a patriarchal, Third World culture (Syria), I have always had an interest in women's issues and rights. This has offered me the possibility of (metaphorically) traversing diverse literary and geo–cultural locations in order to read postcolonial women's writing in a special way, as argued in the previous chapter. Such a way of reading the texts in this thesis foregrounds the potential of postcolonial women's writing to function as a metachronous, complex discourse of

speaking and being. The complexity of women's texts is attributed to the different themes and styles deployed in order to narrate women's stories and to the presence of women as subjects and objects of representation.

The aforementioned points highlight the intersection of several forms of power such as race and gender which I shall examine in the construction of women's narratives and identities in the chosen texts. These, it will be argued, politicise and theorise the issues raised by the authors in order to acknowledge the function of the written word as an outlet for the expression of women's voices and for the disruption of the practices which oppress women. These voices and issues are literarily mapped because they function as "a substitute for decontexualised, ungendered, disembodied, so–called 'objective knowledge'" (Sharp 116–17). This explains why the textual analysis in the coming chapters confronts colonial issues and legacies to a greater or lesser extent and postcolonial theory is of value in analysing these features.

It is also why the textual analysis focuses extensively on race, class, and gender issues which, although they may derive from colonial ideologies and positions, are lived out through other non–postcolonial practices and conditions, such as patriarchy and tradition in El Saadawi's *WPZ*, polygamy and tradition in Bâ's *SLL*, and race and gender in Rhys's *WSS.* Hence, the texts are not merely returns to the literary and are not depoliticised; rather, they treat issues of race, gender, and class within the body of the narrative, as becomes clear from my later analysis of them. This suggests that writing by women challenges the gap created between "fiction" versus "philosophy"/"theory;" that is, the complicated situation of literature which creates fictional characters and situations located in real places and real events.

Therefore, engaging with the selected texts from various postcolonial locations buttresses my pedagogical position as a lecturer and a researcher that dependence on theory exclusively in order to promote activism and transition (among women) has its limitations. It distances us—researchers and critics—from women's experiences of exploitation and resistance, from diverse ways of representing and reclaiming the female body (for example, through widow confinement and imprisonment), and from the desire for liberation which is integral to socio–political agendas of change. This underlines the

constructive link between women's writing and activism. Besides, the selected works do not merely express new forms of domination or female margins which replace European colonialism after the alleged independence. Rather, the texts, in the words of Amal Amireh and Lisa Suhair Majaj, are not "viewed primarily as sociological treatises granting Western readers a glimpse into the 'oppression' of Third World women . . . [and] hailed as 'lift[ing] the veil' from what one reviewer called the 'unimaginable world of [Third World] women'" (7). Even when there is no clear or direct engagement with politics, postcolonial women's writing is not to be seen as less politically engaged.

The women writers under consideration in this thesis share a common objective. As literary activists, they have chosen to speak through their works of challenge and reclamation in order to defy dominant centres and narratives and to recuperate diverse female voices and bodies. For Sunita Sinha, the writers' choice signals the shift from "silence into speech [in order to create] . . . a gesture of defiance that heals, that makes new life and new growth possible. It is that act . . . 'talking back' that is no mere gesture of empty words, that is the expression of a movement from object to subject—the liberated voice" (xii). In other words, postcolonial women's writing extends my understanding of women as objects of knowledge in disciplines such as psychology and anthropology in order to deal with women as agents of change and with their varied perspectives on the postcolonial experience (Chapter Three discusses feminist models of women as agents).[2]

Historical, political, and, to some extent, theoretical writings on oppression can miss out or downplay female experiences of oppression and resistance. However, the subjective form of knowledge generated by women's narratives can counter this masculinist blind–spot. This touches on questions of literary representation or how literature by women can testify to specific suffering of women under various forms of colonisation such as sexism in postcolonial societies. It also relates to the presence of postcolonial women writers as literary activists and of their writing as an ethico–political project of ongoing emancipation from the legacies of colonialism and patriarchy, among other power structures.

As a result, the textual analysis in this thesis aims to construct a literary discourse or archive about the multifaceted epistemology of women from developing countries.

Within this discourse, postcolonial women's writing emerges as a non–linear or metachronous project which deals with change and empowerment as a movement not only forward but also backward; that is, back to multiple times and locations in which (past) women's narratives are operative at present and in the future as they teach and inspire us. This non–linear shift is evident in Brodber's *JL* which deals with female recuperation as a metachronous process determined by a woman's return to her past and her body.

These issues justify the attempt to revisit the selected texts through a contemporary lens in this thesis. The texts and the diverse readings of them explored in this thesis are of particular value to literary critics and to students of women's literature. Revisiting the texts is a matter of pedagogical and intellectual commitment to foreground the potential of postcolonial women's writing to expose and appropriate forms of female oppression in order to envision possibilities of change. This dual shift, backward to texts written in different times and contexts and forward to inspire change for future generations of women, attests to the metachronous aspect of postcolonial women's writing as well as to the ambivalent meaning of the term "postcolonial," as argued in Chapter One.[3]

Moreover, postcolonial women's narratives, as Nnaemeka writes, emerge from the margin; that is, from "border crossings, gray areas and the ambiguous interstices of the binaries where woman is both benevolent *and* malevolent with powers that are healing *and* lethal . . . traditional *and* modern . . . victim *and* agent . . . goddess *and* whore . . . 'soft but stern' . . . in short, just human" ("Imag(in)ing" 2–3; emphasis original). Such different attributes relate to the female characters analysed in this thesis. For instance, Ramatoulaye in Bâ's *SLL* is oppressed by polygamy because she is betrayed and abandoned by her husband who takes a second wife. However, she is an agent of change as is evident when she plays her roles as a mother, a teacher, a mother–in–law, and a trustworthy friend. This example shows that postcolonial women's narratives underline the complex subjectivities of women who are both empowered and marginalised within multiple structures that do not always enable them to speak or act.

Thus, one must acknowledge the potential of postcolonial women's writing to transform and deconstruct. Postcolonial women's return to the written word does not

only acknowledge the interrelatedness of socio–political and individual issues. As Michael Niblett remarks, it "crosses into the political field, constructing a form able not only to articulate the complex legacies of colonialism and uneven development, but also to recuperate and reaffirm a [female] history that provides the resources to rethink the national body politic" (17). The "politic" must include women's narratives if agendas of transformation are to be complete.

In sum, returning to postcolonial women's narratives in this thesis is a personal and politico–pedagogical commitment grounded in the belief that writing by women offers us the opportunity to enter into dialogue with the diverse subjective experiences of the writers and their protagonists. This helps us better understand the reasons behind the protagonists' actions and decisions which they take in order to make their voices heard. This makes postcolonial women's writing a dynamic vehicle for the recuperation and acknowledgement of multiple female voices across the postcolonial world.

Postcolonial women's writing: mapping female spaces

I argued in the previous section that postcolonial women writers deconstruct dominant practices in order to envision new sites for the reclamation of women's bodies and voices. A central concern in this thesis is that writing by women functions as a powerful "human archway or birth canal" that ushers critics and readers into a complex continuum of female stories and standpoints from different cultures (Cobham 59). For me, one of its objectives is to map diverse spaces of female agency through writing the postcolonial female experience. These spaces vary between prison, motherhood, the female body, writing, and madness, out of which oppression and resistance are mapped thematically and structurally.

In a discussion of postcolonial women's writing, Boehmer supports the challenge taken by critics such as Alice Walker, bell hooks, and Mohanty in order to undermine the assumption of a shared marginality based on gender (*Colonial* 226). As will be argued in the next chapter, postcolonial women writers and Third World feminists oppose such homogenising assumptions and intervene in order to negate images of Third World

women as uniformly oppressed.[4] Their intervention claims the diverse make–up of women's lives and the validity of several forms of self–expression on the part of women writers and of their principal characters.

Rather than representing a fixed female narrative of oppression, postcolonial women writers attempt to "unOther" women through different themes and structural modes. Besides, they demonstrate that they write and speak from the margins in order to inspire dialogue and that their writing challenges dominant theoretical practices and paradigms. It is worth quoting Françoise Lionnet's comment on the significance of female margins in relation to postcolonial women's writing which is integral to this thesis: "In border zones, all our academic preconceptions about cultural, linguistic, or stylistic norms are constantly being put to the test by creative practices that make visible and set off the processes of adaptation, appropriation, and contestation governing the construction of identity in colonial and postcolonial contexts" (6). By these transformative processes, postcolonial women writers redefine contemporary culture and negotiate conflicts between centre and margin, tradition and modernity, and self and "Other."

This helps women writers create an interstitial space for their representations and self–positionings, where the margin turns into a site of resistance and disruption as a response to domination. Postcolonial writing by women turns diverse female margins into creative sites of "radical openness and possibility" in order to articulate our kaleidoscopic sense of the world in new ways (hooks, *Yearning* 209). From another perspective, the analysis of the selected texts does not merely reverse binaries or challenge the global sisterhood model appropriated in Chapter Three. Rather, it underlines a complex, multivocal, and open–ended presence of female narratives which surfaces in heterogeneous female figures and realities mapped through diverse narrative styles.

Moreover, the analysis highlights the conflicting or different dimensions of postcolonial women's writing; that is, whether the latter represents women's specificities or is a discourse generated by the mixing of concerns and literary forms. Working from the premise that literature "gives us insight into the mediated process of reading and decoding" and leads to "a complex understanding of difference and 'marginality'" (ix),

Lionnet analyses the notion of female marginality in light of literary interrelatedness. The latter is based on a comparative reading of women writers such as Bessie Head and Michelle Cliff whose concerns intersect with issues of difference and identity. In a similar manner to the personal perspective expressed earlier in this chapter, Lionnet criticises "traditional disciplinary categories" such as social science which tend to be monolithic in their studies of women (8). This explains why Lionnet advocates a reading of postcolonial women's writing which is attentive to acts of negotiation and exchange between and across boundaries in order to expose the plural powers affecting women.

Lionnet's argument informs her choice of "métissage" or "cultural mixing" to read postcolonial women's narratives as a discourse which expresses influences in terms of structures, themes, and trajectories (4). The mixing framework is important because it highlights a key issue in this thesis, namely the value of interrelated female narratives and spaces, where "Other" women are not objectified due to difference and inequality, and where the possibility of sharing certain remits and points of view is achieved. This brings together several narratives in order to deal with difference as a dynamic condition alert to (metaphorically) shared territories and interconnections among women, thereby resisting Enlightenment philosophy and its autonomous subject which *speak for*, rather than with, female "Others."

Consequently, postcolonial women writers do not represent women as marginal "Others" from a fixed point of view. In Teresa de Lauretis's words, women writers such as El Saadawi, Brodber, and Emecheta do not portray women as "*unified* or *simply divided* between positions of masculinity and femininity, but *multiply organized* across positionalities along several axes and across mutually contradictory discourses and practices" (qtd. in Lionnet 5; emphasis original). By this the writers' portrayals of women work against universalism and exclusion inherent in mainstream feminism in order to represent women in diverse ways.

Lionnet tends to encourage "cross–fertilization" in postcolonial women's narratives because she views them as a product of cultural and literary influences (188). But for other critics, postcolonial women's writing represents a mosaic of female identities and locales. As I argued in the previous chapter, the emphasis in this thesis rests on specific

contexts which generate similarities and differences among women (writers). This suggests that the selected texts, which come from various backgrounds and mentalities, enable the writers to search for heterogeneous writing styles and speaking positions. This is attributed to the fact that the writers' shared writing styles and transformative remits do not overlook the social contexts of women's experiences.

For example, motherhood is a shared theme in the texts of Emecheta, Devi, and Bâ and is represented in relative terms which point to various female stories and degrees of agency. However, the different representations of motherhood determine a woman's presence as either a strong mother such as Ramatoulaye in Bâ's *SLL* or as suffering, oppressed mothers such as Jashoda and Nnu Ego in Devi's "BG" and Emecheta's *JM* respectively. Commenting on the function of cultural specificity in postcolonial women's texts, Boehmer argues that it signifies a woman writer's commitment to validate "the buried, apparently humble lives of the women who have gone before them and who perhaps helped to make their own [literary] achievement possible" (*Colonial* 227).

The commitment is a shared goal among the selected writers. By recourse to writing, Brodber, Bâ, Rhys, Emecheta, Devi, and El Saadawi reclaim their literary places and redefine suppressed female histories and diverse ways of challenging oppression. Sharing Boehmer's viewpoint, Head claims that writing by women is like "baking bread and peeling potatoes . . . [it is a] life's learning" (qtd. in Driver 177). Head calls upon women to integrate writing into their daily activities in order to make the figure of the woman (writer) an integral part of society. Postcolonial women's writing at this point can be described as a threshold juncture which encourages women to represent themselves and their narratives in terms of local feminisms (womanisms) whose concerns are vital to social liberation as a whole (Chapter Three offers more insights into this point).[5]

In an interview by Mineke Schipper about the task of African women writers, Bâ argues that African women writers should challenge oppressive values and roles in order to redefine African women's identities (qtd. in Wisker, *Post–Colonial* 138). Bâ's statement is worth quoting because it relates to the central argument of this thesis and to the concerns of the selected authors. Bâ and the other selected authors make visible the presence of women (writers) in order to defy images of "Othering" which, in some cases,

overlap with the experience of mothering as a patriarchal institution, as will be argued in the analysis of Devi's and Emecheta's texts:

> The woman writer in Africa has a special task. She has to present the position of women in Africa in all its aspects. There is still so much injustice . . . in the institutions, in society, in the street, in political organisations . . . As women . . . we must overthrow the status quo which harms us and we must no longer submit to it. Like men, we must use literature as a non–violent but effective weapon. We no longer accept the nostalgic praise to the African Mother, who, in his anxiety, man confuses with Mother Africa. Within African literature, room must be made for women . . . room we will fight for with all our might. (qtd. in Wisker, *Post–Colonial* 139)

Writing by women is an avenue for female activism and transformation. It is a necessary task for women writers across the postcolonial world.

However, whether a woman writer/critic adopts Lionnet's framework of cultural borrowing, works within the specific and the local, or mixes both cases, a common issue is underlined by these positions. It is about the commitment of postcolonial women writers to revive the female body and voice through the written word. Accordingly, the texts explored in this thesis, to borrow Huma Ibrahim's words, bestow life and value upon "a previously deadened sphere for understanding the self/body" (158). This helps formulate strategies of resistance which emerge from the oppression of the female characters in order to "address . . . the negotiations of resistance, ignored thus far" (158). For this reason, the views of Boehmer, Bâ, and Ibrahim underline the articulation of resistant female spaces in postcolonial women's texts; that is, the practice of imaginative mapping which characterises the texts grouped together in this thesis.

The female spaces discussed in this thesis are mapped through a return to women's experiences and standpoints in order to expose the varied power structures which marginalise women. The return projects a yearning for the unrepresentable, the ignored, and the not–yet mapped access to "the 'here and now,' to everyday local or domestic experience . . . rather than [to] public 'outer' reality" in order to show "how local meanings and differences are contingent on 'external' conditions [shaping them]" (Ferrier

159). Phrased differently, women's subjective experiences reflect inner realities that depend on the outside world which constructs them. This dependence collapses any absolutist demarcation between the local (the subjective) and the external (the objective) in literary contexts. For Ketu H. Katrak, the mediation between the local and the social in women's texts establishes a transformative politics which is integrally feminist and personal because it is grounded in the realities of women and is attentive to their needs of change (22). This suggests that women writers such as El Saadawi reconceptualise what colonisation means for them; that is, a local rather than foreign colonisation of women which takes different forms such as patriarchy, tradition, marriage, and cultural tensions.

A recurrent feature of the selected texts is that writing enables women to map new spaces of empowerment and resistance, and in some cases, to transform confining spaces into resistant ones such as home and prison in Bâ's *SLL* and El Saadawi's *WPZ* respectively. These spaces function as sites of counter–hegemonic signification and transformation. Therefore, I am inclined to argue that if the experiences of Third World women are overlooked in Western, nationalist, and patriarchal discourses, postcolonial writing by women revives such experiences in order to represent the female narrative and body anew. This reclaims female agency through acknowledging women's potential to assess the situations in which they find themselves. As Cora Kaplan writes, this potential is emblematic of women's "ability to survive the brutal exploitation of their bodies and their labour, by both the dominant culture and their own world of social relations" (qtd. in Wisker, "Black" 3). As such, the selected texts offer a paradigm of transformation and resistance through diverse themes and structural modes of representation.

Within a postcolonial context, it is necessary to remain alert to the connotation of spatial mapping in relation to women's narratives. Whereas maps are imperialist tools of colonising the territory of the "Other" (Blunt and Rose 9), the form of mapping which I relate to the texts in this thesis is metaphorical. It presents postcolonial women's writing as a contested practice of resistance and reclamation in order to acknowledge diverse modes of representation. The modes are locally bound but extend cross–culturally in

order to advocate women's decolonisation. Also, "space" is used in this thesis in a number of different ways in order to denote physical and metaphorical spaces of confinement and agency.

For example, prison, the attic, and being confined to the home are physical spaces, whereas the female body is a space (or rather, it takes up/ constitutes a space) but in being mobile, in being a body, it is different from other "spaces" such as motherhood which is analysed in this thesis as a female experience with its pains and rewards. Rather than grouping women within homogeneous, static categories, female spaces such as prison, home, motherhood, and madness promote multiplicity, difference, and interconnectedness among women's texts and voices. This justifies my attempt to group these spaces together and in particular to see them as similar in some ways in this thesis. This is not an approach taken by most other engagements with the selected texts.

Sharing the viewpoints of Amireh and Suhair Majaj, Alison Blunt and Gillian Rose criticise the tendencies of some Western feminists to decode women's presence as a "transparent space" which privileges homogeneity and exclusion (8). The "transparent space" contrasts with the quest for contextualised knowledges in postcolonial women's narratives; that is, for knowing about other cultures and for forging interaction across female communities and margins. This explains why postcolonial women's writing develops counter–transparent spaces and works within the local and the cross–cultural in order to map new female spaces which are multidimensional and contradictory.

From a feminist perspective, the aforesaid localised vision or space relates to the research methodology of this thesis in so far as it focuses on women's micropolitics and daily narratives which exist in relation to, as well as in tension with, macropolitics (colonial, patriarchal, traditional, and socio–political practices). The interrelatedness of private and public spheres makes it necessary to examine the various mappings of female spaces in relation to strategies of resistance and to diverse powers such as race and patriarchy. This multilayered examination is a key aspect of the textual analysis in this thesis for two reasons. Firstly, it explores narratives of female oppression in order to engender deconstructive readings which locate resistant spaces as a response to oppressive ones. Secondly, it stresses the potential of literary mapping to reconceptualise

new female roles and spaces which offer "alternative modes of reading and writing the world" (Moore 109). This means that the varied female spaces in postcolonial women's narratives underscore resistant subjectivities and standpoints in order to "re–inflect the meaning of space *in and beyond*" confining gender roles and rules (102; emphasis original).

By constructing a space for their female figures to act and speak, postcolonial women writers translate the negative, mythic images of women into routes of transformation as the title of the thesis denotes. Examples of resistant/confining female spaces discussed in this thesis include home, writing, and widow confinement in Bâ's *SLL,* prison in El Saadawi's *WPZ*, madness and the attic in Rhys's *WSS*, the female body and the kumbla in Brodber's *JL*, and motherhood in Devi's "BG" and Emecheta's *JM*. These spaces connote imaginative worlds which a woman writer develops for her protagonist and from which oppression and resistance is imagined. They also encourage the reading of postcolonial women's narratives as transformative of, and oppositional to, patriarchal, nationalist, and colonial practices rather than complicit with them in colonising women. This signals the value of female narratives and of the diverse readings they engender to students of women's literature.

While some spaces are inspiring and empowering such as widow seclusion in Bâ's *SLL*, others such as motherhood in Emecheta's *JM* are disempowering and isolating. Thematic differences in this case stress that women's narratives construct spaces according to their varied contexts and specificities. The authors allow readers from diverse cultures to engage with women's several experiences of oppression and resistance. This interactive, readerly engagement is located within the context of each narrative in order to incorporate the female figure into larger structures of society, thereby emphasising that a woman's oppression is bound to this or that context rather than emerging from a vacuum.

In addition, literary mapping helps move toward deconstructive and reconstructive (re)readings of women's texts. According to Boehmer, literary mapping lends a new dimension to images of female oppression which have prevailed in (pre)colonial and postcolonial societies (*Stories* 89). Through literary mapping, the female subject is redefined and narrated in texts that convey the heterogeneity of her reality. Thus, readers

and critics are invited to establish dialogue with each narrative mainly in its relation to its context in order to show the interplay and dependency of fiction and history, language and politics, and self and "Other."

For example, Emecheta's *JM* ends with the death of Nnu Ego who, despite being a caring mother, dies disappointed. Some readers of *JM* interpret Nnu Ego's death as a gloomy part of the misfortunes she encounters as a traditional mother in an urban setting. Others read it as a generalised, pessimistic aspect of the presence of mothers in Nigeria. However, my analysis of *JM* in Chapter Seven invites readers to locate an oppositional reading of the narrative conclusion because Nnu Ego's space of agency is created out of her posthumous silence; that is, of her refusal to answer the prayers of barren women to grant them children. As Florence Stratton notes, Nnu Ego, through death and posthumous silence, finds her "spiritual wholeness" denied by socio–emotional and traditional constrains; consequently, she "strikes at the roots of patriarchy" which have confined her (113). This can be read as an affirmation by Emecheta that women have the potential to be reborn "not as the slave woman" but as free human beings (113).

In this sense, female spaces foreground women as agents of resistance, acting within oppressive situations and spaces such as prison and illness. Furthermore, they recall Nnaemeka's emphasis on women's decision to act rather than remain silent, given that what matters is not whether women "survive their insurrection or are crushed by it" ("Imag(in)ing" 4). Rather, what is important is that women *choose* to act and to speak, especially as the texts "make a distinction between 'to be silenced' and 'to be silent,'" where the former signals an enforced state of silence whereas the latter a self–chosen one (4).

Nnaemeka's argument relates to the female characters analysed in this thesis such as Devi's Jashoda, Bâ's Ramatoulaye, and El Saadawi's Firdaus. These female figures are variably oppressed, yet under specific circumstances, they reclaim agency by acting or remaining silent, given that degrees of women's agency vary and are tied to the contexts which structure their experiences. For instance, Ramatoulaye in Bâ's *SLL* claims voice by remaining silent literally but acting and speaking figuratively during her widow confinement. Her speech, voice, and points of view are expressed through writing a letter

to Aissatou, her best friend. Thus, Ramatoulaye's letter accentuates the fact that routes for the expression of female agency and survival can be attained in ways that do not always require literal acts of speech.

While Ramatoulaye claims agency by recourse to writing, Firdaus in El Saadawi's *WPZ* chooses a more direct mode of action. Firdaus lives in a patriarchal society that often silences women and delimits their agency; however, she chooses to act despite being literally imprisoned. Her choice of speaking whilst confined disrupts the connotations of the prison because the latter becomes a space of enunciation and indictment rather than of surrender. Instead of remaining silent and waiting to be hanged, Firdaus stresses that her story be heard; her narrative voice becomes "a *demand*" (Moore 21; emphasis original). This shows that she narrates her story in order to challenge the powers that have forced her to become a prostitute, a killer, and a prisoner.

In addition, the representation of women–centred issues and spaces in postcolonial women's texts operates in terms of particular themes or structures and, sometimes, a mixture of both. The use of particular themes is a feature shared by the selected texts because they represent diverse gender issues through specific themes, narrative plots, and characterisation. The texts also locate women within active speaking positions in order to narrate their varied experiences in relation to family and community. For example, the thematic level enables Adaku in Emecheta's *JM* to challenge patriarchy and tradition and to question preconceived gender roles which seek to restrict her.

As for the structural level which interrelates with the thematic one in the examples below, this refers to the various writing styles and techniques adopted by woman writers in order to grant agency to their protagonists, to subvert colonial and patriarchal practices, and to express the tensions which the protagonists experience. Examples of the texts which create thematic–stylistic interrelatedness are Brodber's *JL* in its fragmented, heteroglossic language and narrative format, Bâ's *SLL* in its epistolary voice and complex literary genre, Rhys's *WSS* in its revisionary writing, multiple narrative voices, and the use of symbols such as dreams and colours, and El Saadawi's *WPZ* in its narrative structure and the fearless narrative voice of Firdaus. These levels stress the potential of postcolonial women's texts to appropriate confining spaces and narratives in ways that

envision resistant ones, even if resistance does not lead to total transformation at the end, as argued in Chapter One.

In short, as this thesis demonstrates, a deconstructive, cultural analysis of postcolonial women's texts destabilises fixed hierarchies and concepts in order to reconceptualise complex female spaces, where traditions and power structures are recognised and resisted. This not only lends a reconstructive vision to postcolonial women's narratives but also complicates the meaning of the terms "the postcolonial" and "woman" due to the different modes of representation and the varying degrees of female agency and inequality represented. As argued earlier, the selected authors reject a monolithic Western act of speaking *for* women because it underestimates their prismatic voices and narratives. Instead, they promote discussions and forge solidarity among women through imagining resistant spaces and representing simultaneously specific and interrelated gender issues.

Therefore, it is worth quoting at length a passage from Lionnet about the function of postcolonial women's narratives examined in this thesis:

> [Postcolonial women] writers illustrate . . . the dynamic and creative processes mobilized by subgroups as means of resistance to the "victim" syndrome. They use their transformative and performative energies on the language and narrative strategies they borrow from the cultures of the West. To represent their regional cultural realities, they make use of appropriative techniques that interweave traditions and languages. The way they portray characters transforms the way *they* see the realities of their own worlds, as well as the way *we*—readers . . . perceive them: that is, no longer as radically "other" realms, so different and alien . . . but rather as microcosms of the globe. (18–19; emphasis original)

Postcolonial women writers create different female narratives in order to challenge the homogenising image of Third World women as "victims" or always oppressed. Their texts are produced from the margins of society in order to deconstruct dominant centres and to envision an alternative literary discourse that is metachronous, dynamic, and dialogical.

This discourse acknowledges the plurality of women's concerns and writing styles in order to revive the female voice and body. It also highlights a key issue in this thesis, namely to read the postcolonial narrative in a productive way that acknowledges the complexity and heterogeneity of women's texts and experiences. This helps avoid the tendency to construct a universal female narrative which reduces the potential of learning from women's specificity and connectedness. These issues justify why the meaning of the "postcolonial" which I read in the selected texts underscores complex and hybrid female identities and points of view (Chapter One furthers discusses the term "postcolonial").

A socio–ethical responsibility and political agenda, the authors' vision of transformation refers back to a concept which they valorise in their feminist writings and positions; that is, to "humanism" or, in Evelyne Accad's formulation, to "femihumanism" (qtd. in Lionnet 19). The femihumanist heterogeneity in postcolonial women's writing resists a monolithic, universal representation of women. Besides, it encourages counter–separatist feminist practices in order to forge a plural society founded on the rejection of all forms of exploitation, locally or globally. Consequently, readers, critics, and students of women's literature should acknowledge the various, interrelated voices, standpoints, and forms of representation in postcolonial women's texts.

In sum, postcolonial women writers, according to Laura E. Donaldson, should "engender feminist standpoints [which] do indeed exist, but we as gardeners–interpreters must recognize the diversity of their ecologies and of the ways they cultivate meaning" (135). In other words, the fictional and historical threading inherent in postcolonial women's narratives constitutes a dynamic field where women's stories are created, told, deconstructed, and related to each other. Accordingly, the selected works promote solidarity in diversity and plurality in order to enable women "to complete . . . [their] journey toward a postcolonial liberation" (Donaldson 139). This journey refers not exclusively to an effort to recuperate a utopic world but to a faith in the possibility for change which emanates from the written word; that is, from women's texts where women are encouraged to defend and redefine their lives. Rather than dismissing the postcolonial narrative as illusory because plural forms of female colonisation still exist at

present, it is productive to account for a deconstructive, empowering vision in postcolonial women's narratives. This vision promotes female transformation in order to affirm the value of reading and teaching postcolonial women's writing as a discourse of resistance and activism at which this thesis aims.

Conclusion

The issues raised in this chapter connect the way I read postcolonial women's texts to several debates about postcolonial women's writing. The deconstructive readings of such texts are productive acts which reclaim and "unOther" a spectrum of female narratives and voices. Although they are contextually located, women's narratives and voices are interrelated and even conflicting. Besides, the spaces which confine women literally (prison, home, and the attic) and figuratively (marriage and motherhood) turn into resistant ones because literary mapping creates female spaces and worldviews through diverse themes and structural styles. Thus, it is not only in literature that these spaces can be appropriated; rather, literature by women allows us to realise how these spaces can be, and are, appropriated in everyday life in order to inspire change.

Female spaces vary between agency and challenge, oppression and recuperation, thereby underscoring the complexity and diversity in representing women. Devi and Emecheta, among other authors, do not romanticise their protagonists' lives; rather, they represent them as placed in transitional or in–between junctures where oppression and inequality, privilege and resistance are parts of the protagonists' realities. This signals the complementarity of oppression and resistance in women's lives and writing.

The next chapter is developed through a theoretical lens in order to discuss the issues which have guided the choice of postcolonial women's writing as the research subject. Mainly, I explore feminist models and debates in order to expose the power axes that affect women and to show how the axes produce diverse female texts and identities. The aim of the chapter is to map similarities between feminist theoretical concerns and the selected texts, thereby stressing that literature by women, in a similar manner to theory,

is capable of theorising women's experiences in literary forms in order to envision routes of decolonisation.

Notes

1. See Jameson 347–60 for a discussion of "cognitive mapping" which, in a similar manner to the practice of literary mapping, seeks to construct imaginary or unrepresentable social realities.

2. For more debates around theoretical modes of theorising women as agents, see Mohanty, *Feminism* 231; Haraway 584; and Aptheker 87.

3. See Lazarus 2 and Bhabha, *Location* 173 for a discussion of the term "postcolonial."

4. For more points of view on this issue, see Bergeron 996 and Aguilar 313.

5. See Walker xi and Emecheta, "Feminism" 173 for a discussion of local feminisms (womanisms).

Chapter Three
Theorising Women from Developing Countries

The previous chapter offered a literature review of criticism on postcolonial women's writing in order to reclaim a plurality of female narratives and voices which are effective tools of change. Described as a metachronous practice of literary mapping, the selected texts create female spaces through different themes and styles. The spaces are sometimes oppressive while at others enabling, thereby acknowledging issues of complexity and difference in postcolonial women's texts. Due to some similarities between postcolonial women's writing and Third World feminism, I am inclined to make connections between the selected texts and feminist theory in this chapter. These connections foreground the potential of postcolonial women's writing to theorise transformation and of its authors to be a useful bridge between the socio–cultural and the literary; that is, to occupy the position of literary activists and feminists who promote agendas of decolonisation through the written word. This helps envision possibilities of meshing feminist theory and literary writing in order to acknowledge women's differences without dehistoricising them.

Central to the debates in this chapter is the global sisterhood model which is deconstructed in order to discuss wider issues regarding the theorisation of women. Terminological issues such as womanism and feminism are also discussed in order to acknowledge women's differences and specificities. The chapter concludes by highlighting some feminist models which stress the importance of heterogeneous, relational avenues of transformation and solidarity which are variably represented in postcolonial women's narratives.

Global sisterhood and deconstruction

As I argued in the previous chapter, postcolonial women writers challenge female oppression through different themes and structural styles. This challenge is vital to

several feminists and critics who, together with the selected writers in this thesis, defy plural modes of female oppression. Therefore, this section offers a smooth movement from deconstructing the global sisterhood model to developing more heterogeneous models of theorising women.

It has been argued that the model of global sisterhood is unidirectional and homogeneous. In this model, patriarchy takes priority in the analysis of women's oppression, irrespective of other forms of power such as race and class. While Third World feminism(s) analyses gender oppression in relation to situated powers, white, middle–class feminists, in some cases, have encouraged a global sisterhood model to challenge the patriarchal oppression of women. By now, this is, of course, a fairly familiar argument but I am revisiting it in order to provide a distinctive background to the deconstructive, cultural reading of the selected texts.

Several critics challenge white, middle–class feminism due to its assumption which relates to women in developed societies (Spivak, "Three" 244; Donaldson 17). Critical of the global sisterhood model, Suzanne Bergeron argues that it works toward a homogeneous feminism which constructs a monolithic female voice fighting against oppression (996). That is, the model ignores local particularities of women from different locations and leads to the collapsing/grouping of women's experiences into a single entity which voices Western women's interests against a capitalist, masculinist society. Consequently, "varying local interpretations are collapsed into a homogeneous identity of 'women's interests' against global capitalism" (1000).

To give a brief example, differences between Indian women such as Jashoda in Devi's "BG" and African women such as Ramatoulaye in Bâ's *SLL* denote the presence of issues specific to Indian/African women and Indian/African brands of feminism. This differentiation reflects culture–specific concerns about Indian and African women who are differently subjugated by traditions of honour, motherhood, patriarchy, class, nationalism, and child marriage. Also, it suggests that the understanding of feminism as in this example needs to centre "not so much on what it *is* as on what it *does*;" that is, it should work across particularities and differences as part of feminist thought (Jackson 1;

emphasis original). This signals the necessity of theorising female narratives of oppression in more heterogeneous ways.

Sharing Bergeron's viewpoint, Inderpal Grewal and Caren Kaplan recommend a prismatic theorisation of women to analyse "transnational scattered hegemonies that reveal themselves in gender relations" (17). Otherwise, feminist movements will reproduce universalising gestures of dominant Western discourses. This suggests that feminism should acknowledge women's differences in order to analyse gender in relation to other power axes such as class and race. Accordingly, the attempt to decolonise white, middle–class feminism requires more complex and dialogical models than the global sisterhood model. The alternative models need not be structured by a single category which "excludes all other interpretive categories" when formulating strategies of decolonisation (Donaldson 17). This develops agendas of transformation from a postcolonial feminist perspective that is intersectional and dialogical.

In light of the aforementioned issues, it is worth quoting at length Delia D. Aguilar's critique of the sisterhood model which emphasises my attitude and the debates highlighted in this thesis with regard to literary and theoretical modes of representing women:

> The wish to perceive all women as sisters . . . still occupies feminist thinking . . . Such essentialist inclinations bear examination because their consequences are contingent on who is making the call for unity . . . [Third World women] fought tenaciously to unmask the white, middle–class woman masquerading as the 'universal woman'. It was this white, middle–class, usually professional woman who, having the authorial voice, could speak of her own experience of subordination and appear as though she were representing womankind . . . When we, however, subscribe to the idea of a universal sisterhood, the effect is radically different—we erase ourselves from the picture! (313–14)

The model of the "universal woman" homogenises the presence of women and threatens the validity of feminism as a transformative movement based on diversity and dialogue.

The analysis of the female characters in the following chapters emphasise Aguilar's argument. For example, Firdaus in El Saadawi's *WPZ*, Ramatoulaye in Bâ's *SLL*, and Nnu

Ego in Emecheta's *JM* share the experience of female oppression. Yet it is a fallacy to assume the sameness or singularity of their oppression on the basis that the three characters are women. Their diverse experiences, locations, and points of view challenge the figure of the "universal woman" and the global sisterhood model. Therefore, rather than constructing "a theory of hegemonic oppression under a unified category of gender" (Grewal and Kaplan 17–18), the selected texts represent multiple forms of oppression and resistance, all of which are differently represented by the authors.

It can be problematic on the part of (some) white, middle–class feminists to formulate agendas of decolonisation for women in developing cultures. From an external position, white, middle–class feminists observe rather than experience the plural colonisations of other women. By voicing their concerns, First World women risk speaking *for* rather than allow "Other" women to speak. This makes it difficult to generate contextualised narratives from the various perspectives and positions of women from developing countries. Therefore, my attempt to problematise the model of global sisterhood is reconstructive for two reasons.

Firstly, it acknowledges that feminism is not a unified category with homogeneous views but a complex debate comprising contested attitudes and differences. As the analysis of the texts will demonstrate, there exist many models of womanhood, several feminisms based on divisions of class, race, and language, and hence different modes of representing women. Consequently, there will never be a monolithic agenda that all women agree on because feminism is "as various as the women it represents. What weaves feminist movement together is consciousness of inequities and a commitment to changing them" (Baumgardner and Richards 47–48). Women are varied and so are the concerns and the brands of feminism represented by women writers.

Secondly, it searches for alternatives to the sisterhood model such as postcolonial women's writing which intersects with feminism in order to examine women's experiences in relation to plural powers of oppression (Crenshaw 1244; Nash 7). This makes it possible to position, as well as to see, postcolonial women writers such as El Saadawi as activists through their writing which develops different feminisms or feminist concerns. These feminist concerns can be located in the texts I have chosen: although the

texts share the theme of female oppression and resistance, their modes of representation differ because women's experiences are located within specific cultures and caused by particular factors. This contextual representation foregrounds the presence of local feminisms which are not limited to a single paradigm—gender—for analysing female oppression. It also makes the authors of the texts treat the theme of female oppression differently to envision diverse modes of narration.

Rhys's *WSS* and El Saadawi's *WPZ* are a case in point because while both are postcolonial texts, they develop feminist concerns. The experience of female oppression in Rhys's text is tied to Antoinette's white Creole ancestry which positions her in a liminal space. Besides, Antoinette's ambivalent identity is shaped by the colonial legacy and differences of class, race, and gender in the Caribbean, all of which lead to her alienation and madness. Firdaus in El Saadawi's text is exploited by patriarchy and class in a masculinist society, where issues of race and foreign colonisation rarely function, except that patriarchy might have been sustained by colonisation and is part of its legacy.

Similarities and differences between both texts suggest that Rhys's *WSS* develops a more acute feminist critique of several powers than El Saadawi's *WPZ*, especially with regard to colonialism and race which exacerbate Antoinette's fragmentation and madness. This example stresses that "third wave feminists [should] attend in detail to the kinds of contestations over feminism which many Third World women's texts engage in" (deCaires Narain, "What" 250). It also helps analyse diversity and difference as integral to diverse feminist discourses in order to envision possibilities of deconstructing homogenising models of women. This shows that women's identities and narratives are marked by the interrelatedness of "biological, sexual, social, cultural, linguistic, ritualistic, and psychological fortunes" (Spillers 67).

Consequently, the selected texts allow for the construction of a cross–cultural, analytical framework in order to engender several types of feminism defined as local and intersectional. This signals differences between the authors and their texts because Rhys's concerns are not essentially reflective of, or similar to, El Saadawi's. It is true that both authors, by recourse to writing, seek to decolonise women; however, each text has its trajectory that represents and challenges the culture it is depicting and criticising.

Cultural–literary specificity constructs several types of feminisms and encourages the authors to map different spaces of decolonisation such as prison, writing, and madness, among others. These spaces enable female characters to speak and act through various modes, thereby developing a metachronous discourse of diversity in postcolonial women's texts and one which has the potential to destabilise the static model of global sisterhood. In sum, deconstructing the global sisterhood model counters the assumption of a shared oppression which, for Sylvia Wynter, enables the liberation of white, middle–class women at the expense of silencing other women from developing countries (363). This necessitates a search for deconstructive practices in order to acknowledge women's complexity and diversity, literarily and theoretically. The following sections discuss some of these practices.

Feminism, womanism, or feminism with a small 'f'?

The presence of diverse types of feminisms and forces oppressing women makes it possible to describe the critiques of the universal sisterhood model as debates over terminology: over womanism/womanist or feminism/feminist. Such debates denote the efforts of women writers and critics from developing countries to distinguish their specificities and daily struggles from those of women in developed countries.

Barbara Smith argues that Western powers have controlled the world and that these powers have been re–enacted at local levels (157). This results in a discourse which overlooks the presence of black women who are colonised by race and gender, among other factors. Besides, the prejudice encountered by black women in private and public spheres contains them in a unitary category of "non–woman;" of non–white "Others" silenced locally and globally (Cobham 52). This is why it is important for black women to redefine their identities. Supporting Smith's argument, Abena P. A. Busia states that black women have been negatively defined by black men and white women ("Words" 2). Under slavery, negative images about black women emerged as is evident in the figure of the 'Hottentot Venus,' a stereotypical black woman (Jordan and Weedon 231). This figure

invokes the image of black women as promiscuous and complicit in the sexual assaults of white men.

Even after slavery, acceptable definitions of beauty and femininity, according to Busia, drew on white, middle–class criteria of womanhood, decency, and family organisation from which black women were excluded ("Words" 3). This shows why black women writers and critics since the 1980s have been engaged in debates about identity, memory, and resistance as shared concerns which relate the personal to the political in their struggles for self–assertion. In order to create a distinctive space of their own, black women have demanded that black feminism(s) should produce critiques and writings by black women which are reflective of their lives and concerns. This demand relates to Walker's "womanism" which functions as an alternative to "feminism" in theorising black women's experiences (xi).

Walker's womanism refers to a black feminist or a feminist of Colour who "appreciates and prefers women's culture . . . and women's strength. Committed to survival and wholeness of entire people . . . Traditionally capable . . . Loves struggle . . . [and] Loves herself" (xi–xii). Walker's concept relates to the notion of feminism with a small 'f' developed by Emecheta, a Nigerian writer ("Feminism" 173). Emecheta supports Walker's "womanism" because it represents African women's specificities through African eyes and points of view. However, if she is to be called a feminist in the African sense, Emecheta is then a feminist with a small 'f' as a challenge to Western feminism. Emecheta's statement is worth quoting because it resonates with the attitudes of the women writers and critics discussed in this thesis and for whom different female narratives and local feminisms are central to their writings and agendas of transition:

> Being a woman, and African born, I see things through an African woman's eyes. I chronicle the little happenings in the lives of the African women . . . if I am now a feminist then I am an African feminist with a small 'f' . . . I don't like being defined by them . . . I do believe in the African type of feminism. They call it womanism . . . That is my brand of feminism. ("Feminism" 175)

Emecheta's type of feminism focuses on African women and on their Afrocentric local experiences. It is a local feminism which encourages women's empowerment and solidarity as avenues of survival.

Walker's and Emecheta's womanist views recall the version of black womanism developed by Chikwenye Okonjo Ogunyemi because it "celebrates . . . black womandom . . . the dynamism of wholeness and self–healing that one sees in the positive, integrative endings of womanist novels" (72). In other words, black womanism emphasises an Afrocentric culture and female subjectivity in order to look for particular features that unify black women's communities within a shared tradition. This keeps intact many features of African culture which intersect with self and community, thereby reconstructing gender relations which exist in African womanist novels.

Bâ's *SLL* can be seen as an example of an African womanist novel because it develops a resistant female community through writing/ Ramatoulaye's letter. The text also empowers women whose presence is conditioned by patriarchy, polygamy, and religion, among other variables. This envisions avenues of resistance available for women who, together with (some) men in this instance, are agents of change. Besides, it makes possible what Barbara Harlow defines as a "structural and affiliative reorganization" of gender roles and relationships; that is, of "bonding" rather than "bondage," in order to locate sites of empowerment out of oppressive ones (*Resistance* 135).

Caribbean critics such as Carole Boyce Davies and Elaine Savory Fido share the concerns of their African and African–American counterparts. Both critics argue that Walker's concept of womanism is central to the understanding of Caribbean women's "crossroad" or complex positions ("Talking" xi). A womanist discourse recuperates Caribbean women's realities as is represented in Caribbean texts which are characterised by a network of diversity and complexity. This shows that Caribbean texts and women are situated at a crossroad of three axes: gender, class, and race, with emphasis on the latter because it "demarcates the situation of the Caribbean women intelligentsia, whether Black or White from that of their Western/Euroamerican counterparts" (Wynter 356).

The presence of such axes, combined with contradictory realities and worldviews in the Caribbean, is understood in light of Rhys's *WSS* and in Brodber's *JL*, although it is more acute or complicated in the former than in the latter. Due to her white Creole ancestry, Antoinette in Rhys's text is represented as a complex figure who shifts between two cultures and identities, yet belongs fully to neither. Cultural ambivalence leads to Antoinette's madness; that is, she resides in an interstitial space where racial prejudice, class discrimination, and gender inequalities get mixed with feelings of admiration between people from various backgrounds (Tia, Christophine, and Rochester). This justifies the tendency of some Caribbean women writers to adopt womanism, or feminism in the form of womanism because it acknowledges the presence of (Caribbean) women as having different experiences which undermine the global sisterhood model.

In sum, womanism helps Third World women writers and critics move toward a new threshold of postcolonial thought. It goes beyond the limits of gender in order to contain the diversity of Third World women and of their literary representations, as argued in this thesis. This helps reclaim diverse female narratives and voices which are effective avenues of female transition.

Third World women (writers) as agents of change

As I argued in Chapters One and Two, postcolonial women's writing represents diverse female narratives and voices through different themes and styles. This is one reason why women writers should be allowed room to emerge and speak. They, "once admitted, prove to have something significantly different to say and a significantly different manner of saying it . . . if the literary account is to be complete" (Mordecai vii).

Connections exist between the theoretical remits of the critics discussed in this thesis and those of the selected authors such as Rhys, El Saadawi, and Bâ. Shared concerns involve a commitment to portray women's narratives of oppression as structured by various powers, given that the female experiences represented in women's literature are functional in Third World feminism. Put differently, women's experiences and texts bring into the world hidden or neglected stories of oppression and resistance which are central

to women, to feminism/womanism, and to literary theory. Therefore, finding a feminist discourse which resists modes of female oppression requires a multidimensional framework that focuses on issues of grounding the local and the universal, on women's roles in redefining their identities, and on difference as a way of promoting solidarity.

This poses a critical question for Mohanty: if Third World feminists seek cross–cultural solidarity, what strategies or theoretical models are appropriate for decolonising Third World women and for making their voices heard? (*Feminism* 231). This section draws upon useful feminist models or strategies in an attempt to answer Mohanty's question. The models require historically situated methods of approaching Third World women's narratives and experiences. Furthermore, they acknowledge issues of similarity and difference in Third World women's voices which are integral to the texts explored in this thesis. This makes possible the reading of postcolonial women's writing as a theoretical discourse of female transformation due to similarities between women's writing and feminist theory, both of which highlight situated or subjective forms of knowledge about women.

Recalling Mohanty's "feminist solidarity" model discussed later in this chapter (*Feminism* 242), Bergeron recommends a "strategic sisterhood" model which advocates solidarity and collaboration, especially as it acknowledges "a whole range of different possible feminist identities, alliances, and forms of resistance" (1000). Within Bergeron's model, feminist movements and postcolonial women's texts envision cross–cultural agendas of decolonisation, thereby foregrounding that a "woman" is not a pre–given, fixed entity but is "created in the social process, it is posed as a corrective to essentialism" (Aguilar 315). This shows that the meaning of "woman" is always "deferred" and never fully fixed since this depends on how gender intersects with other power axes such as class (317).

Aguilar's argument, much like the selected texts in this thesis, highlights the presence of women as shifting subjects with multiple, similar, and different experiences. It also focuses on the potential of women to act as agents with diverse points of view. This denotes a change in the orthodoxies of resistance by shifting agency toward the side of women and subordinate groups. Hence, female agency which is differently represented in

women's texts intersects with Bettina Aptheker's concept of "women's standpoints" because it recommends a bottom–up approach to analyse women (87).

Aptheker's concept recalls the feminist standpoints engendered by women's narratives in so far as it underlines the different meanings of women's lives and of their literary representations. This helps create narratives which are presented from women's diverse standpoints and reflections on their surroundings. These standpoints reveal experiences of oppression while others those of transition and recuperation. As Aptheker writes,

> If we [women] *map* what we learn, *connecting* one meaning or invention to another, we begin to lay out a *different* way of seeing reality . . . [called] *women's standpoint*. And this standpoint *pivots*, of course, depending upon the class, cultural, or racial locations of its *subjects*, and upon their age, sexual preference, physical abilities, the nature of their work and personal relationships . . . which ha[ve] been traditionally *erased* or hidden. (86; emphasis added)

Mapping diverse female standpoints and micropolitics unveils larger narratives of domination. This suggests an interweaving of the individual with the global and the collective in order to achieve development in feminist terms.

In line with Aptheker, Haraway argues that women's standpoints, or "subjugated" standpoints as she describes them, are "preferred" because they provide more "adequate" and "transforming accounts of the world" (584). Hearing alternate female voices creates a more varied picture, as is evident in the protagonists' diverse standpoints analysed in this thesis. Of course, these subjective standpoints differ because they either empower or oppress a woman. Thus, it is necessary to remain alert to the varied experiences of women which have the potential to develop strategies of empowerment. Yet this potential needs to be stressed because the different circumstances in which many women live do not always make the transformation possible—an issue which relates to inequality and to differences in degrees of female agency.

For example, while Devi's Jashoda realises that motherhood joys are illusions, Bâ's Ramatoulaye experiences motherhood as empowering and inspiring despite its socio–individual responsibilities. This example shows that women's standpoints about their roles such as motherhood differ because their roles and perspectives are affected by the

intersectionality of class, patriarchy, education, and tradition, among other factors. Such differences, for Adrien K. Wing, suggest that the "actuality of our [women's] layered experience . . . [is] multiplicative. Multiply each of my parts together, one x one x one x one, and you have one indivisible being" (qtd. in Nash 7). Besides, differences encourage the complexity of dialogue between feminists and women writers who are "like and different from each other'" (Ang 192).

But since dialogue among women is not unproblematic, differences between women cannot simply turn into a unity based on multiplicity. Female solidarity and dialogue can reveal an exaggerated belief in women's capacity to listen to one another. This is attributed to the presence of preconceived ideas and presumptions which hinder women's solidarity; that is, to the presence of the trap of cultural and intellectual imperialism challenged in Chapter One and of some women who act as female oppressors such as Aunt Becca in Brodber's *JL,* the mothers–in–law in Bâ's *SLL*, and Firdaus's mother and Sharifa in El Saadawi's *WPZ*.

As Ien Ang recommends, resolving the problem of dealing with differences requires a "politics of partiality" which is positioned within hierarchies of oppression and resistance (194). A key issue in this thesis is that of the structural partiality of women; that is, their specificity and difference, shows that women have different and even conflicting experiences and interests. Female partiality in this case functions as an alternative to relativism because it focuses on "partial, locatable, critical knowledges" which sustain the possibility of connection, solidarity, and "shared conversations" among women (Haraway 584). Furthermore, it recognises that for "Other" women, survival, famine, and poverty are more important or pressing issues than those of patriarchal oppression.

This justifies the emphasis on different, contextualised forms of oppression and resistance in the coming chapters, and the description of postcolonial women's narratives as a metachronous discourse of transformation through literary mapping. The discourse reclaims and represents prismatic and complex narratives, thereby complicating the meaning of postcolonial women's narratives that do not always celebrate unidirectional experiences of female decolonisation. Therefore, one should discard the call for

homogeneous, feminist models in order to redefine women's positions in relation to a network of variables such as class, race, and sex.

A discussion of Mohanty's model at this point crystalises the aforementioned issues. Given that no cultural boundary or narrative interpretation is totally fixed, Mohanty's "feminist solidarity" or "comparative feminist studies" model reveals the significance of particularities in their connection to the universal (*Feminism* 242). It deals with female experiences and stories as having the potential to challenge modes of domination in neo–colonial locations known as "Third World/South" versus "First World/North" (246). This model can be linked to the selected texts in this thesis because it maps diverse female communities, voices, and points of connection and disconnection, where the personal is related to the political as well as to collective and individual cases of oppression and resistance.

Mohanty's model, in a similar manner to postcolonial women's narratives, "allow[s] . . . for teaching and learning about points of connection and distance among and between communities of women marginalized and privileged along numerous local and global dimensions" (*Feminism* 243). Binaries such as margin/centre and us/them are appropriated within Mohanty's model and are reconstructed as having differences, similarities, and intersections that do not always create spaces of tension. While the global sisterhood model creates centre–periphery narratives of women subjugated by patriarchy, Mohanty's model theorises collective and relational forms of understanding about women. It signals the need to focus on the interrelatedness of various powers affecting women, on women's differences and similarities, and on the "directionality of power" in any cross–cultural study of women's narratives, as this thesis sets out to develop (*Feminism* 242).

As a result, whether in postcolonial women's writing or in feminist theory, what constructs the ground for women's alliance is not the unified category of gender. Rather, it is the way we—researchers and critics— analyse class, race, and gender as related to each struggle of transformation. What determines our cross–cultural reception of postcolonial women's narratives is "the way we position historical narratives of experience in relation to each other, the way we theorize relationality as both historical

and simultaneously singular and collective" (Mohanty, *Feminism* 238). Therefore, this thesis sets out to engage with how this "way" formulates numerous (resistant) communities of women from different locations, woven together by plural experiences of oppression and resistance.

Although female communities are geographically and historically concrete, their boundaries are flexible. Neither the critics discussed in this thesis nor I suggest a homogeneous configuration or narrative of Third World women on the grounds that they belong to a certain race or location. Third World women's heterogeneity and specificity make it difficult to separate intersecting power axes in the analysis of women's texts and lives. This stresses the specific "way" of reading postcolonial women's narratives on which I have expounded in Chapters One and Two. In sum, the engagement of Third World women writers and critics with feminism must be context–bound, historically specific, and relational. Contextualised feminisms deconstruct models which overlook the rich meanings of women's realities. And as Antoinette says in Rhys's *WSS*, there are always people on the other side of the world whom we should consider and listen to. Therefore, what defines women in dialogical ways is a web of varying narratives and encounters rather than of "trans–historical constants" (Nash 7). In this case, we will learn to accept and democratise rather than marginalise other women on the claim that they are different from us.

Conclusion

This chapter has explored a number of key feminist issues which informed the theoretical background of the thesis. This necessitated the attempt to deconstruct the global sisterhood model and the figure of the "universal woman" in order to acknowledge women's heterogeneity in theoretical and literary discourses. The chapter also highlighted the tendency of some critics to use the term "womanism" as an expression of female diversity and specificity. Consequently, women from several developing cultures adopt reconstructive methodologies in order to theorise and challenge oppression.

This acknowledges the presence of similarities between Third World feminists and postcolonial women writers discussed in this thesis. Both stress that gender intersects with other powers and that the multilayered intersections of women's identities need to be contextually and relationally analysed. In this sense, postcolonial women writers occupy the positions of literary activists and feminists who promote agendas of decolonisation through the written word. Consequently, the concerns of feminism need to be developed by a return to the texts of Third World women writers in order to revive agendas of change in light of the authors' critical interventions. The next chapter analyses Brodber's *JL* in order to discuss the issues raised in the previous chapters. It explores the theme of female oppression which is tied to female sexuality and analyses the narrative format and the linguistic structure of Brodber's text, thereby arguing that the writing of *JL* in fragmented narrative and linguistic forms has implications for the fragmented identity of the principal character. The thematic–structural link which I explore represents gender issues as a mode of challenging oppression and of reclaiming the black female body which is a resistant/confining space.

Notes

1. See Cora Kaplan's points of view on cultural imperialism in Wisker, *Post–Colonial* 7.

Chapter Four

Erna Brodber's *Jane and Louisa Will Soon Come Home*

In the previous chapter, a number of feminist theoretical debates which resonated with the remit of the selected writers were discussed in order to provide a distinctive background to the thesis. The chapter analysed heterogeneous feminist models such as "feminist solidarity" which, unlike the global sisterhood model, theorised women in complex and inclusive ways. This chapter develops a deconstructive, cultural analysis of Brodber's *JL* which, together with the other selected texts in this thesis, constitutes a metachronous discourse of literary mapping of prismatic voices and various concerns. My reading focuses on issues of diversity, complexity, and the non–linearity of women's transition, thereby enabling the movement backward in order to re–read postcolonial women's texts which are still relevant today.

The analysis of Brodber's text in this chapter offers an example of thematic–stylistic interrelation in representing confining/resistant female spaces. It also attributes Nellie's oppression to socio–sexual tensions inscribed on her body which is a repressive space. However, as argued previously, women have the potential to resist oppression and to be transformed into agents. This necessitates a discussion of female resistance which empowers Nellie to be reconnected with her body and comminute. In this chapter, Nellie's sexual fragmentation and transformation are discussed in relation to linguistic and narrative styles, along with themes and characters. I illustrate how the narrative style and language shift from the fragmented into something more coherent in ways which resonate with Nellie's fragmented and then recuperated personality. These issues have informed the choice of Brodber's *JL* for analysis in conjunction with recent theoretical debates. They have also helped order Brodber's text in this thesis as following a rite of passage about incorporation because it, in a similar manner to Bâ's *SLL* analysed in the next chapter, leads to female empowerment and survival.

Narrative style as a site of textual disruption

As I argued in Chapter Two, Brodber and the other authors discussed in this thesis represent the female body as a space of alienation and liberation in order to deconstruct gender roles and images. This representation operates in terms of particular themes, narrative styles, and language, all of which highlight the link between the postmodern and the postcolonial in Brodber's text.

Gina Wisker describes Brodber's *JL* as "a marvelous post–modernist piece utilising different writing forms and traditions to give a voice to women with differing experiences, distinct from others' versions of their lives" (*Post–Colonial* 105). The literary utilisation of diverse writing styles in Brodber's text has encouraged my analysis of its narrative style and language in order to locate points of intersection between postmodernism and postcolonialism as a strategy of deconstruction. These intersections include concepts of discontinuity, chaos, and indeterminacy which pertain to issues of subjectivity, identity, history, and representation.

Some critics such as hooks state that postmodern discourses are exclusionary even when they draw attention to the differences and experiences of the "Other" (*Yearning* 23). These discourses, it is argued, lack enthusiasm about gender and rely on a centre–periphery model of the world. But this is a generalised and rather sweeping claim as there remain postmodern practices such as postcolonial women's writing which, for Lionnet, challenge cultural centres, bringing to the fore marginalised voices and categories such as gender (6). This suggests that the relation between postmodernity and postcolonial feminist studies is constructive because it demystifies non–Western cultures and female margins in order to express diverse powers "which are the effects of mobile capital as well as the multiple subjectivities that replace the European unitary subject" (Grewal and Kaplan 7). Female liberation and social change can be located in the discourse of postmodernity which links socio–political practices and local identities to issues of female specificity and writing.

This constructive link between postmodernism and postcolonialism is a feature of Brodber's *JL*, particularly in relation to its narrative structure. As Catherine John states, *JL*

is “a fragmented quagmire of disjointed cultural references, much like the psyches of the subjects she portrays” (73). Because the story of Nellie, Brodber’s protagonist, is located within a fragmented, non–linear structure in order to deconstruct normative forms of narrativisation, it is worth considering the significance of the narrative style which deploys resources of postmodernism within a postcolonial context. These resources are a non–chronological or metachronous time sequence and a fragmented narrative format, both of which amplify Nellie’s dissociated consciousness and gradual quest for identity, as will be argued below.

The narrative’s non–chronological time sequence

The non–chronological time sequence of Nellie’s story in Brodber’s *JL* problematises any direct correlation between her life and the emergence of a Jamaican identity. As I read it, Nellie’s life experience is a personal coming–of–age story and a metaphor for the sort of female identity which might emerge from the burdens of tradition and colonialism. Nellie’s life is a chaotic narrative which shifts between different vignettes and memories which are part of Nellie’s past, present, and future. The shifts highlight Nellie’s fluctuation between childhood and adolescence, body and mind, tradition and modernity, and community and family.

For instance, in Chapter One of the subsection on “Voices,” Nellie is about to take her “Training College exams” (Brodber, *JL* 7), while in Chapter Six of the same subsection she is “sixteen, a prefect at school and a patrol leader” (16). In Chapter Two of the subsection on “The Tale of the Snail in the Kumbla,” Nellie is “hardly eleven” (23), whereas she is “going to be eight” in the following chapter of the novel (25). This example of temporal dissociation is purposeful because it disorients readers: they lose sense of chronological time sequence in the narrative, thereby suggesting the necessity of an alternative reading strategy of the text. An alternative reading demands that readers of Brodber’s text link past and present narrative events in order to derive a more coherent sense of the narrative plot. This acknowledges how a woman’s past interacts with her present and future in ways reminiscent of “genealogical analysis” of women’s texts; of their cultural

specificities and daily standpoints which construct women's identities and narratives (Sarup 58).

Brodber's *JL* is similar to the other texts analysed in this thesis in so far as all are texts about women's small narratives and diverse standpoints, written out of the interrelatedness of history, individual, and community. According to Madan Sarup, "history inserts itself into grand explanatory systems and linear processes, celebrates great moments and individuals and seeks to document a point of origin" (59). By contrast, genealogical analysis, much like the situated readings of women's texts in this thesis, preserves "the singularity of events, turns away from the spectacular in favour of the discredited, the neglected and a whole range of phenomena which have been denied a history" (59). This makes genealogical analysis a feature of Brodber's *JL* which acknowledges the specificity of incidents and actions in relation to society and its living and dead people who are "shrouded together" (12).

As Elina Valovirta argues, Brodber's emphasis on narratives of female specificity relates to the lack of writings on the Caribbean female psyche which has encouraged Brodber to focus on ideas such as women's liberation and male/female relations ("Kumbla" 132). Brodber, a novelist and a sociologist, provides an insider view on both Jamaican society and the presence of women as oppressors/oppressed in that society. She writes the female body from a subjective as opposed to objective frame of reference. This suggests that Brodber situates the female body in the postcolonial Caribbean context of the narrative, where Nellie's body is represented as a complex site of oppression and struggle against cultural and sexual tensions. In doing so, Brodber seeks to recuperate the female voice and body which have been denied presence by hegemonic discourses such as patriarchy and imperialism.

Fragmented into random images, Nellie's story lends itself to Sarup's genealogical analysis in so far as it highlights the plurality of powers behind events and focuses on the relationship between individuals and communities, and between contextualised, partial knowledges. This, in Sarup's words, challenges "the claims of a unitary body of theory which would filter, hierarchize and order them in the name of some true knowledges" (59). For instance, Nellie describes Robin, her friend, as a man filled with enthusiasm to

learn more and to minister to his people: "my young man talks in an unknown tongue . . . words like 'underdevelopment', 'Marx', 'cultural pluralism' . . . He's got the black spirit and it's riding him hard. Lead on Robin. Lead on" (Brodber, *JL* 46). However, Robin dies tragically; he "had reached our highest phase of evolution: he had become a dried–up bird and could only crumble into dust" (52–53).

The description of Robin as an educated man is juxtaposed with his death as a desiccated bird. For Brodber, Robin and other intellectuals disintegrate "because they refused to recognize their personal links with the ordinary people, who hold ideas useful to the discourse [of social change]" ("Me" 120). The intellectuals' entrapment symbolises the hope and yet the disintegration of master narratives and abstractions such as Marxism and multiculturalism. Master narratives are demolished in the wake of postmodern and postcolonial discourses which give rise to experimental texts or to situated, interrelated representations of history, individuals, and communities, as is evident in the other texts analysed in this thesis.

Accordingly, Nellie's fragmented life reflects the disconnected yet meaningful way in which some people survive. People experience their lives as caught up in a metachronous network of past memories, present events, and future plans. This lack of coherence complicates the linear construction of a unified Jamaican identity, much like the other texts explored in this thesis which defy monolithic, fixed representations of women and of their postcolonial experiences. The image of Jamaica as a new place appears in the section of the novel, "My Dear Will You Allow Me," where a group of people sing together about Jamaica (Brodber, *JL* 9). The group is guided by the "conviction that having sung, there would be no more leaf spot, that there would be no more soil erosion and that we had built anew" (9). Yet the song creates an illusory image of Jamaica because the place where Nellie's people live is "dim and cool and very dark . . . You'll find no finger posts to point you to our place . . . Mountains ring us round and cover us" (9).

The presence of a chorus singing in harmony but located within a fragmented time sequence is significant because it undermines the narrative of Jamaican identity and society as coherent and homogeneous and of the image of Jamaica as

> a lovely island in the Caribbean Sea

An island full of coconuts and fine banana trees

An island where the sugar cane is waving in the

breeze

Jamaica is its name

We are out to build a new Jamaica. (Brodber, *JL* 9)

Brodber uses symbolic images of a recuperated Jamaican society in order to help Nellie recuperate her wholeness. For example, Nellie describes Jamaica as a garden which needs to be cleansed because "grass had over–run our paths. No paths lay before us. We would have to make them" (146). The need to clean the garden; that is, Jamaican society, points to the emergence of a new place which looks toward new beginnings and future plans despite being corrupted by the colonial legacy. The place helps generate a new Jamaican identity which, in a similar manner to the other narratives explored in this thesis, is metachronous in the sense of being collective, dynamic, and conscious of its past, present, and future possibilities.

This explains why Nellie and her people "are cleaning our garden . . . we will grow feet and stand . . . We are getting ready . . . It will come" (Brodber, *JL* 147). This passage refers to the future expectation of building a new Jamaican identity and society. The phrase, "We are cleaning our garden," implies that Nellie has not yet fully cleaned, or managed to clean, the gardens (threats) that engender negative images of female sexuality. Also, the phrase, "We are getting ready," in its present progressive form points to a promising end. As the novel approaches its end, Nellie is preparing herself "to give birth to what has grown inside her throughout the novel; budding womanhood" (Valovirta, "Kumbla" 135). Consequently, the narrative ending anticipates Nellie's readiness for asserting her presence as a woman and for building a new society.

The transformation is emphasised by Nellie's dream of the fish—a symbol of rejuvenation and expectation in my Syrian culture. Brodber uses the fish imagery in order to show the polyphonous and evolving nature of Jamaican identity. Nellie dreams that she is pregnant with a "parrot fish so large that it stretched my belly to the point where it became a square gold fish bowl" (*JL* 147). Despite its large size, the fish causes Nellie neither pain nor frustration because "It will come" (147). Thus, the people's song and the

fish imagery suggest that Caribbean society is not unified or totally transformed. Also, they emphasise the potential of a reformed Jamaican identity to reclaim the female body which is erased by colonialism and Anglo–Victorian ethics of womanhood, as will be discussed later in this chapter.

Fragmented narrative format

In a similar manner to its non–linear time sequence, the fragmented narrative format of Brodber's text is an aspect that is worth discussing. Brodber is an experimental woman writer and this manifests itself in *JL* because "She makes herself free to mix different literary forms and thus shows the liberating nature of hybridity" (Valovirta, "Into" 333). The mixing of genre and forms displaces the master's tradition in order to create a new site for writing the female body and voice. This suggests that a text which deconstructs and transforms is one which envisions something new out of existent things as an act of defamiliarisation.

Brodber's *JL* is one such text in so far as it challenges classic, straightforward narratives about the moral growth of their principal characters such as Nellie. As the next chapter will argue, Bâ's *SLL* can be read as a social novel, a regional novel, and an epistolary novel because it has the characteristics of these three genres. Yet neither label totally fits *SLL* and this contributes to the complexity of its categorisation. Likewise, Brodber's *JL* challenges conventional literary genres because it creates an example of intermarriage not only on the thematic level (the marriage of Tia Maria and William) but also on the narrative one.

Brodber's text represents gender issues through an interrelation between themes, language, and structure as sites of counter–hegemonic signification and deconstruction, as argued in Chapter Two. For Denise deCaires Narain, Brodber's deconstructive approach is consolidated when the reader of *JL* "confronts the suspended titles of chapters listed on the contents page; fragments of a Jamaican children's ring game . . . [in order to] stress . . . a sense of the novel as continuous, circular process rather than as static product" ("Body" 101). This shows that Nellie's story shifts not only between the

past and the present but also between different genres in order to challenge fixed narrative styles and to allow room for the elusiveness of words and actions.

For instance, the structure of Brodber's *JL* varies; it is divided into major sections, subsections with titles, and smaller thematic chapters within subsections as in the first section of the text, "My Dear Will You Allow Me" (5). The section contains four subsections such as "Voices" and "Miniatures" as well as numbered chapters within those subsections. The second section, "To Waltz With You" (47), has ten numbered chapters, while the last section of the text, "Jane and Louisa Will Soon Come Home," includes six entitled subsections such as "The Spying Glass," but no chapters are included (117). Nellie's self–consciousness and her way of narrating events also appear disconnected. The ambivalent narrative format complicates issues of genre classification and of the attempt to read the novel in a straightforward manner. This complexity is intensified by the recurrent change of Nellie's attitudes which are conveyed in the first person pronoun "I." The latter refers to an identity under construction and to a subjectivity which acknowledges its presence yet undermines that of some modern concepts such as the "Cartesian subject" because they downplay the relationship between individuals and their communities (Ashcroft, Griffiths, and Tiffin, *Key* 220). As a result, the decentred self of Nellie and the indeterminacy of attitudes and meanings are features of postmodern and postcolonial writing.

In a similar manner to Rhys's *WSS*, Brodber's *JL*, with its open, indeterminate meaning, can be described as a writerly text because it encourages readers to re–enact the role of the writer in order to escape their positions as "passive recipients" and to re–establish the text's unity and narrative lines (Barthes 4). A writerly text, Rhys's *WSS* traces the development of Antoinette from a young, disturbed girl in a West Indian setting to a mad wife imprisoned in the attic. A meaningful reading of Rhys's text demands that readers link Antoinette's character to her metachronous situation; to her past life, present fragmentation, and future hopes, all of which construct her complex character. Brodber's *JL* also demands that readers partake in constructing its meaning and in ordering its events which shift between past, present, and future, as well as between different linguistic structures within the same passage. As the shift problematises the attempt to

identify the addresser and the addressee of a certain passage, it blurs the gap between subject and object, man and woman, and individual and community.

Narration which takes on the role of stage performance is another feature of the narrative style in Brodber's text. Some passages in *JL* are ambiguous dialogues that can be read as a play, as in the example where Nellie addresses the readers of her story in Chapter Four of "The Tale of the Snail in the Kumbla" (27). In order to guide the readers through events, Nellie asks them to "watch the scene" as if they were an audience watching a play (27). Also, she switches from a third person narrator to a first person narrator in the same paragraph, where "she" becomes "I": "She is walking home from classes, free at last . . . I am in a foreign country. I live like all foreign students in a dingy, dirty flat" (27). The alternation of the pronouns "I" and "she" in this passage highlights the construction of Nellie's identity and its elusiveness throughout the novel.

Nellie plays the role of a student in a foreign country in order to illustrate the impact of cultural differences on women in new environments. In a similar manner to Nnu Ego in Emecheta's *JM*, Nellie undergoes cultural conflicts which threaten her sanity and wholeness. Nellie, as is Nnu Ego, is spatially distanced from her family and community but related to them through socio–moral values and gender roles. This shows that Nellie's disjointed subjectivity denotes the gap between rural and urban life styles, and this explains why she builds a kumbla of several roles between which she constantly hovers.

By definition, the kumbla is "a kind of protective enclosure, calabash or cocoon, made up of layers of assumed roles and evasions, behind which the fragile self hides its vulnerability" (O'Callaghan, "Interior" 107). The image of the kumbla and the fragmented style of Brodber's text indicate Nellie's ambivalent attitudes about women and sexuality. Nellie feels confused and guilty about sexuality due to being a woman. This is attributed to the fact that the institutionalised gender roles which Nellie has received as a girl have distorted the picture of the female body in her mind. Besides, they have complicated Nellie's identity which is based on the perception of people judging her rather than on the way she perceives her own self.

This explains why Brodber uses the technique of stage performance in Nellie's words which inform the audience of the play scene, thereby highlighting Nellie's fragmentation:

"Foreign students who wear sweater blouses and jeans . . . They welcome male company. Enter the male. . . " (*JL* 27–28). In this passage, Nellie enacts the role of a foreign student living in a poor, urban place. She describes different ways of living in urban and rural places and of perceiving female sexual experiences. A new player not named by Nellie appears on the stage. "He" is a speaker engaged in a conversation with an unnamed woman referred to as "she":

> He: How about a movie?
>
> She: Tonight if you want.
>
> He: Not tonight. My girl you know . . . have to take my
>
> girl friend out.
>
> She (thinks): Loyal to his girl! Even better. (28)

Along with these theatrical dialogues which are represented in an ambiguous way, there is the chaotic narrative format which makes it difficult to identify the speaker/subject or listener/object in some passages.

For instance, a character says, "Mother says I must stop writing to you—All right, but you must write to let me know why she says so—she says all this writing is not good for me for I must take my . . . exams" (Brodber, *JL* 7). This dialogue complicates the attempt to recognise whether the speaker/I is Nellie or Sarah Richmond involved in a romantic relationship. Also, "you" may refer to Robin or Baba, Nellie's boyfriends, or to Alexander, Sarah's lover. In addition, the use of the word "exams" in the above passage creates a sense of confusion between the subject and the object of the dialogue because the pronoun "I" can identify the speaker as Nellie who is planning to attend university. Again the pronoun "I" can refer to Sarah who "was ashamed that she had married Mrs Becca Pinnock's brother rather than finish her exams" (93).

These examples of narrative confusion stress the deconstructive aspect of Brodber's novel which goes against the grain of Enlightenment narratives of civilisation, linear history, and narratives of human progress. Besides, they highlight the fragility of some modern concepts such as the "Cartesian subject" which downplay the interrelatedness of the collective and the individual in the formation of one's identity (Ashcroft, Griffiths, and Tiffin, *Key* 220). The "Cartesian subject" is defined as an autonomous, rational "Self"

operating in the world through its separation from the object (220). In Brodber's novel, "Cartesian" subjectivity is replaced by multiple subjectivities and powers which affect individuals, as argued in the previous chapters. This shows that individuals and communities interact with one another and that social interaction undermines the subject–object divide in Nellie's story.

In short, the fragmented narrative parts and events of Brodber's text reflect Nellie's social and sexual alienation. But they also deconstruct essentialist ideas about the subject and the object of history which is a key issue for postcolonialism and postmodernism. For Nellie, her family, past, and present are active ingredients that construct her identity. This makes her conclude that "the voice belongs to the family group dead and alive . . . we must walk over them to get where we are going" (*JL* 12). This "voice" stands for "the natives of my person" (O'Callaghan, "Rediscovering" 61); that is, for Nellie's community members and their shared heritage, present solidarity, and future recuperation of a Jamaican identity.

Language as a postmodern and postcolonial theme

In a similar manner to the non–linear and fragmented narrative format, language is a postmodern and postcolonial thematic element in Brodber's text. This element relates to postcolonial acts of deconstruction which have attracted the attention of postmodern critics and theorists (hooks, *Yearning* 23). In addition, the writing styles and the reading strategies of postcolonial women's texts reiterate (some) aspects of postmodern theory which include open and non–authoritative meanings and genres.

The relation between the postcolonial and the postmodern in Brodber's text manifests itself in the emphasis on local and fragmented aspects of signification and on the shifting nature of identity, as discussed earlier. Besides, it highlights the fragility of a transcendent authorial subject and the collapse of monolithic, imperialistic interpretations of the world. Brodber represents Nellie's fragmented personality and story through experimenting with language, namely thematic–stylistic interrelation which includes the use of diverse linguistic styles and registers. This helps trace the different experiences

which construct Nellie's identity and place, as much of the narrative tells about Nellie's attempt to come to terms with her past and present.

Brodber's novel implies that traditions and history are as important for individuals as their personal lives and that the individual–collective dialectic is a vital part of Nellie's identity. As a member of a family and community, Nellie has to accept the ways in which her community's traditions are presented and assigned a role in shaping her conduct and worldview. A way of achieving social interaction and belonging is attained through the usage of different language registers of Jamaican Creole, particularly in dialogues. For example, Nellie uses certain fragmented and ungrammatical speech patterns in order to communicate with her rural family, but as a "grown up and citified" person, she switches to a different speech pattern that is more coherent in her conversations with Aunt Becca (O'Callaghan, "Re–discovering" 63).

This example shows that Nellie fluctuates between different linguistic patterns in ways resonant with the roles she is playing, as will be discussed below. It also suggests that the representation of a community's speech and linguistic heritage go beyond the choice of syntax and vocabulary. This shows that the language of Brodber's *JL* points to broader socio–individual implications, where certain attitudes and orientations toward characters and the world are mirrored in the speech patterns used. This makes language a sociolinguistic, cultural device rather than merely a stylistic one. To elaborate on the sociological aspect of language in *JL*, Evelyne O'Callaghan cites Roger Mais as a novelist for whom language, individuals, and society interrelate to give meaning to one's identity ("Re–discovering" 62). Mais uses language or writing as a socio–cultural tool in order to depict some features which shape a Jamaican man's personality, such as "his love of big words and ostentation" and "his biblical allusions and flowery speech, [which] are all in keeping with one who has been . . . deprived of adequate means of expressing himself" (62).

Mais's mode of textual representation through stylistic excess bridges the gap between sociology and artistic imagination to reveal socio–cultural features which explain a particular character or action. Similarly, an important speech pattern in Brodber's *JL* is Creole code–switching which is made manifest in Nellie's linguistic shifts in different

situations; that is, in shifting between linguistic registers and lects in order to suit the narrative purpose. The shifting gives insights into the Jamaican society presented because it explains the reasons behind a character's choice of speech and the need to perform this switching under certain circumstances.

According to some linguists, the language situation in Jamaica is bilingual, with Jamaican Creole different from Jamaican English, and "all utterances falling between these two ideals can be shown to be the result of code switching" (O'Callaghan, "Re–discovering" 62). For other linguists, the Jamaican model of language is a chain that ranges from Jamaican English/"acrolect" to Jamaican Creole/"basilect," with utterances falling between the two as "mesolect" registers (62). In other words, speakers can move through the linguistic chain but their linguistic capacity relies on social factors. This suggests that an individual's speech indicates his/her "membership in a certain ethnic, occupational, age or peer group . . . class or level of education" (62–63). Hence, shifting from one lect to another signals shifting social roles and positions.

This is evident in Nellie's use of a specific lect in order to communicate with her family and to narrate an event relating to them. The lect includes a variety of mesolect Creole that is closer to Jamaican Creole: "But is not me one frighten. Everybody else frighten too and they quiet . . . Is a funny thing but when the people you close to 'fraid, is a warm fear . . . Is not we one 'fraid" (Brodber, *JL* 14). But as a grown–up person, Nellie switches to a different speech pattern closer to Jamaican English. In a conversation with her middle–class Aunt Becca, Nellie behaves as a responsible, educated adult. The acrolect register Nellie uses implies that she puts on a new identity or social rank, thus a new linguistic register is required: "But it is a Saturday night . . . You let me go to evensong and speech festival by myself at night. I don't understand . . . So I must sit here quiet like an alabaster baby because I am my cousin B?" (16–17).

Nellie's shift between linguistic styles resonates with the shift in roles and settings and contributes to the complexity of classifying characters according to a certain identity. O'Callaghan calls linguistic shifting and flexibility "verbal adaptability" which develops individuals' sociolinguistic input and speech styles ("Re–discovering" 63). This makes verbal adaptability a necessary skill for individuals exposed to different social groups and

to an increased state of sociolinguistic mobility and variation. The skill is a feature of the urban condition and its social relations, where an individual's choice of linguistic style may not necessarily point to his/her class, education, or language. Also, code–switching in Brodber's text highlights a form of sociolinguistic intersection within the Creole chain and its lects. The form invokes the theme of camouflage, where a character assumes a specific identity through adopting a particular speech style or class as a means of escape from one's community. This is evident in the characters of Tia Maria and Anancy who embody the theme of social disguise via linguistic and verbal disguise.

Sharing Bhabha's argument on colonial mimicry, Katrak states that the colonised subject "acquires a sense of power by learning, even 'mimicking' . . . about the colonizers' world—their history, geography, and value systems in their language" (93). Power acquisition is evident in the character of Tia Maria in Brodber's *JL* because she writes herself out of her family history by marrying a white man. She does her best to ensure the superiority of her "khaki" children by nurturing in them kumblas of social camouflage or separation from black community (7). Because speech overlaps with the theme of camouflage in the narrative, Tia Maria teaches her children how to speak like their white father William and how to disguise their lect and belonging: "Tia started to weave one of those purely spun kumblas . . . She nurtured one in each of her children: You mustn't say bway, you must say bai. Talk like your father" (138).

In a sense, the character of Tia Maria recalls that of Antoinette in Rhys's *WSS* in the sense that both women seek to secure the privileges which whiteness accords to women in the Caribbean. Identification with whiteness is evident in Antoinette's desire to have two white dresses which reveal her desire to identify with England, given that the latter is believed to secure her social belonging and mobility. Likewise, Tia Maria "did everything to annihilate herself . . . The stranger the words her children spoke, the happier she felt . . . the more sure she was that they had found their places in . . . a [white] world . . . that was safe and successful" (Brodber, *JL* 139).

The character of Tia Maria shows that speech intersects with the theme of camouflage because she tries to deny her black identity by mimicking the language and life style of her white husband. This highlights individuals' ability to play different roles as a tactic of

survival which is linked to the kumbla. Brodber introduces the story of Anancy in relation to the kumbla in order to illustrate the theme of camouflage by putting on a specific kumbla or shape. Known as a trickster, Anancy is a folkloric figure in Jamaican culture who tricks people around him to survive (Summers 2). Anancy is also "a born liar . . . a maker of finely crafted kumblas" (Brodber, *JL* 124). He uses the kumbla as a protective device to save himself and Tucuma, his child, from being captured by Dryhead, the king of waters.

Besides, Anancy's role–playing and verbal fluency are essential tools of deceiving Dryhead who catches Anancy fishing in his waters. Anancy enacts the role of a broken man who modestly hands over his children to Dryhead. Anancy's speech tone becomes that of surrender and modesty in order to suit the trickster's role he is playing: "Brother Dryhead . . . I broke, I los', I bow to you. You is King. I just can't make it . . . I bring the children . . . Take them, eat them . . . I can't manage no more" (Brodber, *JL* 125–26). Anancy's rhetorical skill at role–playing in this passage helps him deceive Dryhead. Gifted with wit and verbal fluency, Anancy manipulates the verbal weakness of Firefly, Dryhead's guard, to his own advantage. Firefly cannot distinguish between singular and plural forms of speech and this linguistic weakness results in a visual one: "Singulars and plurals is the same thing to him for the man would just not listen. And Anancy knew that" (125). Anancy tricks Firefly who cannot see whether Anancy has brought one child or many children to be offered to Dryhead: "take this chiles of mine . . . Put these chiles at store house . . . Put children, not child in the store house" (125). Anancy manages to take Tucuma out of the store house.

Visual and linguistic confusion in this passage is further illustrated by the double meaning of Anancy's rebuke of his child in public: "You face favour . . . go eena kumbla" (Brodber, *JL* 128). The phrase, "you face favour," means "you are a despicable person, get out of my sight," and the phrase, "go eena kumbla," means "put on a disguise." Anancy asks Tucuma to reside in different kumblas; that is, to put on different shapes in order to ensure survival. Because Dryhead does not understand the real meaning behind these phrases, Anancy's plan of camouflage succeeds. "When used in the right way, as in this

case, the kumbla, woven out of language, becomes a positive thing which enables you to survive" (Valovirta, "Into" 329). Therefore, Anancy ensures his safe home return.

Another feature of the characters' linguistic capacity and variation is the mixture of standard and non–standard English. The combination is a strategy of appropriating and "domesticating" the coloniser's language; that is, of localising it in order to fit the language and the culture of the colonised (Rushdie 64). The use of non–standard English in Brodber's *JL* includes incorrect grammatical structures such as "they should a did tell her not to play . . . they should a did hear him when him say that him want rice and fowl" (13). Another example of incorrect grammar is "me [Nellie] did see when him lift up him foot . . . You never see no horn. Horn is something in him hand" (23). The pronoun "me" is sometimes a demonstrative pronoun which refers to the subject of the sentence as in the example, "It is me who wrote the letter." But in the above passage, the pronoun "me" deconstructs the modernist assumption of a unified self, implying that Nellie's identity is constructed under the eyes of others and through ways of interaction and of seeing the world as a collective reality.

Furthermore, the combination of standard and non–standard English relates to the mixture of cultures and binaries such as Self/"Other" and coloniser/colonised. Tia Maria and William embody the inter–racial hybridity of Jamaican culture, yet both threaten the notion of racial purity. Because race is "the marker of civilization," keeping intact racial difference and purity is a prerequisite to the maintenance of colonial power (Ashcroft, Griffiths, and Tiffin, *Key* 143). However, racial differences may evoke the coloniser's desire for the colonised and this suggests their dependence on each other for survival. Brodber here highlights the impossibility of cultural purity and exposes the attraction of the "Other" through the marriage of Tia Maria and William.

As argued previously, Tia Maria denies her black heritage which she describes as primitive, unlike William's white culture which is "the hope, the blanket, the kumbla and calabash of a black dynasty" (Brodber, *JL* 135). The interracial identification of the couple suggests that most cultural products result from the merging of practices, languages, and traditions. It also helps Tia Maria claim the privileges secured by her husband's culture and this shows the futility of having pure race or culture. The character of Granny Tucker

also represents the futility of racial purity. Granny Tucker denies that "her grandfather had been a slave. No Sir. He was a brown man who could read and write . . . But displays of anger must be trained out of the new generation . . . must be frozen with a compress of ice" (31). The traumatic, historical connection to slavery is present in Granny Tucker's memory and in the collective unconscious of the community. Yet Granny Tucker's repressed cultural memory is a vital part of her identity and so it has to be acknowledged and reconciled with in order to survive.

This desire to locate one's identity in a pure world such as William's or Granny Tucker's is challenged by Brodber's combination of standard and non–standard English. This suggests that cultures and languages can be interconnected through multiplicity and difference, especially as Brodber focuses on plurality and unity in difference in order to represent women's small narratives and experiences. This highlights the hybridity of one's linguistic and cultural heritage and the significant ways of seeing the world from within one's community. Therefore, postcolonial and postmodern tendencies interrelate in Brodber's *JL* in order to stress the deconstruction of binaries and dominant centres, where "all things [are] parodied, piebald, dual, mimicked, always–already borrowed, and ironically secondhand" (Boehmer, *Colonial* 238).

Sexual repression and dissociation from the black female body

Gender is a significant factor in the development of postcolonial women's narratives such as the ones analysed in this thesis. Brodber, among other authors, offers new routes which help reclaim the female body and voice. Besides, she interrogates gender inequality in order to interrupt conventional notions and ideals of sexual roles and identities.

A key issue outlined in Chapter Two is that postcolonial women writers represent women as complex female figures in so far as they are victims and agents, with attributes and reactions that are destructive and healing. For example, Devi's "BG" represents Jashoda's maternal body as a site of agency and exploitation by patriarchal and nationalist discourses. Likewise, Brodber's *JL* represents Nellie's body as an ambivalent

space of repression and transition. This shows that Nellie and Jashoda are oppressed by various powers which construct their identities as women, yet they are empowered to reclaim agency and to be transformed, because agency or transformation is a complementary part of a woman's narrative of oppression. These modes of representing the female body as an ambivalent space point to issues of diversity and complexity in the construction of women's narratives and bodies.

The story of Anancy mentioned above shows that individuals create kumblas as a mechanism of protection from outside threats. For Carolyn Cooper, what threatens Nellie is female sexuality "in its creative and destructive manifestations" ("Afro" 281). This threat in Brodber's *JL* recalls El Saadawi's *WPZ* because both texts expose the restrictions which sexuality and the male gaze place upon women in patriarchal cultures. While the creative aspect of female sexuality refers to women's ability to reproduce, its destructive side also relates to the womb as this is negatively described by Brodber.

Nellie's socio–sexual fragmentation is attributed to her female relatives whose undesirable attitudes about womanhood distance Nellie from her body. This explains why Brodber represents female sexuality as the mysterious "it" and "the whole thing of womanhood, the whole frightening magic of woman–ness" (Valovirta, "Into" 237). Specifically, "it" refers to menstruation which fragments Nellie. Brodber's representation of female sexuality can be attained through the level of language, as argued earlier in this chapter and in Chapter Two. For example, Brodber uses the pun in the word "period" during a conversation between Nellie and her mother (*JL* 23). The conversation intensifies Nellie's sense of shame because she is approaching menstruation. When Nellie reaches puberty which means "it" is coming, her mother advises her to stay away from men: "when it does [come], make sure you tell your aunt" (23). Nellie replies, "Period. End of sentence . . . I am dismissed. Finished. Best to forget all this strangeness but Lord, it's eating up the world" (23–24).

But the pun used in the word "Period" has two meanings: the punctuation mark "period" and Nellie's menstruation. Obviously, the rest of the passage shows that "period" denotes a threatening stage in Nellie's life. Following Valovirta, I argue that the word "period" connects Nellie's "oncoming puberty to an ending, not to a new beginning of

budding womanhood, as one might imagine" because "rumours and an attitude of concealment towards sexuality construct Nellie's womanhood in the form of mystery" ("Kumbla" 135). It is not surprising that adolescence as a critical stage in Nellie's life leads to confusion and fragmentation, as will be discussed later.

Because women act as female victimisers along with men, Aunt Becca increases Nellie's sense of fragmentation and so the aunt can be contrasted with Ramatoulaye in Bâ's *SLL*. As the next chapter will argue, Ramatoulaye is an educated, strong mother who takes the responsibility of educating her daughters about sexuality in ways that raise their consciousness. Ramatoulaye "allows them an appropriate amount of freedom, but encourages them to confide in her" (Wilcox 127). By contrast, Aunt Becca's warnings and pieces of advice express negativity toward female sexuality which becomes a space of alienation. The warnings can save Nellie from a tragedy which recalls that of Aunt Becca who has aborted her baby. This explains why the aunt makes herself a series of restrictive kumblas which repress her body; nevertheless, protection turns into destruction in the case of Nellie.

Accordingly, the character of Aunt Becca offers insights into the Jamaica society presented in the narrative. Educated, middle–class people in the Caribbean such as Aunt Becca are shown to have absorbed Victorian, middle–class values of womanhood. These values, combined with racial, classist, and patriarchal oppressions, deny the black female body. As deCaires Narain and O'Callaghan argue, the notion of "oppressive ladyhood" is associated with Victorian and Christian strictures such as morality, respectability, and socio–cultural taboos placed on the expression of female sexuality ("Anglophone" 628). This explains why Brodber associates female sexuality with shame and defilement.

Womanhood as an oppressive space in Brodber's *JL* relates to Nellie's female relatives who attempt to erase their black bodies, where "Tia had to die that her children could live. Aunt Becca had to kill hers so that she could live, and cousins Letitia, Teena and B had simply dropped U–roy and Locksely and Obadiah . . . What an abominable scrap heap thing is this thing womb" (143). This passage points to the different kumblas chosen by Nellie's relatives as a means of survival. Role–playing intersects at this point with the assumption of a specific personality and kumbla. Tia Maria, Aunt Becca, and Teena

represent different models of women and of the kumblas in which Nellie could potentially reside.

For instance, there is Aunt Becca who chooses the kumbla of middle–class respectability at the price of aborting her illegitimate child and of making herself childless. Also, there are B, Teena, and Letitia who embody the negative image of the womb as a container to throw in it unwanted children. As Brodber remarks, the womb "has the capacity that people can just fling something up there that they don't intend to retrieve . . . which is what you do with a scrap–heap" (qtd. in O'Callaghan, "Re–discovering" 63). Eventually, the efforts of Nellie's relatives at gender violence alienate them from their bodies and lead them to self–denigration. However, the children's ring game, "Jane and Louisa will soon come home," which the novel takes as its title, defies the suppression of the female body.

Reclaiming the female body is the homecoming of "Jane and Louisa;" of a woman's reconciliation with her body, self, and community. The section, "My Dear Will You Allow Me," explores the theme of female sexual repression and fragmentation in *JL* (Brodber 5). It shows several socio–moral taboos which restrict Nellie due to being a female. These taboos take the form of direct and indirect threats, didactic anecdotes, and pieces of advice from Nellie's mother and Aunt Becca regarding what to wear, how to behave, and whom to befriend:

> Don't let boys get near to you for they can tell just by looking at your finger nails that you have it. What a weight! (24)
>
> So freeze yourself and wait and how better to wait than in the shade of a kumbla? So build yourself one if you haven't got one . . . So you must sit still like an alabaster baby in your kumbla lest you be your [fallen] Cousin B. (143)

Such moral instructions affect Nellie's life, mainly because she is a female progressing to adolescence and to engagement with people. Also, they arouse in Nellie a fear of contamination and loss which dissociate her socially and sexually. More broadly, they signal the participation of (some) women such as Aunt Becca in perpetuating gender roles which are constructed and transmitted to daughters through their mothers and aunts.

Besides, "To Waltz With You," has a gendered element which describes Nellie's involvement in radical politics and her subsequent nervous breakdown (Brodber, *JL* 49). The third and fourth sections, "Into This Beautiful Garden" and "Jane and Louisa will Soon Come Home," return to the events narrated in the first part; nevertheless, the return indicates change and homecoming (85, 119). It draws the narrative events together into a coherent family history which empowers Nellie to reconcile with her past and body. As discussed earlier in this chapter, the pivotal metaphor in Brodber's text is the kumbla which is linked to Nellie's fragmentation and reclamation of her body. The frequent occurrence of the kumbla in Nellie's story denotes a woman's need to be hidden from threatening situations in a suppressed mental state or in an enclosed place.

The multiple meanings of the kumbla connect with Anancy's tales to reveal the importance of ancestral legacy for the protection of its descendants. Brodber describes the kumbla as "a beach ball . . . an egg shell . . . a calabash . . . an umbrella . . . [and] a comic strip space ship" (*JL* 123). These shifting shapes add to the indeterminacy of the kumbla, where although "you are safe in the kumbla, where no one can handle you, it means that you cannot handle them, either. Ultimately, action becomes impossible when one stays locked in the alternative order" (Valovirta, "Kumbla" 139). In other words, although the kumbla protects a woman's body sheathed by it against pressures, it negatively affects its dweller.

The ambivalence and the negative impact of the kumbla relate to the black female body under slavery which was a site of ambivalent colonial desires on plantations, as argued in the previous chapter. According to Rhonda Cobham, the black woman in the New World was physically strong, economically resourceful, and sexually independent (52). Such qualities were imposed on the black woman "as part of her status as . . . non–woman . . . during slavery but, like the kumblas of Brodber's vision, the disfigurement functioned dialectically to protect and extend African traditions of female independence and physical prowess" (52). Although these qualities enable self–expression and survival, they erase the black woman's presence and obscure the powers which have conditioned them. This demonstrates the ways in which socialisation into constructed gender roles is informed by race and class, among other hierarchies.

Examples of these powers include ideological and physical violence exerted on the colonised. The colonial enslavement of the female body is part of a process which represses the specificity of the colonised, both male and female. It also creates binaries associated with the missionary discourse of the colonisers which privileges the European, the male, and the refined. By contrast, colonial enslavement undermines the African, the female, and the "Other," and this makes the colonial position of black women undergo multiple forms of oppression. Therefore, conflicting colonial values and binaries divide rather than unite women such as Tia Maria, Nellie, and Aunt Becca in Brodber's *JL* as well as Tia and Antoinette in Rhys's *WSS*.

Furthermore, colonial values and demands are absorbed by some black women, especially those of the Jamaican bourgeoisie, such as Tia Maria and Aunt Becca for whom the kumbla is a device for cultural and bodily repression. Tia Maria seeks to eradicate her black body from her family history through the kumbla of disguise and colonial mimicry. Likewise, Aunt Becca chooses the kumbla of social respect and censure as reflected in her appearance, where her eyes rule over family members in order to look out for indecent behaviour or gesture: "Aunt Becca's shaming eye ruled our roost. Aunt Becca's . . . thin lips pursed together like a shrivelled star apple. Aunt Becca's fish eyes shamed everyone into unworthiness" (Brodber, *JL* 92–93). Aunt Becca's eyes recall the eyes of Firdaus's mother in El Saadawi's *WPZ* in so far as both women act as "successful victimizers" who are complicit with the patriarchal gaze in re–enacting gender inequities (Dubek 210).

Therefore, Aunt Becca's behaviour and appearance indicate that self–denial and censure have left her dried up, symbolically and literally. Her self–inflicted violence leaves her barren after aborting her child by Mass Tanny to improve her family status and to marry Mr. Pinnock who is a teacher. Such censorious manners and values affect Nellie who lives with Aunt Becca in town in order to continue her studies. The aunt advises Nellie to wear the same kumbla as hers/Becca's; that is, not to communicate with men who will spoil her future. Eventually, Nellie infers that Aunt Becca is not a selfish person because "she showed me where to find and how to wear my kumbla" (Brodber, *JL* 142). As such, Aunt Becca's teachings create "psychic veils" which render Nellie the object of

the aunt's dominant gaze which is juxtaposed with the supportive, empowering looks of Aunt Alice (Hitchcock 76).

Moreover, Aunt Becca's teachings distance Nellie from her body and from her ancestry by spinning a protective kumbla of alienation. This is attributed to the negative attitudes about the black female body and the unwanted pregnancies in Nellie's family. Consequently, Nellie becomes another Anancy, a spinner of kumblas and her sexuality turns into a space of shame and alienation. Cobham is justified in arguing that Aunt Becca's advice and home provide Nellie with a safe place in order to pursue her education; nonetheless, they distance Nellie from her body because

> The price Nellie pays for her own successful kumbla of primness and academic dedication is sexual frigidity and social alienation. However, her education and social status provide her with the reflective space she needs to begin rewriting her history. In each of these situations the power and potential for oppression of the wider society are claimed as part of the heritage or kumbla of the women themselves. (49–50)

The social severing of the female body from the mind is conditioned by racism, colonisation, patriarchy, and class, all of which turn black women such as Nellie into shadowy figures. The figures appear in Nellie's story and are vital to the understanding of black sexuality.

Commenting on Nellie's sexual alienation, deCaires Narain argues that an association between female sexuality and disease/shame is made explicit in the section of the novel, "The Pill", in which "a series of powerfully angry images of the black womb are piled one top of the other" ("Body" 105). Tia Maria, Nellie, and Teena attempt to cleanse their black bodies and identities lest they bring them shame: "the black womb is a maw. Disinfect its fruits with fine sterilised white lint . . . Silence it. Best pretend it doesn't exist . . . take a pill" (Brodber, *JL* 143). Although the womb can be powerful as is evident in its depiction as "a maw," it lacks agency in Nellie's story.

As argued in Chapter Two, the selected authors map empowering and alienating spaces which vary between motherhood, the kumbla, home, and the female body, all of which point to differences in women's narratives and experiences. Likewise, Brodber

represents the womb as a complex space because it simultaneously symbolises fertility and isolation, with emphasis on the latter because it fragments Nellie. The disempowering aspect of female sexuality is recognised when Nellie reaches puberty. This is why Nellie chooses the life of a dry, intellectual woman as a way of coping with her bodily alienation.

For Katrak, Nellie is "all brain and no body as she sits, almost disembodied at 'meetings'" with the group (152). Katrak's comment recalls the image of a cracked, sexless doll which is carved by Baba in order to refer to Nellie's intellectualism and sexual alienation. Baba carves a sexually unidentified doll which symbolises "the zombification of diminished woman [Nellie] who is robbed of her possibilities: the alabaster baby" (Cooper, "Something" 73). Nellie gets involved in meetings in order to improve the lives of the poor and the working classes. However, the intellectual type of woman in Nellie's case necessitates Nellie to deny certain aspects of womanhood. Eventually, the doll stands for the evocative symbol of Nellie's fragmentation and disintegration. Also, the kumbla of sexual repression confuses Nellie's sense of ethics. Is she to conform to the whims of urban, sexual liberation or to the decency of her rural community? These opposed life styles restrict Nellie's world.

A stranger in a new, urban setting, Nellie experiences the pressures of sexuality with the man who invites her to a movie. She believes that the unnamed woman, implicitly herself, should prevent the man from touching her. This is what her rural and moral upbringing dictates, yet she feels obliged to return his favour because "he paid the taximan what you knew must have been his week's food" (Brodber, *JL* 28). At this point, Nellie remembers her mother because she imagines her reaction to be shame and reproach: "You feel shame and you see your mother's face and you hear her scream and you feel the snail what she see making for your mouth. One long nasty snail" (28).

Perhaps Brodber uses the word "snail" in order to elaborate on Nellie's sexual desire in symbolic terms. The "snail" which touches Nellie's mouth is likely to evoke the image of oral sex. This image is more apparent with the use of words such as "long," "nasty," "stripped off," and "sucking" (*JL* 28). The implicit reference to oral sex intertwines with Nellie's reaction to the snail/sex image, where "her face pained with disgust, then her

scream" (28). It also emphasises Nellie's desire to be a woman: "now you have a man, you'll be like everybody else. You're normal now!" (28). This passage reveals Nellie's desire for sexual encounter but the desire is repressed due to social–moral restrictions. As Ana Maria Garcia writes, when Nellie is away from her family's watchful eyes, she follows "the prescribed 'script' of a foreign student's casual sexual encounter . . . [However,] it is a miserable experience, devoid of pleasure, and mediated by the imagined presence of her mother" (424). In this way, disgust toward and desire for sex allude to Nellie's ambivalence, because she shifts between the traditional conformity of rural life and the sexual liberation of the urban.

Nellie's interstitial condition makes her wrestle with two antithetical identities or positions which the black woman can occupy in Caribbean society. Being a "normal" woman with sexual relationships or a frigid one are the divides that fragment Nellie. Therefore, internalising the normal/frigid woman divide entraps Nellie until she is rescued by Baba and Aunt Alice who help her realise that she cannot live as "the one sided drum" which alienates her from her body (Brodber, *JL* 119). The image of the drum denotes Brodber's challenge of both the body/mind divide in the portrayal of women and the polarisations created by society which construct dissociative personalities such as Nellie's.

In a similar manner to Emecheta and Rhys in this thesis, Brodber does not celebrate spaces of tension such as tradition/modernity, mind/body, and black/white because they lead women such as Nellie to pathos and fragmentation. This explains why Brodber bridges the gap between these divides in order to make Nellie embark on a process of transformation through the kumbla. This helps Nellie reclaim her wholeness, where each side of the divide complements the other to ensure survival. Brodber provides Nellie with the possibility of transformation, yet Nellie needs to shatter the intellectual–sexual polarisation fragmenting her in order to break her kumbla and be reborn. Nellie needs to avoid the trap of oppositions if she seeks to emerge from her kumbla.

Nervous fragmentation and the homecoming of the black female body

A key issue discussed in this thesis is the presence of the female body as a site of oppression. However, Brodber, among other authors, highlights the potential of the body to return home; that is, to be healed and reclaimed. This textual return of the female body is an important aspect of the creative textual power of postcolonial women's narratives such as Brodber's *JL* and Bâ's *SLL*.

The aforementioned sexual repressions of Aunt Becca and Nellie's mother lead to Nellie's nervous breakdown. Unlike the physical and verbal violence which Firdaus experiences as a wife and a prostitute in El Saadawi's *WPZ*, the violence which Nellie experiences in Brodber's *JL* is psychological. In Chapter One, I argued that women's oppression does not emerge from a vacuum but is tied to specific social contexts which construct women's subjectivities. This shows that Brodber's *JL* situates Nellie's neurotic pressures in socio–political, individual, and psychological contexts, and that these tensions are represented by weaving Nellie's traumatic crisis into a description of her engagement with intellectuals seeking to form radical politics of change.

Brodber represents radicalism as a vital route which helps Nellie's group challenge the status quo; nonetheless, the group members appear alienated from the classes they seek to improve, as does Nellie from her family background. Niblett relates the ambivalence of the kumbla to the group's ideological views in order to signal the ambivalence of the group whose views create a protective/alienating shield (10). Although the shield is about agendas of change, it obstructs the connection to the tenement yard people because the group's approach to political radicalism is theoretical and "only drives a wedge between themselves and the popular classes" (10). This is evident in the binaries "them" and "us" which Nellie uses in order to describe the tenement yard people: "We have unfortunately to make a distinction between them and us . . . How will we ever lead them out in the right and proper way . . .?" (Brodber, *JL* 51). The group's disconnection with the community results in the failure to improve it. Nellie has to find an alternative route to that of intellectualism in order to be transformed.

A positive emergence from Nellie's kumbla of intellectualism mirrors the reconstructive vision of Brodber and of the other authors discussed in this thesis. Despite reflecting upon experiences of female oppression, the authors' narratives envision possibilities of change and empowerment in order to defy images of female subordination and lack of agency. Robin's death is a case in point because it can be seen as having the potential to change Nellie's personality, especially as Nellie realises that the group's politics of change "led to desiccation . . . I saw that it was us who had killed Cock Robin" (*JL* 53). The recurrent images of dryness and separation underline the presence of the female body as colonised and in need of healing in order to be reborn and to rethink agendas of change.

Brodber configures an alternative route to that of the group in order to reclaim the female body. The alternative necessitates engagement with gender in order to achieve socio–personal and political transformation. Although Nellie's conflicts are intensified by shame and sexual suppression, they indicate the attempt to reconcile with her familial history and to connect with the tenement yard people in order to overcome fragmentation. That is why Nellie's transformation is made possible by Aunt Alice and Baba who recall Aissatou in Bâ's *SLL,* Christophine in Rhys's *WSS,* and Adaku in Emecheta's *JM*. These three women are intelligent, strong, and independent; eventually, they become revisionary role models for Ramatoulaye, Antoinette, and Nnu Ego respectively.

Likewise, Aunt Alice and Baba are revisionary models because they help Nellie reclaim her wholeness. Anancy's tale discussed above signifies the power of language as a tool of healing and survival. It indicates Brodber's attempt to weave stories within stories in order to represent a specific theme. Unlike Aunt Becca, Baba and Aunt Alice stand for the therapy which Nellie needs to emerge out of her kumbla(s). For example, Aunt Alice shows Nellie the importance of family history by telling her stories which make Nellie realise that "I knew all my kin . . . I could no longer roam as a stranger" (*JL* 80).

Worth considering again is the phrase, "go eena kumbla," which Anancy repeats to trick Dryhead and Firefly. Anancy's repetitive act parallels the oral tradition in Nellie's life because repetition is part of the act of story–telling. Valovirta states that "Stories are

transmitted to an audience through breath and therefore they have to do with living and survival. Repetition adds to the story and helps the audience better make sense of it" ("Into" 330). This shows that Aunt Alice's stories help Nellie make sense of her life and of her family history. She encourages Nellie to transcend the confining boundaries of the physical body in order to look around, accept, and negotiate. Furthermore, the spying glass offered to Nellie by Aunt Alice is symbolic. Unlike the restrictive kumbla of Aunt Becca, the spying glass is a metaphor for the kind of kaleidoscopic or prismatic knowledge and vision necessary for deconstructing "the narrowly ideological discourses (colonial, black, nationalist, misogynist) which have combined to traumatize and alienate Nellie" (deCaires Narain, "Body" 106).

Along with Aunt Alice, Baba emerges as a healing figure because he helps Nellie come to terms with her sexuality. He can be juxtaposed with oppressive, egotistical male figures such as Bayoumi, Marzouk, and Firdaus's father in El Saadawi's *WPZ*. But Baba's character recalls that of Daouda in Bâ's *SLL* because both men play a positive part in women's empowerment and in opening up a constructive dialogue between both sexes. While Bayoumi mistreats and rapes Firdaus in return for offering her food and shelter in El Saadawi's text, Baba rejects Nellie's attempt to sexually repay him for looking after her during her breakdown: "I fear that you offer yourself because you don't want you. That's no gift love" (Brodber, *JL* 71). It seems that Nellie, unlike Firdaus, finds support in her relationships with men, especially as Baba makes Nellie confront her body in relation to her needs rather than to the repressive constructions of gender roles.

When she and Baba meet again as adults, Nellie realises that he "had oodles of moisture" which she felt in "the firm gentleness of his probing fingers" (Brodber, *JL* 68). Baba precipitates Nellie's emergence from her kumbla in order to be reconnected with her body and society; however, the emergence in itself does not bring immediate reconnection with the female body. Rather, as its title indicates, the novel suggests that the construction and reclamation of a woman's wholeness is a continuous process. Unable to emerge from her kumbla, Nellie experiences a nervous breakdown.

After losing consciousness and then recovering six weeks later, Nellie realises that time has come to start all over again. Nellie's awakening is mapped by her psychological

breakdown, much like Antoinette's confinement and madness in Rhys's *WSS*, among other confining/resistant spaces analysed in this thesis. Baba heals Nellie's psyche and this involves an acknowledgment of her community and language: "My path lay now through the aliens who surrounded me . . . I was willing to learn their ways but someone had . . . to help me test my feet outside the kumbla. Tonight there was going to be a dance" (Brodber, *JL* 70). Nellie's words imply that one's history is a therapeutic site which unites individuals and community, past and present, and mind and body. Besides, they indicate Nellie's need of a mediator such as Baba in order to be reborn.

Nellie's entrance into the dance hall is part of the healing process. She joins the yard people, where voices, movements, and music "merge into a seamless fabric of humanity in which the lines of demarcation between human bodies are no longer of importance" (Cobham 59). Dancing with the yard people helps Nellie to be healed. After Nellie's rediscovery of her community, body, and past, the novel goes back to the incidents narrated in the fragmented prose of the first narrative section. The return helps readers of Brodber's *JL* make sense of the events and of their connections to the characters. It also facilitates the reconciliation between Nellie's conflicting sides; that is, between her body and mind.

Brodber's *JL* is similar to the other texts in this thesis in so far as all develop a metachronous discourse of literary mapping and transition. This suggests that Nellie must undergo "backward resurrection" in order to be transformed; that is, her rebirth is a non–linear process which necessitates the return to one's past and community (Cobham 51). This calls into question the notion that individual and historical narratives of change and progress depend on movement forward. In this way, Nellie has to embark on a process of reintegration that will connect her to her past and present.

The title, *Jane and Louisa Will Soon Come Home*, alludes to this process of transformation. Unlike the ironic titles of Emecheta's *JM* and Devi's "BG" which indirectly express maternal suffering, the title of Brodber's novel is optimistic because it stands for future possibilities of change. Brodber relates the novel's title to her identity as a woman writer, arguing that *JL* is written from her own feminist perspective because "change will come when the women come home, come into their own in the intellectual halls . . . when

Jane and Louisa recognize that they have a unique contribution to make and come home" ("Me" 120). Jane and Louisa are Nellie's cousins who spend summer times with Nellie during childhood. Unlike Nellie, the cousins have the courage to talk about "sex and babies" (*JL* 96). The cousins also refer to Nellie who will come home; that is, who will have the opportunity to acknowledge her womanhood and to have the courage to talk about it. The adverb "soon" in the novel's title signals that something will happen but it will take time. Following Curdella Forbes, I argue that the title of Brodber's text indicates "the incomplete nature of a liberatory experience which is still only in process and, at the communal level, not yet fully perceived or apprehended" (10–11). This suggests that Nellie needs to start a process of change which will continue throughout her life. The process is a matter of accepting difference and of acknowledging self and community in order to reclaim the female body and voice. Accepting this process of transformation is part of its success.

Conclusion

This chapter developed a deconstructive, cultural reading of Brodber's *JL* which reclaimed the female voice and body silenced by the colonial legacy and sexuality. It analysed the oppression of the protagonist as tied to female sexuality and socio–cultural taboos and mores. It also accentuated the presence of the female body as a site of disempowering pressures including colonialism, race, and negative attitudes to sexuality. However, the body in postcolonial women's texts functions as a site of transition in order to reconcile gender and individual relations which variably construct women's identities.

This shows that the socially constructed disintegration of the female body and its possible recuperation can be analysed through thematic–stylistic interrelatedness; that is, through a woman's reconciliation with her body, community, and past, as well as through different themes and structural styles. That is why the fragmented personality of Nellie is analysed in light of the narrative's non–linear time sequence, fragmented format, and language. Such thematic and structural links deconstruct dominant binaries and create new spaces for female transformation. Examples of these spaces are the female

body along with the kumbla, both of which symbolise movement from alienation to visibility in order to stress women's potential to be liberated.

The next chapter analyses Bâ's *SLL* which, in a similar manner to Brodber's text, deals with gender issues through a thematic–stylistic link. The chapter discusses female oppression as attributed to polygamy, marital betrayal, tradition, and woman–woman oppression. More importantly, it focuses on spaces of female empowerment such as writing, friendship, education, motherhood, choice, and the female body. This opens up the possibility of creating resistant female spaces out of restrictive ones such as mirasse/widow seclusion, thereby underlining aspects of complexity and difference in representing women's narratives.

Chapter Five

Mariama Bâ's *So Long a Letter*

The previous chapter developed a deconstructive, cultural analysis of Brodber's *JL*, where it discussed the theme of female oppression and resistance through mediation between the female body, language, and the use of different styles and structures. Likewise, this chapter, through a reading that is deconstructive and culturally situated, analyses Bâ's *SLL* which reclaims the female voice and defies images of female oppression through recourse to several modes of representation. This highlights the metachronous function of postcolonial women's writing and its potential to constitute a rich repository of female voices and stories.

The chapter continues to explore the function of language–gender intersection in postcolonial women's narratives such as Bâ's *SLL* which is a form not only of resistance but also of survival. The analysis of *SLL* highlights a number of gender–related issues. Some constitute forms of transition such as female friendship, choice, motherhood, and tradition–modernity negotiation; others of oppression such as polygamy and woman–woman subjugation; while others open up the possibility of recreating female spaces of rebellion out of confining ones such as mirasse and widow confinement. It is these issues which have guided the selection of Bâ's text for analysis in conjunction with recent postcolonial feminist debates and its order in this thesis as a text which, in a similar manner to Brodber's *JL*, follows a rite of passage identified as female incorporation and empowerment.

Epistolary voice as a mode of being and empowerment

As I argued in the previous chapters, postcolonial women's writing has the potential to challenge female oppression and to reformulate resistant spaces and stories of women. This link between writing and activism is attributed to the fact that postcolonial women's writing "often becomes the context through which new political identities are forged. It

becomes a space for struggle and contestation about reality itself" (Mohanty, "Cartographies" 34). Taking this as a starting point, I argue that the letter of Ramatoulaye, the principal female character of Bâ's text, contributes to the project of social contestation and identity construction through the written word.

Through this project, Bâ invokes the style or "the image of woman–as–author in the context of a Senegalese culture that does not traditionally include such an image" (Johnson 233). In other words, Bâ calls upon women to use writing as "a peaceful weapon" in order to redefine their identities and to disrupt the powers that subjugate them (qtd. in Harrell–Bond 214). This means that postcolonial women's writing is not a simple act of putting words on a page; rather, it is a socio–literary discourse of activism and a deliberate attempt to express a woman's choice of self–analysis and recuperation which are key issues in this thesis. The form which this "peaceful weapon" takes in Bâ's *SLL* relates to the healing power of its epistolary structure and complex literary genre, much like the fragmented and jointed structure and narrative format of Brodber's *JL*.

The epistolary form in *SLL* underlines Bâ's desire to make women speak *for* themselves. As argued in Chapters One and Two, several critics view postcolonial women's writing as a transformative act of female recuperation and "unOthering."[1] Likewise, Bâ, as a socio–literary activist, resorts to writing in order to challenge the oppressive powers of her Senegalese society and to remap liberating spaces of female agency. These spaces, together with the other spaces discussed in this thesis, contribute to the reconstructive, metachronous function of postcolonial women's writing. Ramatoulaye responds to Bâ's call in the sense that *SLL* is written in the form of a long letter addressed to "Dear Aissatou," Ramatoulaye's friend, and, possibly, to Ramatoulaye's self which survives in distress at the moment of writing (1).

According to Eva Rueschmann, Ramatoulaye's act of writing is an indirect, purgatory correspondence with her female self, where "rather than an object defined by a (male) Other, the female letter writer is her own subject; she defines herself, with her own words" (7). By writing her life script in the form of a letter, Ramatoulaye creates her empowering space while being confined in a domestic space commanded by widow confinement in Islam. Ramatoulaye's letter or Bâ's *SLL* tells of a middle–class teacher and

widow reflecting upon her sometimes happy and often unsettled marital life. In addition, Bâ's text, as Tanure Ojaide argues, has raised interest in African women's writing due to its prismatic and transformative representation of gender issues which are "complicated by the identity problem of the Senegalese, religious obligations, conflicting ways of traditional and modern women, class, patriarchal social norms, and modern conditions in education, profession, and politics, among others" ("Contexts" 109).

Recalling Firdaus, the central character of El Saadawi's *WPZ*, Ramatoulaye in Bâ's *SLL* makes use of her confinement in order to tell her story through a series of reflections on marriage, family, patriarchy, women's choices, sexuality, and above all, the place of women in patriarchal, Muslim societies such as Senegal. Ramatoulaye's letter is addressed to a certain audience identified as Aissatou, among other audiences such as readers of *SLL*. This helps Ramatoulaye survive because she becomes more empowered during the act of writing the letter, as will be argued later in this chapter.

Commenting on the function of personal letters, Ode Ogede states that through personal letters people "reap the benefits of communication . . . A performative mode, or method of image–making, the letter permits individuals to share common concerns and worries and to offer each other encouragement and solidarity within a closed circle" (406). Ogede's words highlight the importance of Ramatoulaye's letter for two reasons. Firstly, the letter creates a space of utterance and self–assertion in order to offer a critical analysis of a woman's situation and culture. Secondly, the letter, being addressed to a confidante whose experiences mirror Ramatoulaye's, bestows strength upon the latter in order to confirm her identity as a woman and to express her feelings and attitudes openly.

Consequently, the letter gives Ramatoulaye the opportunity for in–depth introspection and for a critical assessment of herself and her society. Ramatoulaye's self–assessment is evident in the narrative setting, in familial relationships, and in socio–cultural practices which are represented as they are perceived in her mind. This underscores the value of women's standpoints which move from a critique of the dynamics of female oppression into a process of reconstruction as women narrate and remain close to their surroundings (Chapter Three discusses the notion of women's standpoints).

A central issue in this thesis is the expression of diverse female voices which, for Sinha, is a mode of deconstruction and emergence (xii). This mode points to the function of the epistolary voice in Bâ's novel; that is, to Ramatoulaye's voice which signifies awakening and control over her life. Ramatoulaye and the other female figures analysed in this thesis share a significant feature despite their differences. This feature relates to women's potential to come to terms with their voices in order to challenge the confining spaces in which they are literally or metaphorically confined. For instance, while Firdaus El Saadawi's *WPZ* tells her story from the prison where she is waiting to be hanged, Ramatoulaye writes her letter during a period of enclosure and mourning. Firdaus's and Ramatoulaye's shared desire to speak is first prompted by confinement and then by the presence of a confidante, whether literally such as the psychiatrist or spiritually such as Aissatou respectively.

This presence stresses the transformative power of women's voices, suggesting that "for women, the ability to inhabit their own stories, and to become the subject of their own histories can be of itself an act or gesture of rebellion" (Busia, "Rebellious" 89). It also makes Ramatoulaye's letter a mode of rebellion and liberation as well as of breaking the silence which has engulfed women's lives for a long time. That is why Ramatoulaye, at a critical moment of her story, chooses to "speak out" because "My voice has known thirty years of silence, thirty years of harassment. It bursts out, violent, sometimes sarcastic, sometimes contemptuous" (Bâ 57–58). These words recall Firdaus's commanding words and narrative voice in El Saadawi's *WPZ* because both emphasise the agency and empowerment that emanate from women's assertive voices when they choose to speak.

Integral to the epistolary voice of Ramatoulaye's story is widow confinement or mirasse. As I read it, Bâ deploys widow confinement not only as a theme but also as a narrative device which interrelates with the notion of female empowerment through textual remapping. The occasion of writing the letter is mirasse which Ada Uzoamaka Azodo defines as "that space accorded the members of the community to strip the dead of its earthly burden, so that it may enter more easily into eternal bliss" ("Role" 78). Widow seclusion necessitates a period of female enclosure in order to ease the dead's worldly burden and so it functions as a confining space in *SLL*. Yet Ramatoulaye chooses to speak

(figuratively) because she reworks the space of her seclusion in order to recount her experiences of marital betrayal and abandonment.

Ramatoulaye's decision to write the letter, and hence to defy being silent, turns that space of confinement into a space of self–healing and disclosure. My reading of Bâ's *SLL* at this point stresses the function of literary mapping in postcolonial women's writing which this thesis highlights. This is attributed to the fact that Bâ extends or remaps the notions of physical space or enclosure (home and widow seclusion) and personal disclosure (mirasse) in order to create a space of enunciation for her heroine. Bâ's purposeful appropriation of Islamic rituals positions Ramatoulaye within a socio–cultural and "structural" framework in order to expose "intimate secrets of married life . . . 'Mirasse', therefore, becomes the principle that legitimises and regulates Rama's act of systematic personal revelation which simultaneously constitutes a systematic analysis of some of the most pressing socio–economic and cultural issues challenging women and society" (Cham 91–92). Ramatoulaye's subjective disclosures facilitate the attempt to restructure her life. This makes widow confinement a space of dialogue and disruption rather than of confinement and repression. Accordingly, if widow confinement obstructs Ramatoulaye's communication with others such as Aissatou in public spaces, it opens up an alternative avenue for self–expression through the epistolary form and the mirasse. This avenue emphasises the dialogical exchange of supportive female feelings which makes the ritual of confinement enabling.

Home is often seen as a female space of domesticity, restriction, and adherence to traditions. But the reading of Bâ's text in this chapter disrupts the connotations of oppressive spaces in order to engender resistant ones. Through the textual devices of letter writing and mirasse, Bâ redefines home as a confining female space in order to make it resistant and transformative, much like Firdaus's prison in El Saadawi's *WPZ*, Nnu Ego's death and posthumous silence in Emecheta's *JM*, and Jashoda's maternal body in Devi's "BG." Home as a figurative and physical space in Bâ's text suggests that power can emanate from the women and the margins. This is why Ramatoulaye's letter takes her beyond the "limited" (in size) and "limiting" space where she is physically confined but from which she "manage[s] to achieve some kind of victory by rejecting . . . [her]

confinement" (Saiti 167). Hence, the letter empowers Ramatoulaye to regain her dignity as a human being. She writes:

> I no longer scorn my mother's reserve concerning you [Modou], for a mother can instinctively feel where her child's happiness lies. I no longer laugh when I think that she found you too handsome, too polished, too perfect for a man. She often spoke of the wide gap between your two upper incisors: the sign of the primacy of sensuality in the individual. (Bâ 14)

Ramatoulaye reclaims her self–esteem because she no longer thinks of Modou as the perfect partner whom her mother has rejected as a son–in–law for being "too handsome." The suspicion of sensuality here can be linked to the character of Aunt Becca analysed in the previous chapter, in so far as she, in a similar manner to Ramatoulaye's mother, warns younger women against "too handsome" or "too sensual" a man who can spoil women's lives. Following Azodo, I argue that Ramatoulaye re–establishes her wounded self–esteem and honour of a "dutiful" wife and daughter "by exorcizing a disappointing and oppressive past of abandonment and humiliation, and revealing her husband as inferior, lacking in honor, and worthy to be told off" ("Role" 78). Consequently, Ramatoulaye regains her dignity and redefines her relationships with others.

Toward the end of her letter, Ramatoulaye underlines her decision to survive: "I have not given up wanting to refashion my life. Despite everything—hope still lives on within me . . . I can feel new buds springing up in me. The word 'happiness' does indeed have meaning, doesn't it? I shall go out in search of it" (Bâ 89). Ramatoulaye here points to the process of transformation she is undergoing during the time of writing the letter. Ramatoulaye, in a similar manner to Aissatou, has become more dynamic, aspiring, and independent. The ending of Ramatoulaye's letter signals women's potential to overcome oppression caused by men, by oppressive women, and by society. This denotes that writing by women helps "alleviate pain. Bâ probably wants to suggest, therefore, that the process has a therapeutic effect on Ramatoulaye" (Palmer 146).

Although it is meant to be a route of freeing her inner self from distress, writing for Ramatoulaye becomes an asset for recognising her dignity and capability. It leads her to a sense of freedom and hope, much like Aunt Alice's empowering stories which help Nellie

recuperate in Brodber's *JL*. For Aissatou, the letter replaces the spoken word because she writes a short but evocative letter to her husband in order to express her rejection of a polygamous life: "I say that there can be no union of bodies without the heart's acceptance, however little that may be . . . I am stripping myself of your love, your name. Clothed in my dignity, the only worthy garment, I go my way" (Bâ 31–32).

Aissatou's letter signals confrontation and transition between her fragmented marital life and her new one established on independence. This makes the act of writing by Bâ's protagonists challenging in two ways. Besides being a weapon which reclaims women's self–definition, writing is a catalyst for women's transformation aspired to by Aissatou and Ramatoulaye. As C. L. Innes argues, Aissatou's letter, in its defiant tone, "crystallises the attitude of independence and firm self–assurance which Ramatoulaye's monologue brings her to" (146). Aissatou creates an autonomous space for herself which grants her the right to enjoy equal and liberating roles, as has been the case of some pre–colonial women such as Ona, Nnu Ego's mother in Emecheta's *JM*. Pre–colonial women, according to Molara Ogundipe–Leslie, "often had a much greater share than allowed them in contemporary life" because their "voices were heard, their opinions consulted, [and] their participation guaranteed, from familial households to councils" (501–02). This makes Aissatou's letter a political discourse on female resistance and altruism in a patriarchal, Muslim culture.

In sum, writing is crucial to the development of Bâ's principal characters in particular and of silent women in general. The written word supports women's aptitude to restructure their lives, especially as women have the potential to speak with plural voices that go beyond the confines of spaces of disempowerment constructed by society. Therefore, writing is a means for Ramatoulaye, for Aissatou, and for the female writer "to confirm her beliefs, to claim her voice . . . For the author herself, writing is a means to define herself publicly, to thrust off the limitations of silence in order to tell her story and that of so many other women—a story which has often been misrepresented, when represented at all, by male writers" (Wilcox 124). Bâ, in a similar manner to Ramatoulaye and Aissatou, recognises the enabling power of the written word which is not only spiritual but also transferable to others. Thus, Ramatoulaye's ability to challenge her

society and her confinement depends on her decision to reply to Aissatou. As will be argued below, this is made manifest in the opening section of the novel, where Ramatoulaye's reply is the (unsent) letter, which frames Bâ's text and gives it its distinctiveness and complexity.

So Long a Letter and the complexity of classification

In her letter, Ramatoulaye mentions a number of details that Aissatou already knows, and this makes Bâ's *SLL* more like a memoir than an epistolary novel. The narrative structure of "double–, multiple–, and plural coding," which characterises *SLL* makes its readers engage with the text at different levels at once (Azodo, "Role" 76). These levels refer to the various genres of classification such as diary, memoir, regional novel, and social novel which can be applied to *SLL* through the deconstructive, cultural reading performed in this chapter.

Identifying the genre of Bâ's *SLL* seems to be a simple matter, especially as the novel's title and opening salutation, "Dear Aissatou," tell it is an epistolary novel (1). However, the text resists classification in terms of eurocentric textual conventions in order to emphasise the importance of genre disordering according to non–Western women writers such as Bâ. In other words, Bâ deploys strategies of abrogation and appropriation at the levels of the narrative architecture, themes, and characters, as argued in Chapter Two. These strategies examine the difficulty of analysing *SLL* according to Western literary genres.

By definition, abrogation refers to a process by which language as a medium of power supports postcolonial writings and replaces the coloniser's discourse with that of the colonised (Ashcroft, Griffiths, and Tiffin, *Key* 5). This means that abrogation in postcolonial literature rejects imperial power and its normative standards in order to reflect the aspirations of the colonised for transition. Likewise, appropriation attempts to take over and appropriate the imperial language and its modes of representation by postcolonial subjects in order to "interpolate their own cultural realities, or use that dominant language to describe those realities to a wide audience of readers" (20). Bâ's

use of both strategies shows that she views the notion of genre as an artist's strategy of change in order to present African literature in terms of transformation and creativity rather than of borrowing and imitation.

In her letter, Ramatoulaye says that transition emerges from "the privilege of our generation to be the link between two periods in our history, one of domination, the other of independence. We remained young and efficient, for we were the messengers of a new design" (Bâ 25). In this passage, Ramatoulaye, having the opportunity to participate in national liberation, feels the power of "we" in the independence of Senegal from French rule. Ramatoulaye is a speaking subject who reclaims agency through her motivating attitudes and possibly through Bâ's choice or non–choice of a narrative classification genre. This shows that Bâ's *SLL* resists attempts at genre classification, especially as the epistolary novel brings its genre identity into question in the first moments readers engage with it.

Although the novel's title alludes to its genre as epistolary, where events are "conveyed entirely by an exchange of letters" between characters (Abrams 131), the definition of an epistolary novel does not accurately fit *SLL*. Ramatoulaye responds to Aissatou's letter; nonetheless, we, readers of Bâ's text, never know or come across what Aissatou's letters are about. There is no real exchange of letters between both women in the text, and instead the novel reaches us as one lengthy letter. The novel can be interpreted as epistolary upon reading the salutation of the letter; however, by reading sentence two, we find that Ramatoulaye writes, "I am beginning this diary, my prop in my distress" (1). Ramatoulaye's words make us approach the novel as a diary.

Characteristics of epistolary novel and diary are apparent but neither label totally fits *SLL*. Bâ's text is not a daily account of Ramatoulaye's actions; consequently, it cannot be classified as a diary, especially as it lacks a chronological or calendrical outline structure. This is evident in Ramatoulaye's narration of past events, such as "Do you remember the morning train that took us for the first time to Ponty–Ville, the teachers' training college in Sebikotane?" (13). Ramatoulaye's words imply that she and Aissatou share many experiences and much of the novel is a recounting of other events shared by them.

From another perspective, Bâ highlights the socio–political and religious specificities of postcolonial Senegal. The contextual framework represents *SLL* as a social novel which, for M. H. Abrams, acknowledges the function of "the social and economic condition of an era on characters and events; often it also embodies an implicit or explicit thesis recommending political and social reform" (13). Abrams's argument relates to Ramatoulaye who redefines her roles in private and public spheres. She extends the horizon of her hopes and achievements into a recommendation for the future of Senegal based on the promotion of socio–familial justice. Ramatoulaye's future call for the progress of Senegal as a community presents Bâ's *SLL* as a social novel of transition and reformation.

In addition, Ramatoulaye's narration of certain episodes about the cultural specificity of Senegal takes on a new dimension. Local elements are crucial in a contextual reading of Bâ's *SLL* because they define it as regional. The word "regional" has several meanings, but I use it in the context of Bâ's text in order to denote a positive, anti–colonial space referring not only to spatiality but also to the specificity of women's communities and everyday tapestries, as argued in Chapter Three. This emphasises "the setting, speech, and social structure and customs of a particular locality, not merely as local color, but as important conditions affecting the temperament of the characters and their way of thinking, feeling and interacting" (Abrams 134). Accordingly, Bâ sets her novel in a Senegalese locale, with physical settings, customs, and standpoints affecting the way characters appear and react.

Regional aspects can be traced through Ramatoulaye's comments on culture–specific traditions. For instance, the funeral of Modou, Ramatoulaye's husband, and the period of seclusion are presented as religious rituals of Senegalese Muslim culture. Also, the element of locality is evident in Bâ's use of Senegalese words in order to describe certain Senegalese customs. This makes non–Senegalese readers of *SLL* go to the "Notes" section at the end of the novel in order to get translated meanings of Senegalese words, such as "*Siguil ndigale*: a form of condolence and moral recovery," "*griot*: black African who is part–poet, part–musician, part–sorcerer," and "*Bissimilai*: an expression denoting surprise" (90).

Indeed, the inclusion of context–specific scenes and details adds a local dimension to the narrative sequence and determines the characters' attitudes and motivations. In this respect, Bâ's *SLL* may be labelled as regional, yet we should not ignore the fact that it is a woman–authored text which, in a similar manner to Brodber's *JL*, resists conformity to Western literary genres. It is difficult to categorise *SLL* according to normative literary genres such as epistolary writing. Genre non–adaptation turns women's narratives into sites of literary revolution and remapping which form an intrinsic component of disidentification and reformation. No literary genre or sub–genre clearly defines Bâ's novel if we read it as a postcolonial narrative of female transformation.

Put differently, the discourse of postcolonial literary theory and practice results from the inability of European theories to deal with complexity and difference which are key issues in this thesis (Bhabha, *Location* 173). By the same token, postcolonial writing by women does not adopt homogeneous modes of representation. Rather, it redefines modes of representation in order to arrive at a discourse of defamiliarisation and reconstruction. This discourse is indicative of multiple and different female experiences and voices; consequently, the postcolonial techniques of non–adaptation and subversion explain the difficult attempt to categorise *SLL*.

The above techniques define the objective of postcolonial women's writing as the subversion and mixing of literary traditions and genres in the context of Bâ's text. The intertwining of genre and gender is purposeful because it signals a more challenging issue, namely Bâ's refusal to imitate Western genres in order to change gender roles and relations not only in Senegal and but also all over the world. It also signals Bâ's resistance "to put labels on African women as ignorant, erotic, subjugated, and so on. Bâ's feminism cannot be placed rigidly as this or that, as there are confusion, complexity and contradictions embedded in the narrative" (Azodo, "Introduction" xiii). In short, Bâ creates and owns her work. Hers is a feminist discourse of reconstruction and creativity which produces new styles in order to support women's narratives of change. Shari Coulis is justified in arguing that Bâ uses an "eclectic" literary genre in order to assert her constructive vision, where Senegalese people are no longer marginalised "Others" living miles away from the centre of civilisation (30). Accordingly, the liberated "we" of

Ramatoulaye comes to occupy a new space founded on agency and resistance (Bâ 25). It is a space of appropriation and resistance and the one that effectively constructs *SLL*.

Bâ and recommendations for female transition and survival

As I argued above, the attempt to classify Bâ's *SLL* is complex; nonetheless, the caution that such a work must be understood within its local context is important to the interpretation of the text. This necessitates an analysis of *SLL* which is informed by a double move in order to situate the text within the local specificity of Senegal and to acknowledge the presence of plural forms of female oppression and resistance.

Bâ does not simply present characters and actions as a means of decentring imperial and patriarchal power structures. A woman writer keen on promoting female transition, Bâ's role needs to be considered in the context of her Senegalese motherland and feminist discourse which empower her principal characters. For Maria Lugones and Elizabeth Spelman, this suggests that readers of Bâ's text should "learn to become unintrusive, unimportant, patient to the point of tears, while at the same time open to learning any possible lessons" (qtd. in Dubek 200). My reading of *SLL* identifies "lessons" or recommendations in empowerment that are central issues in postcolonial feminist studies and in the analysis of female resistance in this thesis. These recommendations include female friendship as opposed to woman–woman oppression and the concept of choice, both of which intersect with the value of the female body.

The first recommendation is empowerment through female friendship which is a reconstructive bond or strategy that contrasts with woman–woman oppression. Bâ's *SLL* goes beyond the representation of patriarchal domination and deception and, as a woman–authored text, it is more concerned about women's sisterhood and bonding; that is, about "the redemptive and spiritual make–up of self–expression among and between women as friends and mothers" (Reyes, *Mothering* 161). This suggests that the theme of female friendship is represented by the reconstruction of the personal and the socio–political and by the presence of female characters who belong to the reconstructive type of women such as Ramatoulaye and Aissatou.

Recalling the healing powers of language and the kumbla in Brodber's *JL*, female friendship in Bâ's *SLL* has "splendours" and therapeutic effects on the individuals involved (54). The friendship between Ramatoulaye and Aissatou, as much as the death of Modou, gives occasion to Ramatoulaye's letter and to Bâ's text. This is evident when readers of *SLL* realise that Ramatoulaye's letter is not only about her life but also about Aissatou's. At the time of the narrative, Ramatoulaye resides in Senegal while Aissatou lives in the US; nonetheless, their friendship binds them together and bestows upon them strength in order to transcend distance and difficulties. The presence of both women relates to Stratton's "convention of paired women" in African women's writing because it functions as "a corrective to the image of women" as lacking the potential to support one another (qtd. in Boehmer, *Stories* 177). This is evident in the pair Ramatoulaye and Aissatou whose friendship "grows stronger when crossed, whereas obstacles kill love. Friendship resists time, which wearies and severs couples. It has heights unknown to love" (Bâ 54). Consequently, *SLL* can be seen as a "metaphor" for the friendship which Ramatoulaye and Aissatou "forged in childhood, modified throughout many years together and apart, and continues to offer sustenance and support to them both . . . This is the very essence of their relationship—continually evolving, never static, always in a state of growth" (Coulis 32).

As argued in Chapter One, the selected authors in this thesis represent gender issues differently and female friendship is one such issue. While the worlds of El Saadawi's *WPZ* and Devi's "BG" are devoid of female alliance and support, the world of Bâ's *SLL* provides knowledge about the importance of female friendship and of its unconditional love and support. Although Ramatoulaye's letter is not sent, Aissatou does not remain a passive listener, even virtually, given the strong ties between both women. Aissatou's role as a narratee is invoked by Ramatoulaye's opening words, "I have received your letter . . . [to which I] reply . . . Our long association has taught me that confiding in others allays pain" (Bâ 1). Ramatoulaye's words indicate that her experiences of pain and betrayal are familiar to Aissatou who has undergone similar experiences of marital betrayal. This highlights the presence of Aissatou as a confidante who will "hear and prolong her

intimate story, for they know each other very well and have had similar experiences of deception and abandonment in adult life by their husbands" (Azodo, "Role" 77).

By recourse to the written word (letter), Ramatoulaye reveals her need of Aissatou in order to overcome distress. Both women keep in touch with each other and, at the end of her confinement, Ramatoulaye welcomes Aissatou into her home. Therefore, Bâ, in a similar manner to Emecheta, Rhys, and El Saadawi in this thesis, underlines that the psychic and physical survival of women depends on their ability to establish supportive female bonds. Such bonds "find strength in cultural difference while working actively to eradicate the differences in power that separate one woman from another" (Dubek 201). While the global sisterhood model threatens to obliterate women's differences, female friendship transcends such differences in order to forge alliances committed to the well–being of women.

Thus, the presence of Ramatoulaye and Aissatou confirms the "beauty" of female friendship during hard times (Kuoh–Moukoury xvii). Friendship encourages both women to play the perfect role model for each other. For instance, Aissatou becomes a role model for Ramatoulaye and "the stable reference point against which Rama measures her own temporary condition of instability" (Cham 93). This role–modelling underlines women's potential to negotiate the differences which hinder their solidarity without eroding the integrity and mores of either woman. This explains why Ramatoulaye looks forward to welcoming Aissatou who will be wearing a tailored suit as a sign of modernity but who will be sitting on a mat where she will dip her hands in a "steaming bowl" as a Senegalese tradition of eating (Bâ 89).

Although the two signs refer to cultural differences and individual preferences, they do not divide Aissatou and Ramatoulaye to whom "The essential thing is the content of our hearts . . . Time, distance, as well as mutual memories have consolidated our ties . . . Reunited . . . we sow new seeds for new harvests" (Bâ 72). By representing female friendship as a space of empowerment, Bâ develops the idea of friendship as based on supportive, dialogical "looks" and relations in order to defy the dominant gaze of men and society (Hitchcock 80). This accentuates the depth and strength of female friendship which endures after marital bonds have been broken.

Bâ acknowledges the value of female friendship; nonetheless, she criticises the complicity of women in oppressing other women. Several critics argue that some women act as oppressors who are complicit in female oppression (Uko 99; Dubek 201). The significance of representing women as oppressors arises from Bâ's understanding of the devastating powers which some (old) women hold over the lives of their sons, daughters, and relatives. Examples of oppressive women who feature in this thesis include Sharifa in El Saadawi's *WPZ*, the Haldars' daughters–in law in Devi's "BG," and Aunt Nabou and Binetou's mother in Bâ's *SLL*.

The presence of women as oppressors makes Bâ explore the power of the mother especially in situations where the latter is keen on manipulating her maternal control in order to fulfil certain interests. Elaborating on Bâ's representation of oppressive women, Laura Dubek emphasises the need on the part of (some) women to acknowledge their responsibility for the perpetuation of racist, sexist, and classist ideologies (201). This suggests that Bâ's *SLL*, in a similar manner to the other texts analysed in this thesis, demystifies narratives which represent women as oppressed by patriarchy and group them under a homogeneous, static identity of subordination (see Chapter Three which further discusses the heterogeneous experiences and standpoints of women).

While Nahem Yousaf claims that Bâ's female characters are "denied access to power" in public and private spheres (86), I am inclined to argue that Bâ reconstructs empowering spaces for displaced women who access power through various roles/choices. Bâ classifies her female characters into two models of women; that is, women who get involved in diverse tasks in order to survive and to speak out, and women who empower themselves by means of destroying other women. As friends and single mothers, Ramatoulaye and Aissatou belong to the first (reconstructive) type which underlines women's potential to defy oppression and silence. By contrast, Aunt Nabou and Binetou's mother belong to the second type of women because they hinder female solidarity by the negative use of their maternal power.

These two types or models of womanhood do not unify women under a fixed image of oppression; rather, they expose the different experiences and attitudes of women. This implies that the presence of some women "is worsened by a vicious cycle whereby

women enter into complicity with the situation by playing 'the male game,' that is taking advantage of the situation and the men for their own personal gains" (Azodo, "Postscript" 421). For example, Aunt Nabou and Binetou's mother make life hard for (younger) fellow women such as Aissatou. Both mothers use their influence in order to control their children's lives, to gain material rewards, and to keep intact a noble lineage. Aunt Nabou seeks revenge against Aissatou, her daughter–in–law, because she is afraid that her royal lineage may fall due to Aissatou's lower–class; consequently, the aunt weaves a scheme which no dutiful son rejects.

Aunt Nabou asks her brother to give her Nabou, his young daughter, whom she raises and trains to be a meek wife for Mawdo. In order to force Mawdo into marrying his relative, Aunt Nabou pretends that her life and her family honour are at risk and that only Mawdo can save both of them by marrying Nabou. Unable to reject his mother's request, Mawdo marries Nabou, regardless of Aissatou's reaction. By the negative use of her maternal power, Aunt Nabou unveils her motivations, where she connives to displace Aissatou by introducing a third party into the life of Mawdo. This party, the new wife, will break the couple's matrimonial harmony and make their love short–lived. Mawdo tells Aissatou about his second marriage, justifying it by the fact that "My mother is old. The knocks and disappointments of life have weakened her heart. If I spurn this child, she will die . . . Think of it, her brother's daughter, brought up by her, rejected by her son. What shame before society!" (Bâ 30).

Exerting maternal authority in order to fulfil certain desires arises also in the character of Binetou's mother. The mother is "an image of what not only Ramatoulaye but every woman is in danger of becoming if she does not seek the power to liberate herself" (Stratton 120). Belonging to a lower–class family, Binetou's mother does her best to convince Binetou of marrying Modou in order to secure socio–economic advantages. Binetou is forced into an unhappy arranged marriage with Modou, the father of Daba who is Binetou's best friend. Daba, Ramatoulaye's daughter, unwittingly tells her mother about Binetou's marriage to an old "sugar–daddy" (Bâ 35). Binetou's marriage fragments Ramatoulaye's marital life and makes Modou abandon Ramatoulaye and her children.

Ultimately, Aunt Nabou and Binetou's mother not only perpetuate polygamous marriages but also destroy Aissatou's and Ramatoulaye's happiness. They are selfish and indifferent to the damage they cause to other women's lives and this explains why Mbye B. Cham describes the two mothers–in–law as the "modern–day . . . reincarnations of the spirit of Iago;" that is, of abusing others for one's own benefit (94). Ironically, while Bâ challenges the oppression of women, that oppression is partly caused by some women who destroy the lives of other women in order to secure socio–individual comfort and mobility, among other reasons.

The second recommendation is the value of female choice which relates to the varied strategies which women use in order to defy oppression. This makes the issue of choice a central issue in this thesis as well as in my analysis of Bâ's text. As argued in Chapter Two, it is important to encourage women to choose and to act, even if their choices and actions are expressed by silence.[2] This is evident in the texts analysed in this thesis, such as Emecheta's *JM*, where Nnu Ego's posthumous silence functions as a space of agency and disruption rather than of passivity. Also, Bâ's *SLL* underscores Ramatoulaye's and Aissatou's different choices and reactions toward their marital betrayal. While Ramatoulaye applies the strategy of appropriation and reconstruction regarding how to redefine her life, Aissatou employs that of abrogation.

Unlike Aissatou, Ramatoulaye chooses to remain in a polygamous marriage because she "ha[s] never conceived of happiness outside marriage" (Bâ 56). As Ojaide argues, Ramatoulaye has twelve children and hence she is "realistic about her chances for a single man and [so] she settles to take care of her children" ("Contexts" 114). This choice is about determination not to let distress overcome women and mothers like Ramatoulaye. For this reason, she remains attached to her domestic space as a single mother but with a sense of appropriation. At this point, Ramatoulaye recalls Jashoda in Devi's "BG" because Jashoda's career as a wet nurse enables her to turn the domestic space into a site of financial support rather than of dependency on men.

Likewise, Ramatoulaye transforms the meaning of spatial and marital confinement into empowerment and reconciliation with her own self. This is made manifest in the allegory of the car which signals Ramatoulaye's movement from confining spaces into liberating

ones. Aissatou buys Ramatoulaye a car in order to stress women's need of mobility and reintegration into public spaces. Besides, the car represents Aissatou's desire to see Ramatoulaye more outgoing and ambitious, especially as the latter uses the car to take her children to school.

For Aissatou, the concept of choice takes on a particular dimension. She chooses to start her life anew rather than expand it within a polygamous marriage. She ends her marriage which will not survive in the face of polygamy. Approving of Aissatou's choice, Ramatoulaye writes: "You had the surprising courage to take your life into your own hands . . . you looked resolutely to the future. You set yourself a difficult task: and more than just my presence and my encouragements, books saved you . . . they sustained you" (Bâ 32). Aissatou finds fulfilment in her role as a single mother who takes responsibility for her life and as an interpreter at the Senegalese embassy in the US. This underlines Marie Umeh's argument that "women are their own worst enemies by passively letting others control their destinies . . . [Aissatou] loses nothing by being honest with herself and refusing to be a slave to a selfish and insensitive spouse" ("Procreation" 198).

Recalling Adaku in Emecheta's *JM*, Aissatou leaves her husband in an attempt to defy the socially constructed walls of home, polygamy, and patriarchy which confine her. For some readers of Bâ's text, Aissatou is more courageous than Ramatoulaye who is seen as conventional due to her choice. But Ramatoulaye's choice is suggestive because it expresses her ethics and feminist self. For Eustace Palmer, this accentuates the point that Western feminists should not expect their African counterparts to be like them, given that "The African feminist, while being aware of her disadvantageous positions and the need for change, might also realize that she has invested too much in her marriage to give up too easily" (140).

Palmer is making an important point about challenging the idea that there is only one solution to marital (or any other) problems (in this case, to end a marriage). This point acknowledges the presence of differences between women and the fact that women's choices are tied to their lives which make them respond differently to their problems. Women such as Ramatoulaye who survive in patriarchal, Muslim societies cannot simply turn their backs on traditions which form an integral part of their cultural specificity.

Also, Bâ, through the different choices of Ramatoulaye and Aissatou, reclaims the possibility of women's transition and of their families' well–being. In a sense, each woman's choice is empowering and valid in its own results. While Aissatou succeeds in her profession, Ramatoulaye succeeds in educating her children in order to make them avoid the problems she has faced. As I read it, female transformation is not always linked to one's location or career. Many women move to new settings but do not succeed in changing their lives due to various obstacles created by class, gender, and tradition. Migrating and getting introduced into new cultures can empower (some) women, yet women such as Ramatoulaye who stay at home can also redefine their identities. This suggests that change and empowerment do not always require a literal action of moving on and of changing one's location.

Also of importance is that Ramatoulaye's and Aissatou's choices are about salvation and transition. As Ibrahim argues, strategies of female resistance and survival are important because they emerge from women's stories often ignored in male and nationalist narratives (158). Sharing Ibrahim's viewpoint, Médoune Gueye states that Ramatoulaye's and Aissatou's choices reflect their "philosophical attitudes" because they "adopt a means of resistance particular to her own personal philosophy, this latter translating into *survivre* for Ramatoulaye" and abrogation for Aissatou (105; emphasis original). This is evident in Ramatoulaye's repetition of the words, "I survived," on many occasions in the novel in order to confirm her survival (Bâ 51, 53). These words are a means of self–consolation for Ramatoulaye who is enclosed in "forced solitude and reclusion" as part of her confinement (26).

The choice of survival for Ramatoulaye works on the familial level where she takes responsibility for her family and on the social one when she rejects certain oppressive traditions such as levirate and polygamy, as will be discussed later. While Ramatoulaye and Aissatou choose, other women such as young Nabou and Binetou are denied the right to choose. In a similar manner to Firdaus in El Saadawi's *WPZ*, Young Nabou and Binetou are forced to marry old (married) men because the women's feelings and opinions are not considered in the case of marriage. For Palmer, such arranged marriages imply that women are treated by men and society "as possessions or as bits of food . . . Indeed, as far

as marriage is concerned, it is not important that the woman should be in love at all" (132). Unlike Ramatoulaye and Aissatou, Binetou and young Nabou cannot choose. Differences in representing female choice and agency in this case refer to the notion of "complex personhood" in postcolonial women's narratives and lives (Robolin 85). This notion connotes that women's experiences are differently lived and represented in women's texts in order to challenge images of sameness. It also underlines the problematic presence of women in postcolonial societies which construct women's relations and determine the nature and the degree of their oppression and agency.

Central to the above recommendations is the value of the female body, as argued in respect of Brodber's *JL* in the previous chapter. Ramatoulaye is aware of her daughters' needs as women: "I insist that my daughters be aware of the value of their bodies. I emphasize the sublime experience of the sexual act, an expression of love" (Bâ 87). Realising the value of the female body alters Ramatoulaye's attitudes and self–esteem. As Ojaide remarks, because Ramatoulaye "does not want her daughters to go through the harsh experience she went through, she teaches them about the importance of the woman's body" ("Contexts" 114). The realisation results from Ramatoulaye's lack of attention to her body due to the passage of time and to her confinement which have resulted in low self–esteem: "I looked at myself in the mirror . . . I could not delude myself: youth was deserting my body" (Bâ 41). Also, the awareness results from the "revitalizing effect" of the bath she takes during confinement, where the cleanliness of her body and clothes soothes her (63).

It seems that Ramatoulaye's writing of her story spiritually recreates her body; it is a new body which has optimistic views toward life. In light of the aforementioned points, Bâ's *SLL* promotes concerns which have been "formalised and consolidated under the designation of women's rights" such as choice, freedom, equality, and empowerment (Anker 117). The concerns are evident in the passage where Ramatoulaye supports the women's movement which empowers her after having endured marital and spiritual crises: "I am not indifferent to the irreversible currents of women's liberation that are lashing the world . . . My heart rejoices each time a woman emerges from the shadows . . .

which religions or unjust legislation have sealed" (Bâ 88). Ramatoulaye secures a new identity which is always under construction. Her vision of liberation expands to a vision of liberation for all women, irrespective of their differences.

In short, Ramatoulaye's story is about (female) transition and survival. It intersects with the welfare of society because the story is not restricted to women's liberation. This is emphasised by Bâ's attempt to envision a postcolonial world where diverse female voices seek to eliminate all forms of domination, thereby extending the gender nature of *SLL* to include the struggle to rebuild society "so that the collectivity could survive" (Azodo "Role" 82).

Empowerment via ambivalence: tradition and modernity reconciled

Engaging with tradition and modernity but with a sense of appropriation is central to Ramatoulaye's journey toward empowerment. The journey signifies a woman's attempt to balance between tradition and modernity as a way of survival. It also implies a woman's rejection and modification of specific confining practices that make up tradition.

Bâ explores women's struggle to balance the competing tensions of the traditional–modern divide and to reject the ones which hinder them from prospering. However, as Valovirta has argued in respect of Brodber's *JL*, progress is attained not only by recourse to local values as opposed to foreign ones, which means a reversal of binaries, but also by means of negotiation and appropriation ("Into" 332). Bâ's treatment of the above divide confirms Valovirta's point because one of the factors which empower Ramatoulaye is cultural merging. The latter is represented through Ramatoulaye's roles as a teacher, a single mother, and a woman combining European–style education with a traditional Senegalese life.

Ramatoulaye selects certain aspects of the tradition–modernity paradigm in order to live as a modern woman while not deserting her traditions. For example, handling her unwed daughter's pregnancy best illustrates the way she appropriates tradition and modernity as an educated, Muslim mother. The local norms of Ramatoulaye's Senegalese

culture are embodied in the "griot" woman Farmata who, in a similar manner to Christophine in Rhys's *WSS*, uses ritualistic ways as a means of knowledge and survival. Farmata casts her "cowries" and expects Ramatoulaye's reaction toward her daughter's pregnancy to be cries and punishment (Bâ 83). Nonetheless, Farmata "was astonished" because "She expected wailing; I smiled. She wanted strong reprimands: I consoled. She wished for threats: I forgave . . . To give a sinner so much attention was beyond her" (83).

Another example of engagement with tradition and modernity as a route of empowerment relates to Ramatoulaye's colonial education.[3] The latter differs in its impact on women in postcolonial contexts because it either empowers or disempowers women. Nellie's colonial education in Brodber's *JL* disempowers her in so far as it alienates her from her body and community due to gender, race, and class tensions, despite being rescued later by Aunt Alice and Baba. By contrast, Ramatoulaye's and Aissatou's colonial education empowers them (this explains why Bâ originally writes *SLL* in French in 1979).[4]

Empowerment via colonial education presents colonisation as a complex issue in Bâ's novel which is not always considered negative. This relates to the point that colonial education shapes Ramatoulaye's and Aissatou's lives and is a source of their evolving conscience as strong African women. It is embodied in the presence of Western female figures who contribute knowledge to Ramatoulaye and Aissatou. Speaking of her boarding school years with Aissatou and of the French headmistress who is a link between two different cultures, Ramatoulaye writes:

> We were true sisters, destined to the same mission of emancipation. To lift us out of the bog of tradition . . . to make up for our inadequacies, to develop universal moral values in us: these were the aims of our admirable headmistress . . . because the path chosen for our training and our blossoming has . . . accorded with the profound choices made by New Africa for the promotion of the black woman. (15–16)

This passage revolves around the significant impact which the French education in Senegal has left on Senegalese women, including Bâ herself. With its encouraging feminist tendencies, Ramatoulaye's and Aissatou's colonial education empowers them. It makes

them unable to accept, later in their lives, the constructed roles and pressures set by traditions such as polygamy.

Ponty–Ville where Ramatoulaye and Aissatou are trained as teachers symbolises strength and modernity. It is "the crucible in which a new, pliable post–colonial subject, the agent of social transformation, is formed" (Esonwanne 89). But for me, Uzo Esonwanne's words refer also to Ramatoulaye's ritual confinement which is a space of self–growth. In positioning a liberated, educated woman in a traditional space of confinement (home), Bâ brings together cultural differences as spaces of transformation, showing that she is not totally rejecting traditions while adhering to modernity. As Modupe Olaogun argues, Bâ positions Ramatoulaye in a "traverse space" or in an in–between space of agency which acknowledges the intersections of the traditional and the modern and of the local and the universal (182). This suggests the possibility of seeing tradition and modernity as a space of revision; that is, of merging tradition and modernity in ways that do not impede female progress. This is why Ramatoulaye selects certain aspects of tradition and modernity which empower her.

Moreover, colonial education enables Ramatoulaye to find a job. The financial independence secured through female employment deepens Ramatoulaye's belief in her role as an accomplished woman in private and public spheres. Obviously, the aims of Ramatoulaye's French teacher echo hers as well, particularly in Ramatoulaye's choice of teaching as a profession which makes her recognise the progress brought by teachers to society and to its young minds. As a female teacher myself, I argue that when a woman is given an opportunity to assert her presence and to make use of her abilities, she can succeed in becoming a dynamic part of a community's development. And as Ramatoulaye says, teachers "form a noble army . . . of knowledge . . . How faithfully we served our profession . . . In those children we set in motion waves that, breaking, carried away in their furl a bit of ourselves" (Bâ 23). Ramatoulaye as a teacher participates in enlightening the nation's young minds. She compares her profession of teaching with that of doctors, hinting indirectly at Mawdo's position as a doctor because both professions are important. This reflects Bâ's concern about equality between men and women and about the significance of women's careers with respect to those of men.

Likewise, Aissatou gains success and independence out of her education and career. She makes a radical change in her career because she works as an interpreter for the Senegalese embassy in the US. An individual choice made by a single Muslim woman raises points of controversy among (male) critics in their judgment of Aissatou's decision and its aftermath. Male critics such as Fémi Ojo–Ade see Aissatou's career as insignificant because it simply means translating information (76). Ojo–Ade judges Aissatou's profession as sterile and her hopes as unfulfilled because her choice of departure "is not an action taken in search of happiness; or if that is the motive, the objective is never attained. The saving grace in Aissatou's embattled existence is her career, and as any overworked administrator, or interpreter or intellectual would admit, a career is eons removed from human care" (77). Unhappy, unloved, and alone is the image which Ojo–Ade draws for Aissatou who lives in the US. He does not consider that she is a rebellious woman who can be lucky and capable enough to find happiness that will change her life.

Possibly, Ojo–Ade, unlike Bâ, looks at Aissatou's career from a single dimension which points to the financial rewards secured by Aissatou's career, regardless of its importance to the working woman as a source of independence. Disagreeing with Ojo–Ade, Rebecca Wilcox finds the role of interpreter as supportive because it creates stability and flexibility in running international relations (129). If Aissatou as an interpreter misinterprets a word, delegates and people from different countries may misunderstand one another or may receive incorrect information. The misinterpretation can cause a breakdown in negotiation and relation agendas among countries.

Despite being aware of the importance of women's work and self–development, I do not view them as the only avenues of empowerment available to Bâ's female protagonists. This relates to the presence of women in discussions about national progress. Toward the end of the letter, Ramatoulaye adopts a renewed interest in politics. Although she has not yet decided to engage in social change, Ramatoulaye reconsiders active involvement in politics to modify social ills. For example, after her middle boys are hit by a motorcyclist while playing in the street, she comments that society must show more responsibility toward the well–being of its people by creating playgrounds for children.

During her confinement, Ramatoulaye encounters an incident which reveals her concern about women's roles and rights in politics. She and Daouda engage in a political discussion during which she becomes critical. Daouda starts talking about the achievements women have made in accessing political powers by holding four seats in the national assembly. Ramatoulaye responds angrily, saying that this is "a ridiculous ratio" compared with hundreds of seats allocated for men (Bâ 60). She continues to figure out the constraints as well as the strengths such as education, voting, and well–paid work which need to be redefined in order to place women in proper positions equal to those of men.

For his part, Daouda responds positively to Ramatoulaye's comments and agrees about the right of women to be equal to men. Nonetheless, he expresses the need for more political activism on the part of women because "If men alone are active in the parties, why should they think of the women?" (Bâ 62). Daouda's suggestion to further develop women's roles in politics gives insights into his identity as a man. Bâ creates Daouda as a pro–feminist male figure who acknowledges the need for solidarity and strength in order to improve gender relations, where "women, in the private and public sectors, [should] move ahead" (Azodo, "Role" 85). This shows that Bâ recommends a political agenda for women and is presented by Daouda who, in a similar manner to Baba in Brodber's *JL*, is rational and sympathetic.

Ramatoulaye identifies herself with a more politically involved self as part of the agenda of change. She names herself for the first time during her discussion with Daouda, thereby asserting herself in political terms: "I had remained the same Ramatoulaye . . . a bit of a rebel" (Bâ 61). Besides, what exemplifies Ramatoulaye's negotiation of tradition and modernity is religion which expresses Ramatoulaye's "Islamic feminism" that is integral to her identity (Edwin 723). Supporting Shirin Edwin's opinion, Rizwana Habib Latha states that if a distinction is made between Senegalese women's writing and other female writing, it is "the association with religion" (23–24). The constructive link between religion and women in Bâ's *SLL* denotes the function of the Qur'an in shaping Ramatoulaye's feminist thought and ethics. This is evident in the frequent references to the Qur'an and to Islamic values in Ramatoulaye's letter.

As stated previously, Ramatoulaye's decision to accept a polygamous life results from her faith as a true Muslim believer (and from her love and admiration for Modou, too). By highlighting some Islamic rituals such as prayer and mourning period, Bâ situates Ramatoulaye's expression of Islamic feminism in the context of Senegal. However, I go beyond Bâ's viewpoint in order to argue that Ramatoulaye's dependence on her strategic self–positioning and gradual recuperation enables her to make good use of Islamic feminism. Besides, associating Ramatoulaye's character with religion suggests that while Ramatoulaye uses religion as a healing tool, men such as Modou manipulate religion in order to attain certain privileges. Modou breaches paternal love and support toward his family. For some critics, he transgresses Islamic laws which demand that the husband treats his wives fairly in polygamous marriages (Palmer 131; Orabueze 128).

Agreeing with Palmer and F. O. Orabueze, Amira Nowaira argues that the presence of men such as Modou who abuse women in Muslim societies and refuse to grant them their rights does not mean that "the Qur'an," "the Prophet," and "the Islamic tradition in general" dictate this abuse (67). Recalling El Saadawi's *WPZ*, Bâ's *SLL* is situated against a patriarchal Muslim society which makes readers recognise the discrepancies between the teachings of Islam on the one hand, and the exploitative practices of men who manipulate certain religious values in order to control women on the other. In this sense, religion bestows a wider dimension to the tradition–modernity paradigm and to the feminist position which empowers Ramatoulaye.

In light of the aforementioned debates, Ramatoulaye appropriates the tensions of tradition and modernity for her own benefit. Although these tensions lead the protagonists of Emecheta's *JM* and Brodber's *JL* to loss and fragmentation, they need not be decoded as signs of weakness and ambivalence in the case of Ramatoulaye. A key issue which contributes to the metachronous aspect of postcolonial women's texts is that differences in representing female spaces show that ambivalence toward tradition and modernity can be a positive route of survival, given that a woman's life is "an eternal compromise" (Bâ 72). This recalls Angelita Reyes's argument that ambivalence is a strengthening "part of the pathway to understanding the self" rather than "the end product of issues that cannot be resolved" ("Epistolary" 210).

Accordingly, ambivalence helps Ramatoulaye reclaim her own self. The complexity of Bâ's text and of Ramatoulaye's character arises from combining contesting paradigms such as tradition and modernity while rejecting generalisation and stereotyping. This explains why Ramatoulaye chooses her Senegalese community as a framework and works within it in order to make it a more accommodating space for women.

Self–assertion between polygamy and motherhood

While tradition and modernity empower women such as Ramatoulaye, female subjugation is still prevalent in terms of class and gender on the local level in the society Bâ depicts. A key issue discussed in this thesis is the presence of intersectional, contextualised powers which contribute to female oppression.

Applied to my analysis of *SLL*, female subjugation is tied to polygamy, class antagonism, and male domination, among other repressive traditions. This suggests that Senegalese women retain and, in some cases, are forced to incarnate the role of the "Other" due to such powers. Unlike Binetou and young Nabou who cannot defy their status quo, Ramatoulaye and Aissatou are aware of the workings and the aftermaths of their oppression. Their awareness results from several factors such as being educated (in French), participating in national liberation, and realising that they are still colonised but this time by a local colonisation named polygamy.

As a Muslim woman, I am inclined to argue that polygamy in Bâ's text is emblematic of the break in familial relations and of hypocritical religious practices rather than of a repressive practice sanctioned by Islam. This shows that men's polygamous instincts and sensual whims lead them to infidelity and irresponsibility. As Nnaemeka writes, "Bâ puts on stage a bunch of irresponsible philanderers who use the institution of polygamy as an alibi . . . [in order] to manipulate the system to their own advantage" ("Urban" 184). While Mawdo tells Aissatou about his marriage to young Nabou, Modou secretly marries Binetou and abandons his family.

Ramatoulaye expresses frustration and anguish caused by Modou's second marriage: "With consternation, I measure the extent of Modou's betrayal . . . [which] was the

outcome of the choice of a new life . . . He mapped out his future without taking our existence into account" (Bâ 9). Modou objectifies Ramatoulaye; he uses religion in order to justify his decision because taking a new wife is a matter of "fate that decides men and things: God intended him to have a second wife, there is nothing he can do about it" (37). Modou's words hint at his selfish personality and imply that young women such as Binetou are attracted by affluent life–styles offered through arranged marriages to married men such as Modou who provides Binetou with a villa and a monthly allowance.

Likewise, Aissatou experiences marital betrayal and emotional pain. But unlike Ramatoulaye, she rejects a polygamous life and chooses to leave. As argued earlier, Aissatou writes a letter to Mawdo in order to express her denunciation of being oppressed by polygamy: "Princes master their feelings to fulfil their duties. 'Others' bend their heads and, in silence, accept a destiny that oppresses them. That, briefly put, is the internal ordering of our society, with its absurd divisions. I will not yield to it" (Bâ 31). The letter shows that Aissatou voices her denunciation of polygamy which causes heartbreak and degradation to women.

After Modou's death, Ramatoulaye is offered a marriage proposal by Daouda who will make her life better; however, she rejects the proposal with sadness because it re–enacts polygamy. Again, Ramatoulaye finds solace in writing and so she writes a letter to Daouda in order to express her rejection of the proposal: "Abandoned yesterday because of a woman, I cannot lightly bring myself between you and your family . . . Those who are involved in it [polygamy] know the constraints, the lies, the injustices that weigh down their consciences in return for the ephemeral joys of change . . . I offer you my friendship. Dear Daouda, please accept it" (Bâ 68). Ramatoulaye expresses the sorrow faced by women when their husbands take new wives. Although she accepts Binetou as a co–wife, she is careful not to participate in polygamy because it will destroy the lives of other families. Therefore, Ramatoulaye accepts Islamic precepts and practices such as polygamy but on her own terms; that is, she modifies the marital structure according to her beliefs and this adds to the distinctiveness of her personality.

Another version of the selfish Modou appears in the character of Tamsir, his brother. After Modou's death, Tamsir proposes to Ramatoulaye because "You suit me as a wife . . .

Usually it is the younger brother who inherits his elder brother's wife" (Bâ 57). Tamsir's proposal, unlike that of Daouda, reflects neither love nor a real intent to marry. It is linked with the tradition of levirate which allows a man to possess his dead brother's wife and to perpetuate female degradation and possession. But my analysis of *SLL*, in a similar manner to the other selected texts, derives instances of female transformation out of oppressive situations.

For example, the principal female characters in Emecheta's *JM* and Devi's "BG" undergo moments of self–awakening in order to reveal the false joys of motherhood in patriarchal societies. For Ramatoulaye, the moment of triumph relates to her rejection of Tamsir's proposal as well as to her potential to speak in the presence of men who often silence women: "You forgot that I have a heart, a mind, that I am not an object to be passed from hand to hand . . . You, the revered lord, you take it easy, obeyed at the crook of a finger. I shall never be the one to complete your collection [of wives]" (Bâ 58). Ramatoulaye's words signal her defiance of the socio–sexual commodification of women, and this recalls Firdaus's rejection of being commodified by men in the same way as they commodify money in El Saadawi's *WPZ*.

Ramatoulaye's triumph emphasises her identity as a woman who can inscribe her own life text. It also actualises Nnu Ego's prayer in Emecheta's *JM* by recreating herself as a woman who is not enslaved by men. A newly–born woman, Ramatoulaye rebels against polygamy embedded in Tamsir's proposal of levirate. This highlights the significance of Ramatoulaye's manner of asserting herself as a Muslim woman; that is, of Ramatoulaye's potential to say "No" in the presence of the Imam (a Muslim male leader) to an offer that will enslave her. This expresses the inner strength arising from Ramatoulaye and, more importantly, from Bâ's commitment to make women come to terms with their voices in order to speak. As Gueye writes, Ramatoulaye's rejection of Tamsir's proposal is a deliberate action in order to shock him and the Imam and to "measure the impact of such transgressive behavoir and the heroine's determination to challenge certain social norms" (109). Ramatoulaye succeeds in redefining her life and in acquiring audaciousness in order to speak up for her rights as a free human being.

As for Mawdo, Modou, and Tamsir, they recall Firdaus's uncle, Di'aa, and Ibrahim who are oppressive and egoistic men in El Saadawi's *WPZ*. The similarity between those male figures necessitates the analysis of their personalities not only as referring to individuals but also as reflective of wider systems of corruption. Modou, Mawdo, and Di'aa are educated and enlightened; however, they manipulate tradition and religion for their benefits. What a woman needs is understanding, care, and compassion; that is, a man who feels her joy and pain. Undoubtedly, Mawdo and Modou fail to be such partners and so Bâ's heroines restructure their lives in order to be independent and happy.

Unlike Modou and Mawdo, Bâ's good men are represented through the fiancés of Daba and Aissatou, Ramatoulaye's daughters. The fiancés love their future wives, share domestic chores, and grant themselves equal rights. This paints a picture of the fiancés as representatives of a new generation of enlightened, responsible men. By presenting examples of good men, Bâ underscores the complementarity of men and women, especially as Bâ, Ramatoulaye, and Aissatou are expressing a desire for respect by men while rejecting marriages established on betrayal. This explains why Bâ, as the narrative epigraph shows, dedicates *SLL* to women and to "good" men. It is also why Bâ separates her good heroines from irresponsible men by making Modou die while letting Mawdo be rejected by Aissatou.

While Bâ deconstructs polygamy as a confining space and experience, she maps an alternative space of empowerment identified as motherhood. As Renée Larrier remarks, Bâ highlights aspects of mothering that no longer depict women as "body parts" but "as whole persons" who enjoy the rewards of their roles as mothers (195). Although Ramatoulaye rejects polygamy, she remains an ideal mother. It is possible to argue that the mother image is a problematic issue in postcolonial women's texts due to its varied representations (Green 127). For instance, while motherhood empowers Ramatoulaye and Aissatou in Bâ's *SLL*, it causes physical and emotional pain to Nnu Ego and Jashoda in Emecheta's *JM* and Devi's "BG" respectively.

As will be argued in Chapter Seven, differences in representing similar themes relate to the diversity of women's experiences and to the complexity of their lives, especially when they are represented as victims and agents as in the case of motherhood. Motherhood in

postcolonial women's narratives offers "a tenacious resistance against the victimizing world" and this explains why Bâ bases women's supportive relationships not only on friendship but also on motherhood (Ibrahim 155). In other words, motherhood is not always a space of oppression, especially as Bâ's two protagonists are not oppressed by their roles as mothers. Unlike Aunt Nabou and Binetou's mother, Ramatoulaye is aware of the healing power of motherhood when it is devoid of oppression and control. This helps her negotiate the tensions of motherhood as a patriarchal institution and motherhood as an experience which, for Nnaemeka, has its "pains" and "rewards" ("Imag(in)ing" 5).

Ramatoulaye plays her role as a successful mother and a mother–in–law. Sharing Wilcox's viewpoint, I consider Ramatoulaye an "ideal" mother who motivates other women to survive even if they are abandoned by their husbands (127). Along with being a working woman, Ramatoulaye is a caring mother of *twelve* children. Probably, Bâ deliberately chooses this large number of children in order to underline Ramatoulaye's movement from the traditional status of mothers as reproductive machines into self–capable mothers.

I argued earlier that Ramatoulaye is first shocked when Aissatou, her unwed daughter, turns out to be pregnant. Yet the mother's reaction later changes because she realises "that the choice is ultimately theirs and that she will be better off guiding them through their mistakes than abandoning them to flounder unsupported" (Wilcox 127). Aissatou's choice of her mate Ibrahim Sall seems wise in Ramatoulaye's opinion as she accepts the fate of her unwed daughter. Consequently, Ramatoulaye stresses that she is a mother in order to "understand the inexplicable . . . [Aissatou's] life and future were at stake, and these were powerful considerations, overriding all taboos and assuming greater importance in my heart and in my mind. The life that fluttered in her was questioning me. It was eager to blossom. It vibrated, demanding protection" (Bâ 82–83). Motivated by her maternal instinct, Ramatoulaye realises that her daughter is in need of care, not of rebuke and abandonment. Furthermore, she establishes her relationship with her sons on understanding and support. Although Ramatoulaye criticises her middle boys for playing in the street, she recognises their need to play outdoors. Thus, Ramatoulaye, in a similar

manner to Aissatou, brings up her sons alone contrary to the expectations of relatives and community.

Ramatoulaye's attitudes as a caring mother arise from Bâ's belief which she is happy to convey to other women: "we mothers who have had the privilege to understand a little and to play a part in the education of our sons, we have tried to raise them so that they do not grow up thinking of themselves as 'kings of the family'" (qtd. in Harrell–Bond 211). Ramatoulaye prevents her sons from enacting the roles of Modou, Mawdo, and Tamsir; that is, from playing oppressive roles within the family which are based on traditions. The end of Ramatoulaye's letter acknowledges her identity as a transformed woman. This shows that she starts her letter as an "estranged widow and ends as embraced mother. She moves from an externally based definition of self, legally constructed in relation to an absent man—the dead husband, to a self–definition, voluntarily articulated in relation to her children as separate individuals without reference to this absent father" (Busia, "Rebellious" 96). Busia emphasises women's capability to survive as single mothers; an identity that is stronger and more liberating than that of a wife.

Having first named herself in a politically centred chapter in the novel, Ramatoulaye is encouraged to end the letter appropriately with her signature. Ending a letter with its writer's name is something normal as most letters are closed in this way. But in Ramatoulaye's case, inscribing a woman's name on a paper is suggestive, much like its inscription on a cloth by Antoinette in Rhys's *WSS*. It asserts Ramatoulaye's emergent identity established during the act of writing because it has shifted from a difficult situation to a more optimistic one. Also, Ramatoulaye's signature marks the closure of the letter and of a painful part of her life. She no longer feels the need to continue writing because distress has given way to hope and empowerment.

In sum, Bâ offers readers of *SLL* the opportunity to discover how women can empower themselves by calling for a greater solidarity among each other at all levels. A writer keen on voicing women's rights, Bâ writes *SLL* in order to focus on the creative use of several spaces of power available to women instead of merely pinpointing their oppression. This project of socio–literary activism is a key issue in the analysis of the selected texts in this thesis.

Conclusion

This chapter developed a deconstructive, cultural reading of Bâ's *SLL* in order to read it as a transformative text which announces the vigorous return of the colonised female voice. By discussing the epistolary narrative structure and the complexity of classifying *SLL*, the chapter underscored the possibility of claiming women's voices and texts as outlets for the expression of women's need to be transformed. Besides, other lessons in empowerment are available to women who choose to change their status quo. These recommendations include female friendship, the value of the female body and choice, motherhood, education, and employment, all of which enable women to lead self–determined lives in desperate situations which are caused by polygamy and woman–woman subjugation. Such avenues of empowerment demystify the assumption that women cannot be happy and successful without men. The discussion of the tradition and modernity paradigm as a site of negotiation also illustrated women's potential to resist conflicting tensions in order to create positive values and to better serve themselves and their families. Thus, *SLL* regains plural forms of female agency and integrates them with other identity landscapes in order to sustain women's transformation.

The next chapter also develops a deconstructive, cultural analysis of Rhys's *WSS* in order to discuss female agency through different modes of representation, thereby stressing the metachronous aspect of postcolonial women's writing in this thesis. The chapter discusses the interrelation of race, class, and cultural tensions because it participates in the oppression of Rhys's white Creole heroine and leads to her ambivalence and madness. The chapter also explores structural and thematic issues which pertain to the reading of *WSS* as a postcolonial text. This underlines the function of spatial mapping in Rhys's text in order to derive instances of transition out of confining spaces such as madness and the attic, thereby highlighting the presence of plural experiences of women as well as of their voices and texts.

Notes

1. Glasgow, “Struggle” 74 and Bryce 621 provide more viewpoints about the function of postcolonial women’s writing.

2. See the arguments of Ibrahim 158 and Nnaemeka, “Imag(in)ing” 4 which discuss the value of female choice and agency.

3. See Singh 103–14 for more debates around the issue of colonial education in *SLL*.

4. For Lionnet, writing *SLL* through the language of the coloniser (French) denotes appropriation and creativity. This relates to the changes which the colonial language undergoes by women writers who transform it. See Lionnet 13 for a discussion of this issue.

Chapter Six

Jean Rhys's *Wide Sargasso Sea*

The previous chapter developed a deconstructive, cultural analysis of Bâ's *SLL* as a text of female empowerment. It analysed the theme of female oppression as perpetuated by polygamy, marital betrayal, and female–female oppression, among other factors. It also mapped spaces of empowerment such as writing, friendship, and motherhood through thematic and structural interrelatedness. Likewise, this chapter, through a deconstructive yet contextualised analysis, reads Rhys's *WSS* as a text of female transition and ambivalence which offers different readings of women's experiences and confining/resistant spaces.

These varied modes of representing women relate to the metachronous aspect of postcolonial women's writing which does not align with a fixed mode of narrating a woman's story or with a single female voice. Rather, it uses different themes and structures in order to inscribe plural experiences of women, thereby adding diversity and complexity to the interpretations of the texts, all of which are operative at present in order to inspire change. The chapter identifies the causes of Antoinette's oppression as tied to her white Creole lineage and gender. It also analyses the actions Antoinette takes in order to assert her presence in a world which silences her due to her mixed race. Gender, race binaries, and narrative voices are among the issues discussed in this chapter because they consolidate the postcolonial element of Rhys's text and of its aspects of literary revision.

The role of the mother (land) is important because the protagonist's insecure relationship with her mother parallels her uncertainty regarding her belonging and motherland. Antoinette's displacement and identity confusion are also discussed as stylistically mediated issues through the use of symbols such as colours and dreams which are part of the artistic structure of *WSS*. Coupled with these issues is the theme of madness which foregrounds a re–examination of the socio–political narrative context

which shapes Antoinette's in–between identity and space of resistance. Recent theoretical debates around these issues have guided the choice of Rhys's *WSS* for analysis and ordering it in this thesis as following a rite of passage about transition which, unlike the empowering rites of passage of Brodber's Nellie and Bâ's Ramatoulaye, leads Antoinette to nowhere.

Wide Sargasso Sea as a postcolonial text

Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak reads *WSS* as a text which obscures the voice of the "Other" and instead acknowledges the Western female voice centralised in Brontë's *JE*: "no perspective critical of imperialism can turn the Other into a self, because the project of imperialism has always already historically refracted what might have been the absolutely Other into a domesticated Other that consolidates the imperialist self" ("Three" 253). For Spivak, liberating the female "Other" through revisionary writing reinforces the notion of otherness and undermines the attempt of the "Other" to enunciate a new self.

Spivak's notion of female otherness in the context of Rhys's text is plausible because it foregrounds the problematic attempt to reverse the Self/Other binary once the latter is constructed. But this notion leaves no possibility for Antoinette, Rhys's principal figure, to escape from the space of otherness constructed by her gender and lineage, among other variables. This complicates the search for resistance and reconstruction in postcolonial women's texts. As I argued in Chapter One, resistance and agency are complementary parts of women's experiences of oppression, and this suggests that women are represented as both agents and victims in postcolonial women's narratives such as Rhys's *WSS*. Accordingly, a reading of *WSS* that is deconstructive and different from Spivak's is presented in this chapter. This will uncover the ways in which Antoinette, in a similar manner to Ramatoulaye in Bâ's *SLL*, is the narrator and the central character in the story because she goes beyond the tragic end allotted for her double figure in Brontë's *JE*. This section explores the ways in which *WSS* can be read as a postcolonial text of female

transition in order to counter Spivak's argument and to acknowledge the distinctiveness of Rhys's work.

The description of Rhys's *WSS* as a postcolonial text because it voices the marginalised white Creole woman overlooks other narrative and structural issues which are central to its creation and to its analysis in this chapter. These issues include the reclamation of Rhys's authorial voice, the plurality of narrative voices, and the disruption of Eurocentric binaries. Put differently, it is anomalous to describe Rhys's *WSS* as a postcolonial text, especially as it is set in Jamaica and Dominica during the 1830s. However, Rhys completed the novel in 1966, when the power of European empire had begun to retreat. The breakdown of colonial power is represented several times in the text, particularly in relation to issues of gender and race. This is evident in Rhys's commitment to voice the white Creole woman of Brontë's text and to unsilence the black woman, thereby deconstructing nineteenth–century narratives which voiced white, middle–class women and claimed their solipsistic identities, as argued in Chapter Three.[1]

The first argument which highlights the postcolonial nature of *WSS* is Rhys's authorial voice. Although Rhys's literary oeuvre has been acknowledged, she is often displaced within two literary traditions (from British and Caribbean canons) which consider her "Other" due to her mixed race. This has inspired much debate, mainly about Rhys's place in the literary canon. Just as Antoinette feels displaced in a world to which she has not entirely belonged due to her white Creole lineage, Rhys appears to reside in a literary world which is ambivalent about her place; that is, whether her works are considered Caribbean and whether she is a West Indian or an English writer.

For Edward Kamau Brathwaite, white Creole writers such as Rhys in the West Indies "have contributed too little culturally, as a group, to give credence to the notion that they can . . . identify or be identified, with the spiritual world on this side of the Sargasso Sea" (qtd. in Ramchand 99). The writings of white Creole writers are not considered by Brathwaite an authentic representation of the realities of the West Indies.[2] The Creole representation of the West Indian experience is assumed to be neither true nor lived in the same way as that of West Indians, or the non–white underprivileged majority who form the basis of Caribbean society. For this reason, it is argued that works by white

Creole writers contribute little to the Caribbean literary tradition and to its Afro–Caribbean sensibility.[3]

While Brathwaite views white Creole (female) writers as occupying an outsider place, other critics claim that this place or voice is integral to the Caribbean literary tradition (Donnell 92). Disagreeing with Brathwaite, O'Callaghan argues that narratives written by female outsiders such as Rhys are rich representations of the reality of the West Indies ("Outsider's" 276). This suggests that the specificities of such narratives cannot be fully experienced nor provided by Afro–Caribbean writers or expatriate European ones; consequently, Rhys's "outsider's" voice is integral to the reconstruction of Caribbean literature.

Rhys wrote that "the West Indies started knocking at my heart . . . That (the knocking) has never stopped" (Wyndham and Melly 171). Although Rhys spent her life in England, she considered the West Indies an important place of her being, personally and literarily. Writing *WSS* can be the response to the "knocking" because it is a creative response or return. It enables Rhys to engage with issues of race, class, gender, and the legacy of the plantation history in the West Indies, all of which add ambivalence and distinctiveness to Antoinette's character. By writing *WSS* which voices marginalised women, Rhys claims her literary place rather than "remaining abandoned by history because she is not deemed sufficiently 'Caribbean'" (Lonsdale 43). Borrowing Saree S. Makdisi's words, I argue that "just as Conrad's [*Heart of Darkness*] was bound up with Britain's imperial project, [Rhys's *WSS*] participates (in an oppositional way) in the afterlife of the same project today, by 'writing back' to the colonial power that once ruled the [West Indies]" (qtd. in Huebener 29). This highlights the need to understand Rhys's ambivalence in creative and literary rather than racial terms, as this chapter attempts to do.

The second issue which helps read *WSS* as a postcolonial text is the gender perspective of the narrative. Antoinette experiences individual and historical ambivalence and fragmentation due to her mixed lineage, yet a rejection of the narrative voice which Rhys allocates for Antoinette is untenable. As Laura Niesen de Abruna remarks, Rhys reclaims the marginalised voices of white Creole (and black) women because she returns to the West Indian Bertha Mason/Antoinette "the dignity taken away by Charlotte Brontë . . .

[because] Bertha Mason was a victim of the sexism and imperialism of British culture" ("Twentieth" 96). This reclamation is not merely about the rejection of racial and gender categorisations which silence women. Rather, Rhys provides marginalised women such as Antoinette and Christophine, the black servant, with an audience who will hear their voices and acknowledge their varied reflections on society.

Linking with Bâ, Emecheta, and El Saadawi in this thesis, Rhys underlines the oppressive kinship experienced by women through marriage, especially as Antoinette and Rochester fail to have a healthy, marital life. Rochester belongs to the civil culture of the whites which embodies patriarchal norms of domination. He is juxtaposed with Antoinette who represents the island as mysterious, savage, and disturbing. The different and conflicting realities of Rochester and Antoinette foreshadow their inability to reconcile their difference, especially as they do not reach an objective understanding of each other's culture. This lack of understanding is exacerbated by the institution of marriage, where Rochester, in a similar manner to Firdaus's husband in El Saadawi's *WPZ*, is given the right to mistreat his wife.

The intersection of power and patriarchy in the case of marriage can be read as a postcolonial issue because it creates a space of female oppression and confinement sanctioned by society. Besides, Rhys not only highlights the complex relationship between gender and power which oppresses women but also voices it from the challenging position of "dislocation, marginality and . . . disempowerment" (İçöz 196). In other words, being a woman whose identity is structured by racial, classist, and patriarchal powers means that modes of colonisation will be experienced in more intense ways. This is why Antoinette's marriage imposes multiple pressures on her with which she cannot cope; consequently, she progresses toward insanity as a reaction against her oppression, as will be discussed later.

It is possible to argue that Brontë's *JE* is a feminist text which enables its central character to assert her individuality in a patriarchal society. Consequently, any additional modification from a feminist perspective by Rhys can be seen as borrowed or not linked to postcolonial origins. Nevertheless, it is important to note the different ways in which both authors deal with their female characters from a feminist perspective. Unlike that of

Brontë, Rhys's protagonist does not eventually achieve a happy marital life founded on female individuality because she is oppressed by a network of powers which is made acute by her gender and her white Creole lineage. This highlights an issue raised in Chapter Three, namely race as the main variable which distinguishes the presence of Caribbean women and undermines claims about the homogeneity of female oppression.[4] This means that Antoinette does not benefit from her status as a white Creole woman because she is unable to progress toward a happy life. From this perspective, the feminist and the postcolonial in Rhys's *WSS* overlap, where Antoinette's shifting identity is represented in racial and sexual terms. The overlap contributes to the complexity of Antoinette's character and provides readers of *WSS* with the opportunity to reflect on how a woman's life is shaped by patriarchy and race, among other power structures.

WSS is also a postcolonial text in the sense that it disrupts Eurocentric ideologies and epistemologies as a mode of resistance. According to Vijay Mishra and Bob Hodge, postcolonial literature "foregrounds a politics of opposition and struggle and problematizes the key relationship between the centre and periphery" (276). Helen Tiffin further adds that projects of literary decolonisation appropriate the dominant European discourse, as discussed in the previous two chapters ("Post–Colonial" 95).[5] Eventually, Rhys's text originates from and centralises the natives of the island because it is a resistant text written by and for Antoinette, Christophine, and Rhys herself. This makes the attempt to rewrite fictional and historical European narratives a vital mode of postcolonial literary representation. By subverting the relationship between the centre and the margin (between Rochester and Antoinette and between Antoinette and Christophine/Tia), Rhys disrupts the authority of the metropolitan English (woman, man, and culture) in order to reverse the roles of the coloniser/the oppressor and the colonised/the oppressed.

As such, *WSS* deliberately disrupts "received, supposedly singular notions of 'colonizer,' 'colonized,' and 'creole' as they were used in 19th century British prose" (Murdoch 256). In this way, Rhys formulates new subject positions and spaces of power which are evident in the use of race in the physical sense to denote colour prejudice. The main instance of the reversal of powers is represented by Antoinette who belongs to a

white family of slave–holders and colonisers. However, according to Rochester's logic of racial purity (whiteness), she is one of the colonised people on the island. As such, Antoinette, due to her hybrid situation, fails to secure a fixed sense of belonging which helps consolidate her identity as a member of a slave–owner's family.

This makes Antoinette feel that a "black nigger" is better than a "white nigger" like her (Rhys, *WSS* 24). Antoinette's feelings refer to a statement that recurs throughout the novel, namely the indictment of the socio–racial conditions experienced by the colonisers and the colonised in the colonies. As the narrative plot shows, the poverty and isolation of Antoinette's family are important registers of the changes which Caribbean society has undergone in a period of transformation. The hierarchy of master–slave has disappeared and so have the powers of Antoinette's family, thereby indicating that the whites, once stripped of power and money, become social inferiors who are mocked and rejected by the indigenous population on the island.

Besides, colonial mockery and displacement of binaries construct an incompatible relationship between whites (the coloniser) and blacks (the colonised). This signals the irreconcilable oppositions experienced by Antoinette in her childhood and youth, and, more broadly, by the whites and the blacks in Jamaica. As the first pages of Rhys's *WSS* indicate, white Jamaican women hate Antoinette's mother because she is a white, Martinican lady while English women hate her because she is pretty. The blacks also hate Antoinette's family for being ex–colonisers and slave–owners, thereby suggesting that much of Antoinette's life comprises a series of tensions based on her familial origins. This is evident when Antoinette's family is "colonised" and demeaned by the ex–slaves who burn the Coulibri estate.

Another example of the subversion of colonial binaries relates to the relationship between Tia and Antoinette. While playing in the bathing pool, Tia steals Antoinette's clothes and cheats her by taking her money. This example reverses the position of the colonised people who have been (economically) exploited by the colonisers. It also suggests that racial hierarchies and feelings of abasement between people in the Caribbean are instilled in the inhabitants' minds from early years, as is evident in the characters of Tia and the black children who chase Antoinette.

Rhys also creates a purposeful reversal of binaries through the character of Rochester. Rochester is represented as the fictive "Other" in a Caribbean world and text. His self–assurance and dignity as a white man weaken upon coming into contact with the unknown island. Besides, his situation triggers feelings of revulsion and betrayal because he feels that "Hatred, Life, Death came very close" to him while residing in the island and so he has to keep saying, "'You are safe,' I'd say . . . to my self" to ease his confused mind (*WSS* 94). Another example of binary disruption is evident in Antoinette's attempt to displace the (colonial) borders dividing her from the blacks through the use of black rituals. Antoinette, in a similar manner to Christophine, resorts to specific black rituals such as lighting the candle and love potion spells which do not belong to her white Creole power structure and culture. She lights candles in order to dispel darkness while walking down the dark passage in Rochester's house in the final narrative scene.

Lighting candles is believed to be an act by which the "believer" catches her "shadow" and therefore controls her own destiny (Renk 13). In this way, Antoinette, a product of irreconcilable cultures, identifies with African ritual in so far as she traverses the line demarcating the centre and the margin in order to express her right to choose how to act. Her choice of black witchcraft is a means of self–realisation through a power system that resides outside of white, patriarchal norms which divide the blacks and the whites. This makes Antoinette an emblem of West Indian women's resistance to the dominant culture which attempts to control her own. By voicing the displacement of socio–racial stratifications in the Caribbean, the postcolonial element of the novel is consolidated. This explains why Boyce Davies and Savory Fido are justified in describing the Caribbean experience as a hybrid, complex encounter between different social groups and races, as argued in Chapter Three.[6]

In addition to its destabilisation of race and gender hierarchies, Rhys's text represents a postcolonial product of different narrative voices. In a similar manner to the other texts explored in this thesis, Rhys's *WSS* reshapes social reality from a postcolonial perspective which acknowledges diversity and complexity of (female) voices and identities. Rhys constructs the narrative voices of Antoinette as the colonised white Creole woman and of Rochester as the white male coloniser. The change in the narrative voices creates a

narrative space where relationships and intimacies between different people can be observed and judged by readers of Rhys's text.

Following Nagihan Haliloğlu, I argue that "The passage from one voice to the other, sometimes staged as a transformation of one subjectivity into another, reveals the shifting borders of subject–categories, especially in the colonial order" (154–55). While narration in colonial texts is apt to be in part due to race and gender perspectives, Rhys's text creates several narrators (male and female, coloniser and colonised). The multiplicity of voices offers readers of *WSS* the opportunity to recognise how the white Creole woman feels and thinks about her island and England and how her agonising experiences result in madness and decline. Of importance is that Antoinette's voice raises her from the status of a "savage" person objectified in Brontë's *JE* into that of a speaking subject (258). A re–imagined version of Brontë's silent woman, Antoinette differs from Bertha not only because she is still alive at the narrative ending of Rhys's text but also because she is given a unique voice in order to tell her story. Besides, Antoinette's voice asserts her sanity and agency which are tied to her ability to narrate and to the links and feelings she makes with places and people.

Accordingly, Rhys's writing of *WSS* de–essentialises not only narratives of patriarchal and colonial centres which determine Antoinette's presence but also categories of narration which often equate voice with the (white) man. By making Antoinette narrate rather than be narrated, Rhys undermines the image of the "Englishman" through the character of Rochester who is given authority as a male (husband). Rhys does not grant Rochester the authority to have the last word in her text. He narrates part two of the narrative which provides insights into his social reality and motivations toward Antoinette and the island, yet his narrative voice is not triumphant.

This is attributed to the fact that Rhys blurs the distinction between the coloniser and colonised through Rochester's voice and the physical and emotional changes he experiences on the island. This makes Rochester's self–narration an indication not of how he colonises the "Other" as much as of how he loses himself and is turned into an "Other" during his journey on the island. As such, Rhys "dethrones him [Rochester], turning him into a haunted and brooding colonial on a colonized island. For him, the island is

overpowering and frightening" (Reyes, *Mothering* 86). More importantly, Rochester's voice is silenced in part three of the narrative in order to enable the return of the white Creole female (voice) who dominates the narrative ending. This draws the reader's sympathy for Antoinette while preventing Rochester from giving the final unreliable account of her madness and deterioration. These narrative voices differ in terms of gender, race, class, and hence in terms of agency and belonging. Moreover, they affirm Antoinette's belief in the necessity of acknowledging the varied and contradictory identities shaping reality, and of how one should respect the other's worldview. This contributes to the complexity and hybridity defining the Caribbean experience which is always plural and shifting.

Rhys and revisionary writing

As I argued earlier, the postcolonial element in Rhys's *WSS* is consolidated by the discussion of several themes and narrative issues. But it is useful as well to discuss the deconstructive framework of revisionary writing which structures *WSS*. The framework is seen as an overall narrative space of voicing from which the issues discussed in the previous section originate and thus it deserves attention.

Rob Pope states that revisionary writing links "practices of critical reading to those of creative writing" (130). *WSS* is one such creative discourse because it offers critical readings of the hybrid female condition. In other words, the newly derived tale of Rhys's text is a purposeful intervention or extension which uncovers contextual gaps and silences in a colonial text. While writing the Western literary canon can be a form of cultural control and visibility, rewriting this canon is a productive, liberating act for the (female) margins. representing several female texts and experiences reveals the desire to rewrite a story from another standpoint that is generative, different, and hence compelling, as argued in Chapter Three.

Rhys rewrites Brontë's text in order to voice its silenced female "Other," given that Rhys's intertextual act of rewriting the empire creates "new discursive spaces" in which "the unspoken" is made "visible and audible" (Threadgold 56). Within such spaces which

are literarily mapped, Antoinette, the Creole female "Other," is brought onto the stage and is represented as a speaking subject who narrates her story. Subsequently, *WSS*, in its revision of "Rochester's account of his marriage with Bertha Mason in Jamaica . . . opens up a new vision, a complex of lives, relationships, and social facts of the colonial island world that are utterly absent in *Jane Eyre*" (Müller 64). This literary extension revives undocumented female history of the white Creole woman whose complexity is conditioned by race and gender conflicts.

In addition, the generative function of Rhys's text exposes contextual gaps which allude to colonial and gender bias in that of Brontë. As Said remarks, in reading a postcolonial text such as *WSS*, "one must open it out both to what went into it and what its author excluded. Each cultural work is a vision of a moment, and we must juxtapose that vision with the various revisions it later provoked" (*Culture* 79). The type of writerly or contrapuntal reading recommended by Said allows Rhys to destabilise Brontë's text in order to offer a more subtle account of a white Creole woman who is caught in a complex web of tensions (Chapter Four provides a fuller discussion of writerly texts).[7] Hence, Antoinette's story can be read as the past of Brontë's dehumanised Bertha and is re–imagined through a flashback technique. In a sense, Antoinette can be seen as crossing the Sargasso Sea back to the West Indies, specifically to the time of her childhood and marriage, and then back again to England where she is imprisoned by Rochester in the attic.

But in Brontë's *JE*, Bertha is represented as an "Other" who "grovelled, seemingly, on all fours; it snatched and growled like some strange wild animal: but it was covered with clothing and a quantity of dark, grizzled hair, wild as a mane, hid its head and face" (258). Bertha is locked up in the attic by her husband who believes that she "came of a mad family . . . Her mother, the Creole, was both a madwoman and a drunkard" (257). Rochester's words reveal the way he thinks of his wife, but readers of Brontë's *JE* never come to know how the Creole female thinks of him. The different representations of the white Creole woman explain why Rhys's text reaches its readers with a deeper understanding of a woman who is no longer a stereotypical, silent figure but a human being whose past and present construct her in the way she appears in the narrative.

Rhys rethinks Brontë's one–dimensional madwoman in order to trace the development of Antoinette from an isolated girl in a West Indian setting to a love–deprived, mad wife confined in the attic. This is why Rhys's text reclaims the story of the "Other" by granting Bertha/Antoinette the right to speak. It is worth quoting a passage from Rhys's letter to Selma Vaz Dias which explains why the Creole "Other" must speak:

> The Creole in Charlotte Brontë's novel . . . must be right *on stage*. She must at least be plausible with a past, the *reason* why Mr. Rochester treats her so abominably and feels justified, the *reason* why he thinks she is mad and why of course she goes mad, even the *reason* why she tries to set everything on fire, and eventually succeeds . . . Another "I" must talk . . . Then the Creole's "I" will come to life. (Wyndham and Melly 156–57; emphasis original)

Rhys expresses the need to recreate Brontë's Bertha in a way that secures her an identity in a postcolonial setting like the Caribbean. This makes Rhys imagine what a past life Bertha/Antoinette may have had in Jamaica as this subjective past is omitted from Brontë's text. In a sense, Rhys foretells Said's ideas about how the perspective of the "Other" is overlooked in Western texts which reflect the European Self and its adherence to European culture (*Orientalism* 66). This underlines the potential of literature to "foretell" theory, as argued in Chapters One and Two.

By writing *WSS*, Rhys gives prominence to the function of counter–discursive projects of literary revision which are critical of socio–historical, political, and gender powers. These projects, according to Adrienne Rich, are about acts of "looking back" as well as of "entering an old text from a new critical direction" in order to see things with fresh eyes (18). These acts are part of a woman's search for identity to refuse the destructiveness of society and to "know the writing of the past, and know it differently than we have ever known it; not to pass on a tradition but to break its hold over us" (19). This makes rewriting by women a state of awakening and an act which is collective and reconstructive; consequently, Rhys's *WSS* is a revisionary act of cultural criticism which voices the female subject often silenced by the violence done through language; that is, through Eurocentric narratives and worldviews.

Antoinette, Rochester, and the (fe)male gaze

Along with voicing the story of the white Creole "Other" through literary revision, Rhys develops certain instances which underline the potential to objectify the male gaze by herself as a woman writer and by Antoinette. Other instances indicate that the female gaze can be agential but not fully authoritative and this highlights the ambivalence inherent in representing female agency by postcolonial women writers.

Rhys's *WSS* reveals how a displaced female subject is capable of possessing a gaze which, for Nalini Paul, subverts patriarchal powers because it is "a major determinant in what Bhabha calls the 'shifting [of] forces and fixities'" (par. 2). The relationship between Antoinette and Rochester, on some occasions, displaces the authoritative patriarchal self while being confined in a space defined by gendered outsiderness (Antoinette as a white Creole woman) as well as by spatial outsiderness (Antoinette's estate in Granbois).This alludes to the functionality of the female gaze in *WSS* in order to achieve what Kaja Silverman calls a "'feminization' of the male subject;" that is, to reverse the male/female binary in ways that empower Antoinette and consolidate the postcolonial argument of the text (qtd. in Paul, par.7).

The aspect of feminising the male is made manifest in the relationship between Rochester and Antoinette during their honeymoon. Rochester gazes at Antoinette in order to objectify her, using his power as a husband. Furthermore, he claims a certain degree of authority as a man of English ancestry; nonetheless, he is economically dependent on Antoinette. Rochester's dependence initially castrates him (figuratively) because it has been argued that it is women who often depend on men for the provision of sustenance, as will be argued in the next chapter. Yet Rochester's arranged marriage to Antoinette grants him the right to claim his wife's fortune according to "English Law" (Rhys, *WSS* 110). Rochester's situation in this case is a complex one because it denotes *both* lack and presence of male agency.

Another instance of Rochester's attempt to objectify Antoinette is evident when he gazes at her strange beauty, especially her "Long, sad, dark alien eyes" which are "disconcerting" (Rhys, *WSS* 67). It seems that Rochester's standards of judgement while

being on the island are derived from his English life style. As Merritt Moseley writes, Rochester "make[s] his surroundings more nearly correspond to what he considers normal and controllable: hence his strictures on the way the servants are treated, hence his ideas about the proper use of scent—and hence Antoinette must become Bertha" (229). However, Rochester's tendency to judge others according to his values cannot be an example of a patriarchal self gazing at a female "Other." This is due to the fact that Antoinette's "strange" eyes instil fear in Rochester; consequently, they have the potential to occupy the place of the gazer rather than merely that of the gazed at.

Feminising the male subject also appears in the act of verbal repetition as a mode of self–assertion on the part of Rochester. Disapproving of the way his wife socialises with the blacks, especially Christophine, Rochester asks Antoinette why she "'hug[s] and kiss[es] Christophine?' I'd say . . . 'I wouldn't hug and kiss them [black people],' I'd say, I couldn't" (Rhys, *WSS* 91). Rochester's shift from the word "Christophine" to the pronoun "them" in this passage denotes his attempt to objectify Christophine and the blacks whom Antoinette should not befriend due to race hierarchies. This explains why he strips Christophine of her individual identity as a black (strong) woman and reduces her to a homogenous group categorised as "them/the blacks."

Nonetheless, Rochester's repetition of the pronoun "I" four times in the above quotation shows that Rhys subverts master narratives which privilege the self while "othering" the rest. This makes Rochester lack absolutist authority as a male coloniser. The act of repetition indicates Rochester's need of validating his opinions; that is, his inability to assert a powerful presence in a strange place whose inhabitants occupy the space of otherness according to his colonial order of things. This reveals Rochester's anxiety over the loss of his authority. This technique of repetition relates to Bhabha's notion of the repeated colonial "I" in the "English book" ("Signs" 29). According to Bhabha, the "English book" is an emblem of colonial authority and "a signifier of colonial desire and discipline" and hence a justification to dominate the colonised (29). Integral to Bhabha's notion of "English book" is the process of displacement and distortion through repetition as a mode of authority. The repetition occurs in acts of translating the Bible

from English into Hindu in order to reinforce the coloniser's religion over that of the colonised and to hide the ambivalence of the colonial discourse.

Applied to Rochester's situation, the repetition of the pronoun "I" is a means of legitimising his colonial identity and vision over those of Antoinette and the blacks. More importantly, the repetition indicates Rochester's sense of insecurity due to his lack of knowledge about "Other" people on the island. Because the blacks are alien and threatening to his sense of security and authority, Rochester "reinforces difference between himself by pitting 'I' against 'them' in antagonistic anxiety" (Paul, par. 10). Therefore, it is Rochester who becomes in need of asserting his masculine (English) identity which is often equated with narratives of authority and knowledge.

The female gaze of Rhys also objectifies Rochester by leaving him unnamed in the text. Rochester is neither named nor physically described in the novel; however, the intertextual narrative makes it clear that he is Rochester of Brontë's *JE*. According to Caroline Rody, Rhys's attempt to castrate Rochester, "the English lord" of Brontë's text, rewrites him as "an anonymous, lost voice in a place where the very existence of his fatherland is questioned . . . [to] recuperate the mother [Antoinette]" (qtd. in Giles 180). The namelessness of Rochester calls forth an identity problem because it impairs him as a male and denies the authority of his colonial and patriarchal gaze.

Rochester's (textual) displacement is accentuated through the psychological and emotional changes in his character such as anxiety, jealousy, and fear of the "Other." Aware of his displacement and as a means of compensation, Rochester displaces Antoinette in order to replace himself through different ways such as calling her mad, describing her as silly, and betraying her by having a sexual encounter with Amélie, the black servant. However, Rochester's authority does not prevail because Rhys dethrones him by leaving him unnamed (anonymous to readers only of *WSS*) and by objectifying his dominant gaze. This draws attention to the distinction between the amount of power Rochester has within the text (or within society at that time) and his textual presence. In a sense, being unnamed strips Rochester of something which in the "real" world gives men power; that is, of their names.

This relates to the power of names in the narrative, where Rochester, despite being unnamed and dethroned by Rhys, ends up having the power to determine Antoinette's name, as will be argued later. Yet the female gaze is operative when Antoinette makes Rochester wear a flower wreath on his head because she desires him to do so: "'You look like a king, an emperor.' 'God forbid,' I said and took the wreath off" (*WSS* 73). Antoinette turns Rochester into a fetishised object of her gaze and vision. She tells him that he looks like a hero when she sees his reflection in the mirror; however, he does not feel happy with the royal identity imposed upon him, so he takes the garland off and crushes it.

But the fact that Rhys disrupts the male gaze does not mean that the female gaze is granted full authority in her text. Reading *WSS* as postcolonial text does not simply suggest a reversal of the male/female gaze with the aim of granting authority to the female gaze. In a similar manner to the other texts analysed in this thesis, Rhys's text attempts to displace the male gaze and other dominant practices. More importantly, it attends to the complexity or difficulty of representing women as shifting easily from one experience or situation into another; that is, from oppression to transformation. This is true in the case of Antoinette whose gaze cannot totally liberate her due to her hybrid identity and surroundings. The complexity of Antoinette's character explains why she becomes mad at the end of the narrative. It also justifies why Rhys's text is treated in this order in the thesis as following a rite of passage identified as transition (complexity and liminality) rather than empowerment.

Unlike Christophine, her black nurse and confidante, Antoinette is bound by the English system of patriarchy and so she must find avenues of liberation other than literally going away as Christophine does. Rhys's creativity emerges at this point; she grants Antoinette the power to choose how to act while being confined in the attic. Antoinette resorts to a (ambiguous) suicide attempt in order to free herself from being confined in the attic. Among possible readings of the suicide attempt is one which reads it as a compensation for the lack of a potential female gaze. In Paul's words, the attempt establishes Antoinette's ability to recognise that she no longer controls her life and that "what remains of her self, Bertha Mason, the madwoman in the attic, must therefore be annihilated" (par. 23). Put differently, Rhys subverts the equation of triumph with power

in order to map a space of transition for Antoinette outside the normative definitions of power structures which confine her, much like Firdaus's rebellion through imprisonment in El Saadawi's *WPZ*.

Rhys and the decolonised black woman

Rhys's *WSS* not only recuperates the white Creole woman's voice but also highlights a central issue in this thesis, namely the reclamation of plural female voices in postcolonial women's texts despite their difference and inequality. This issue is illustrated through the representation of different women such as Annette and Christophine. Therefore, Rhys does not present black women as silent and "tangential" as Spivak argues ("Three" 253).

Rather than pinpointing their shared experiences of oppression, Rhys portrays her female characters as shifting between different modes of being such as strong and weak, empowered and displaced. Through the figure of Christophine, Rhys unsettles the stereotypical images of black people created by the European colonial discourse, as argued in Chapter Three. However, some critics have challenged the voicelessness of the black characters in Rhys's text. For example, Spivak argues that Christophine is a marginal figure in *WSS* because "She cannot be contained by a novel which rewrites a canonical English text within the European novelistic tradition in the interest of the white Creole rather than the native" who is turned into a silent, domesticated "Other" ("Three" 253). Spivak views *WSS* and its novelist as implicated in the colonialist assumptions of the white Creole female protagonist.

Also, Veronica Marie Gregg observes how "The racialist usurpation of the voices, acts, and identities of 'black people,' so central to Rhys's writing as a whole, is the psychological cement in the architecture of this novel" (114). Both critics suggest that Rhys cannot fully "unsilence" or represent the native presence of the black woman (Christophine). This ignores the point that Rhys does not marginalise her black characters, mainly Christophine. As I read it, Rhys creates a distinctive place for the black woman such as Christophine because she is represented as the voice of reason, the surrogate mother of Antoinette, and the model of women who are illiterate but are

equipped with skills of survival and self–empowerment. These qualities destabilise hierarchies between women from different backgrounds in order to acknowledge the presence of the marginalised black female.

As the next chapter will argue, Emecheta in *JM* represents Adaku and Nnu Ego as examples of different women with varied experiences and standpoints. Likewise, Rhys represents Christophine and Antoinette as such women, where the former is more empowered and self–determined than the latter. These different types of women stress the fragility of homogeneous models of women such as the global sisterhood model, as argued in the previous chapters. Unlike Antoinette, Christophine is an independent woman who creates her own identity by opposing colonial and patriarchal power structures. Although Christophine is an illiterate former slave, she is "undaunted. She was a fighter . . . Read and write I don't know. Other things I know" (*WSS* 161). Obviously, Christophine is empowered by these "other things" such as obeah (magic) and self–assertion. Christophine disappears when Rochester invokes the law; nevertheless, she is sure of her knowledge and survival skills. Hence, it is Christophine's "vocal agency, by comparison to Antoinette's half sentences and interiorized musings" which distinguish her in the text as a strong, capable woman (deCaires Narain, "Writing" 499). Sharing deCaires Narain's viewpoint, Teresa F. O'Connor states that Christophine is an articulate island woman who stands for wisdom, strength, and autonomy which she "vainly attempts to encourage in Antoinette" (208). Therefore, reading Christophine's character from a postcolonial feminist perspective in this chapter provides a way of viewing her role as one of female survival and empowerment, much like the roles of Aissatou and Adaku in Bâ's *SLL* and Emecheta's *JM* respectively.

Christophine can be described as Rhys's spokesperson because she is an opponent of patriarchal and imperial logic. Rhys grants Christophine the right to speak in the imperial tongue: "though she could speak good English if she wanted to, and French as well as patois, she took care to talk as they [the Jamaicans] did" (*WSS* 21). Christophine, in a similar manner to Nellie in Brodber's *JL*, speaks ungrammatical English as the result of appropriating the colonial tongue and discourse. This is evident in the scene where

Christophine tells Antoinette that "When man don't love you . . . they after you night and day" and "He [Rochester] give again and well satisfy" (Rhys, *WSS* 109–10).

Also, rejecting the European law of monogamous marriage is another example of Christophine's subversion of patriarchy. She has "Three children . . . One living in this world, each one a different father, but no husband" (Rhys, *WSS* 109–10). This example shows that Christophine does not conform to such a law that will confine her to a monogamous marital life. As such, Christophine's expressiveness, which contrasts with Antoinette's hesitation, suggests that Rhys portrays black women as symbols of audacity and agency. As deCaires Narain comments, "these subaltern [black] women can speak; it is the White Creole woman who is presented as mute and without a position from which to articulate her subjectivity. The White Creole is presented as victim while the black woman represents resistance" ("What" 246). In other words, Christophine stands for the empowerment of the black woman who defies being eliminated by Rochester who embodies the colonial and patriarchal emblem on the island. She also represents a kind of textual healing which reclaims the black (Afro–Caribbean) female body and voice silenced by external and internal forms of oppression, as argued in respect of Nellie in Brodber's *JL*.

Christophine makes her exit from the narrative by walking away without looking back in order to underline her "aloofness" towards the power structures of the white English culture (Paul, par. 19). By resisting it, Christophine expresses her disdain for Rochester's culture and literally walks away. In a sense, Rhys creates a black female woman who refuses to be silenced and judged by the values of patriarchy. This narrative link between gender and race enables Rhys to map a space of empowerment for Christophine whose character has not received as much critical attention as Antoinette's. This shows that Christophine is essential to the plot of *WSS* because she signifies a woman's choice to take action and to redefine her life. It also makes her physical presence a healing force which enables Antoinette's spiritual return in the final narrative scene, as will be argued later in this chapter.

Christophine, Jamaica, and the surrogate mother(land)

As I argued earlier in this chapter, the role of the mother is important in an analysis of Antoinette's character and her need to belong. The presence and lack of female support are central to the analysis of Rhys's text because Antoinette's presence is affected by the connections she makes with her "mother" and "land" which are related.

According to Rich, a woman is empowered by "a kind of strength . . . which stretches from mother to daughter, from woman to woman across the generations, [otherwise,] women will still be wandering in the wilderness" (qtd. in Morris and Dunn 235). Rich highlights the empowering roles of women towards other women as well as the negative impact of the lack of supportive female bonds. As argued in the previous chapter, Bâ represents the theme of motherhood (and friendship as well) as an empowering female bond and role in *SLL*; however, the same role is disempowering and alienating in Rhys's *WSS*. For this reason, Rhys locates alternative mothering bonds for Antoinette in order to secure support and belonging.

The alternative is identified as surrogate mothering represented by the island and Christophine. Unlike that of Ramatoulaye's daughters in Bâ's *SLL*, Antoinette's relationship with her mother complicates her quest for strength and identity. She is rejected by her mother who privileges her ill son and is despised by the blacks and the whites on the island. This makes Antoinette seek the company of Christophine who becomes the surrogate mother and the wise adviser. Consequently, mothering in Rhys's text shifts from the biological into the spiritual and the spatial, where spiritual mothering relates to Christophine while spatial mothering connects Antoinette to the island.

It is possible to argue that Rhys's portrayal of black female characters such as Tia and Christophine is ambivalent, especially as Antoinette's feelings toward these characters change. Yet this does not foreclose possibilities of bonding among women divided by class and race, among other hierarchies. As Ann R. Morris and Margaret M. Dunn remark, the notion of motherland is a complex one for the Caribbean woman (writer) because it connotes several things at once, such as island home and culture as well as "the body of tropes, talismans and female bonding that is a woman's heritage through her own and

other mothers" (219). In other words, one's land and mother intersect in order to establish a force or a bond of spiritual and physical survival which depends on a woman's ability to claim relation to both and to be prepared for the journey toward self–assertion.

However, not all women are ready to make this journey due to the varied obstacles of race, class and gender. Antoinette is one such woman because she fails to establish a supportive bond with her mother. In a similar manner to Emecheta's *JM*, Rhys's *WSS* underlines how the denial or the absence of a supportive mother–daughter relationship disempowers women. Antoinette's mother does not provide her with a supportive bond; still, her motherland becomes the surrogate mother which offers on many occasions a (temporary) sense of security and belonging. According to Paul Huebener, Antoinette, due to her social alienation and her affinity with the island, develops "a predilection for metaphorical thinking;" that is, for making imaginative associations between people and places to understand herself in terms of her surroundings (20).

One of the things which Antoinette remembers early in the novel is a permanent frown on her mother's face as if it were "cut with a knife" (Rhys, *WSS* 20). When she tries to smooth out the frown, the mother shuns her "as if she had decided once and for all that I was useless to her . . . So I spent most of my time in the kitchen . . . [with Christophine]" (20). The mother's rejection complicates her relationship with her daughter.[8] Deprived of a supportive mother, Antoinette seeks other sources of surrogate mothering exemplified by Christophine and the island.

As argued earlier, Christophine provides a comforting presence for Antoinette, and this means that Christophine is not simply a housemaid but a confidante, a nurse, and an adviser. Opposing patriarchal oppression of women, Christophine is a caring surrogate mother who encourages the weak Antoinette to "pack up and go" instead of being controlled by an egotistical husband (Rhys, *WSS* 109). When Antoinette hesitates, Christophine spits over her own shoulder and says that "all women, all colours, nothing but fools" (109). Christophine here erodes the divisions between women in order to emphasise their need for self–determination and strength to survive. This helps Antoinette find a surrogate mother connection with Christophine, yet it is a complex connection which is at times empowering and at others despised.

Along with Christophine, Antoinette establishes a supportive link with her island, in ways reminiscent of the myth of feminising the land as a supportive mother, as the next chapter will argue. Antoinette detaches herself from the human world and drenches herself in the smells and colours of her island: "The sky was dark blue through the dark green mango leaves, and I thought, 'this is my place and this is where I belong and this is where I wish to stay'" (Rhys, *WSS* 108). It seems that Antoinette connects her selfhood with her homeland on which she has grown up. These metaphorical links are integral to the coherence of Antoinette's subjectivity and this explains why she does not wish to lose the island and its natural objects. But in the same passage, Antoinette says that the mango tree "is too high up for mangoes and it many never bear fruit" and then she follows up by the thought that her husband hates her (108).

Antoinette's words foretell that a breakage will take place in the association she makes with her surroundings; that is, they signal her enforced departure to England later in the novel. Like the garden of the Coulibri estate that is Eden–like but "had gone wild" (Rhys, *WSS* 19), the surroundings within which Antoinette establishes a secure passage to self–identification are simultaneously hospitable and hostile, nourishing and impoverishing. The combination of things and feelings indicates that Antoinette is prone to being caught in a liminal space where she will be safe and not safe, sane and insane, and alive and dead like a zombie.

This form of conceptual mapping, which Antoinette performs between herself and people/places in order to secure an identity, contributes to her progression toward madness. From another perspective, the blending suggests that Antoinette's madness is a subversive mode of being where things and concepts get blended in order to signal rebellion and chaos. And it is not until she is taken to England that Antoinette's connection with the island is severed, where she is alienated from people and nature by being locked up in the attic. In this case, Antoinette's separation from her mother and mother–land leads to her psychic and cultural alienation which speaks to the significance of such bonds. These bonds provide moments of security and self–assertion for Antoinette, yet their support is temporary. Due to the play of cultural tensions which fragment her, Antoinette is obstructed from maintaining a permanent link with people

and places around her. Her attempts to be integrated into the cultures of the whites and the blacks are complicated, as will be discussed below. This alludes to the complexity of cultural integration for the white Creole woman.

The white Creole woman and the complexity of integration

There is a striking difference between Antoinette and the other female protagonists analysed in this thesis. For instance, Brodber's Nellie, Bâ's Ramatoulaye, and El Saadawi's Firdaus, unlike Antoinette, are more socially rooted despite the different pressures and forms of oppression they experience. Ramatoulaye in Bâ's *SLL* is a case in point; she is aware of her identity as a Muslim widow who has experienced several challenges such as polygamy, single mothering, and adherence to tradition. However, she succeeds in overcoming her oppression and in turning sites of suffering into ones of empowerment.

This example shows that Ramatoulaye, contrary to Antoinette, has a coherent identity made up of different roles which consolidate her status as a Muslim Senegalese woman. It also suggests that Ramatoulaye must depend on her multilayered identity as a single mother, a teacher, a friend, and a mother–in–law to overcome oppression. Besides, Ramatoulaye reconciles with the tensions of tradition and modernity in ways that empower her, thereby positioning her in a third space which leads to her transition. While Ramatoulaye has children, for whom she feels love and responsibility, Antoinette does not have anything to take her outside of herself and this touches on the question of isolation.

Due to her hybrid identity, Antoinette occupies a third space of alienation and liminality that does not empower her as it does Ramatoulaye. Recalling the protagonists of Brodber and Emecheta analysed in this thesis, Antoinette experiences cultural collisions which position her in spaces of conflict, where women's "bodies become battlegrounds . . . At times, such conflicts are reconciled uneasily; at other times they drag the female body into outsiderness" (Katrak 99–100). For Rhys, female outsiderness is represented through Antoinette's cultural dislocation which highlights a central

argument in this chapter, namely the one which reads the white Creole ancestry as the reason for the ambivalence experienced by Antoinette.

This makes Antoinette experience "a schizophrenic condition" which characterises the interstitial stage between her childhood and adolescence and between the conflicting parts of her identity (Eke 52). She is located in a limbo space, neither considered at home in Jamaica as Tia and Christophine are, nor accepted as English by her husband. Consequently, she suffers from disorientation and alienation which confirm her childhood maxim that everything around her is "better than people" (Rhys, *WSS* 28). The failure of this attempt to bridge cultural gaps is evident in the way Antoinette sees Tia's reflection in the mirror as if it were hers and in the conversation between Antoinette and Rochester about the unreality of each other's homeland.

Also of importance are the feelings of rootlessness experienced by Antoinette as she inhabits an empty space of belonging. Supposedly superior to the black community, Antoinette and her family are not considered equals by English people. Being a by–product of two different cultures, Antoinette suffers agonising disturbances in the form of recurrent nightmares, feelings of alienation, loss, and confusion. This ambivalent condition, which exposes some obstacles to self–definition and (spatial and spiritual) belonging, is made manifest in two symbolic scenes which relate to Tia and to Rochester. In the first scene, Antoinette escapes from the white culture by running to Tia; however, Tia throws a stone at Antoinette in order to signal her rejection of the latter's entry into the black community: "I saw Tia and her mother and I ran to her, for she was all that was left of my life as it had been . . . When I was close I saw the jagged stone in her hand but I did not see her throw it . . . I looked at her and I saw her face crumple up as she began to cry. We stared at each other, blood on my face, tears on hers. It was as if I saw myself. Like in a looking–glass" (Rhys, *WSS* 45). Tia refuses to accept Antoinette as a friend. The latter believes that one's identity is a matter of free will; that she can make herself belong to the black community.

As a child, Antoinette tries to assimilate Christophine's and Tia's values and spiritual practices. Antoinette empathises with the former and admires the latter as an expression of her desire to identify with them; however, she is rejected by them: "I [Antoinette]

never looked at any strange negro. They hated us. They call us white cockroaches . . . go away, no body want you" (Rhys, *WSS* 23). Eventually, the wound inflicted on Antoinette's forehead underlines her belief that people hate her family, so it symbolises cultural rejection and incompatible difference. Such tensions of class and colour prejudice obstruct women from building friendship which empowers them as it does Ramatoulaye and Aissatou in Bâ's *SLL*.

For Maria Olaussen, Tia's rejection of Antoinette places the latter within the white community (78); nonetheless, Antoinette does not secure a white identity as Olaussen suggests. In the second narrative scene, Rochester reveals his confused impressions about Antoinette whom he sees as a "Creole of pure English descent she may be, but they are not English or European either" (Rhys, *WSS* 67). The shifting emotions between the couple lead to Antoinette's fragmentation which culminates in her role as a wife. Recalling Firdaus in El Saadawi's *WPZ*, Antoinette enters an unhealthy marriage which pushes her into a confining space. Ultimately, she is labelled "Other" not only because of her heritage but also because of her gender.

Jana Giles shares Olaussen's emphasis on Antoinette's need to belong, arguing that the gap between Antoinette's unbelonging and her psychological exile makes her "search for closure in the form of recognition from the metropolitan center [Rochester], in spite of her self–identification with the islands" (165). In other words, Antoinette's need to belong makes her enter an arranged marriage which represents a new kind of bondage, namely marital and economic bondage. As a plundering coloniser, Rochester extracts wealth from the colony in the form of Antoinette's dowry. He extinguishes Antoinette's love of the island which can be seen as a space of her sanity and security. Moreover, he forces her to move to England where he imprisons her in the attic; eventually, their marriage fails because they come from socially and geographically opposed backgrounds. Rochester and Antoinette cannot comprehend each other and the only way to be reconciled is to destroy each other.

In order to portray Antoinette's attempts to belong, Rhys uses colours and dreams as narrative devices which point to the symbolic patterning which structures the narrative. As I argued in Chapter Two, postcolonial women writers represent gender issues through

a combination of structural and thematic modes of writing. For example, Brodber in *JL* uses disjointed narrative formats, non–linear time sequence, and fragmented language to weave the fragmented personality of Nellie. Likewise, Rhys in *WSS* uses dreams along with colours—white, red, and black—in order to represent Antoinette's attempts and feelings regarding her ambivalence and fragmentation.

Antoinette's desire to identify with the whites in order to secure belonging is expressed through the colours of her dresses which alternatively change between white (England) and red (the Caribbean) whenever her feelings change. The transition in colours from red (Caribbean) to white (England) takes place in part one and part two of the narrative in order to hint at Antoinette's marriage to Rochester and at her identification with England. Nonetheless, the transition goes back to its normal route in part three where it becomes red. This signals Antoinette's reunion with the Caribbean that is embodied through the union with Tia in the dream.

Rhys also uses dreams in *WSS* as a type of reality and "a model of association, condensation, and displacement [which] structure . . . the text of the entire novel" (Emery 425). This suggests that the dreams which Antoinette narrates have the potential to deliver certain connotations. For instance, in part one of the narrative, Antoinette narrates a dream where she wears a white dress. In the dream, Antoinette attempts to hold up her dress lest it gets dirty but she lets it trail in the mud: "I walk with difficulty, following the man who is with me and holding up the skirt of my dress. It is white and beautiful . . . I follow him, weeping. Now I do not try to hold up my dress, it trails in the dirt, my beautiful dress" (Rhys, *WSS* 59–60). This dream foretells Antoinette's marriage to Rochester.

In part two of the narrative, the image of a dress trailing on the floor occurs again and is evoked by Rochester. Christophine hands Antoinette and Rochester coffee, and soon Rochester comments that Christophine's dress will get dirty unless she holds it up: "Her coffee is delicious but her language is horrible and she might hold her dress up. It must get very dirty, yards of it trailing on the floor . . . it is not a clean habit" (Rhys, *WSS* 85). Antoinette disagrees with Rochester and defends Christophine, saying that "It is [a clean habit] . . . They don't care about getting a dress dirty because it shows it isn't the only

dress they have" (85). Antoinette's defence of Christophine subverts colonial hierarchies which separate the whites from the blacks.

Christophine warns Antoinette against the danger of surrendering to Rochester by using a symbolic phrase which hints at the image of holding up a dress: "a rich white girl like you and more foolish than the rest. A man don't treat you good, pick up your skirt and walk out" (Rhys, *WSS* 110). This passage implies that Christophine knows what to do with her money and how to deal with men like Rochester. Also, it shows that she does not seem bothered whether her dress gets dirty because she has an identity assigned not by a dress colour but by being a strong black woman.

Images of Antoinette's white dress prevail in part two of the narrative. Rochester is excited upon seeing the white dress which makes him "breathless and savage with desire" (Rhys, *WSS* 93). Antoinette tries to win Rochester's heart by different means such as making her body an object of desire and resorting to love potion spells. Because Antoinette cannot easily secure an identity as an English woman, she relies on her beauty in order to attract Rochester. This reliance not only reclaims the female body but also deploys it as a means of adapting a woman's condition. As deCaires Narain states, Rhys "expose[s] this manipulation of femininity as the consequence of the limited options for social stability available to women, particularly for the White Creole woman, whose insecure economic position requires her to cling tenaciously to familiar signifiers of 'ladyhood' (dress, deportment . . .)" ("What" 245).

Antoinette's manipulation of her beauty is evident in her desire to wear the white dress preferred by Rochester and to have "another made exactly like it . . . 'Will you be pleased?'" (Rhys, *WSS* 93–94). The desire to have two white dresses indicates Antoinette's need to be accepted by her white husband. With no desire to have a red dress rather than a second white one, Antoinette allows no place for her Caribbean surroundings. They become obscured by her white dresses and by the change in her feelings. But as Rochester believes, Antoinette's white dress does not fit her anymore because "she looked very much like Amélie. Perhaps they are related . . . It's possible, it's even probable in this damned place" (127). The difficulty of belonging to a place that is not Antoinette's is consolidated by Rochester's ill–treatment of her and by the dreams she

nourishes about England. Hence, the white dress does not enable Antoinette to be identified as an English person and so it stands for betrayal, disappointment, and subjugation.

By contrast, the colour red describes the nature of the Caribbean which Antoinette admires as a child. Red emerges several times in the novel as the colour of the fire burning the Coulibri estate and Thornfield Hall, of Antoinette's dress, and of flowers and lights. The colour red is also mentioned in a silent but suggestive way during Antoinette's residence in a convent after the destruction of the Coulibri estate. It is the colour of the thread which Antoinette uses to weave her canvas: "Underneath, I will write my name in fire red, Antoinette Mason, née Cosway, Mount Calvary Convent, Spanish Town, Jamaica, 1839" (Rhys, *WSS* 53).

Weaving her name on a canvas is an evocative gesture of self–assertion by Antoinette, much like Ramatoulaye's story which is written in the form of a letter in Bâ's *SLL*. The sewing, through which one's identity and life script are written, can be interpreted as a textual device which enables Antoinette to break the silence of her fragmented self. Antoinette's signature on the canvas also reveals a yearning to articulate a connection to her surroundings. Although her identity is not fully attained, it is through the blazing colour of the canvas that Antoinette's real self is revealed for the first time.

Red is also the colour of Antoinette's dress kept with her in the English attic. Her senses awaken upon seeing the red dress hanging in the press, where "The scent that came from the dress was very faint at first, then it grew stronger. The smell of vetivert and frangipanni, of cinnamon and dust . . . The smell of the sun and the smell of the rain" (Rhys, *WSS* 185). The red dress makes Antoinette come back to life just like the dress scent that grows stronger. Antoinette's reawakening is stressed by the last dream which awakens her from death–in–life to play her final role; that is, to burn the English house, thereby securing an identity forged through her union with Tia in the final dream.

Along with colours and dreams**,** the mirror symbolises the complexity of belonging for both Antoinette and her mother. As I interpret it, the mirror is a space of tension which participates in Antoinette's fragmented selfhood. This space (the mirror) is an alternative to people because it provides both women with security and self–assertion denied by

others. In the mirror, Antoinette and her mother look at themselves "not out of vanity or out of concern for the superficial" but out of their need to be visible and to soothe feelings of alienation (Brown 230). This can be read as an agential act because both women are aware of their action; that is, of the fact that they look into the mirror in order to discover or confirm something.

Additionally, when they gaze into their mirrors, Antoinette and her mother see not only their reflections but also themselves as constructed by their surroundings which are not always hospitable. They confront the reality of their situation as being rejected and mocked by the whites and the blacks. However, Antoinette's mother "planned and hoped–perhaps she had to hope every time she passed a looking glass" (Rhys, *WSS* 18). But the mirror betrays Antoinette because there is no looking–glass in the attic where she is confined: "I don't know what I am like now . . . Now they have taken everything away. What am I doing in this place and who am I?" (180). It seems that the mirrorless place exacerbates Antoinette's feelings of self–negation and loss because she speaks of herself in the third person which is a sign of alienation. Consequently, she becomes a ghost: "I saw Antoinette drifting out of the window with her scents, her pretty clothes and her looking–glass" (180). Antoinette's words emphasise that the absence of the mirror, which is used to secure a sense of subjecthood, is a prerequisite for the absence of her coherent self which gets fragmented. Without a mirror, there is no Antoinette but a ghost (a disturbed woman). In this sense, the mirror intensifies the white Creole's alienation and ambivalence, both of which lead to her madness.

The aforementioned issues underline the failed attempts of the white Creole woman to establish a fixed relationship with the whites and the blacks. Moreover, they highlight the problematic presence and the hopelessness of a white Creole's place–making. But from a reconstructive postcolonial vision, they emphasise the subversive function of Antoinette's status of nonbelonging. As Vivian Nun Halloran argues, the emphasis on Antoinette's failure to belong and on her identity as an outsider attests to postcolonial critiques of "absolutist national discourses" which are operative in the dominant world criticised by Rhys's text and in other nineteenth–century English texts such Brontë's *JE* to which Rhys's *WSS* alludes (98). This stresses the incompatible ways of seeing the world as

offered by the white Creoles, by the blacks, and by the Europeans coming to the West Indies in Rhys's text.

Antoinette's identity as a white Creole woman relegates her to the status of a composite, shifting figure and a double outsider condemned to fragmentation and rootlessness. This is why she believes that there is always another side to consider. Acknowledging women's varied and contradictory experiences promotes a consideration for other versions of reality as an alternative to cultural fragmentation experienced by white Creole women such as Antoinette. The alternative will not force women into splitting themselves into two or more in order to conceptualise an identity. It also encourages Rhys to rewrite the reality obscured in Brontë's text and to make Antoinette identify with the blacks in her final dream. Although her desire to identify with Tia is attained in the dream, this does not suggest that Antoinette has secured a fixed, coherent identity. She does not progress toward a happy life because she becomes a disturbed woman, as will be argued below.

Madness, liminality, and the rite of transition

Society sometimes labels women "mad" in order to create boundaries between reason (male, the centre) and insanity (female, the marginal). However, Rhys questions the reasons behind such labelling in order to subvert normative oppositions and categorisations. This makes Antoinette's madness a metaphor and a postcolonial response to colonialism compounded with gender oppression, both of which fragment Antoinette.

Drawing on Kenneth Burke's definition of metaphor, Huebener argues that metaphor extends or carries over a concept into a new, unexpected domain of meaning in order to create new linkages and interpretations (20). But metaphor can also denote a condition of insanity due to its destabilisation of fixed relations and concepts. Applying Huebener's explanation of metaphor to Antoinette's madness, I argue that madness takes place when one, for instance, traverses the normative boundaries between things. This gives a

destabilising function to Antoinette's madness in so far as it blurs the distinction between one thing and another and leaves no coherent presence of binaries such as sane/insane.

Accordingly, the argument in this section reads Antoinette's madness as a socio–historical issue rather than a biological one. Frantz Fanon argues that postcolonial madness is "not a disease but a story, the story of a situation, of a wandering, of the impossibility to be heard, of a filiation whose history is one of betrayal, murder, enslavement" (qtd. in Gaylard 50). Fanon undermines the assumption that madness and neurotic disturbances originate from inherited factors because this overlooks other factors such as race, gender, and cultural tensions. For example, Nnu Ego in Emecheta's *JM* is not born, but becomes, mad due to the motherhood shocks she has suffered and the cultural tensions she has failed to reconcile. Likewise, Antoinette's madness in Rhys's *WSS* is a socially constructed form of coping with her complex, liminal identity and a result of the pressures she experiences and fails to reconcile as a white Creole woman. This underlines the cultural specificity of madness and its different representations in postcolonial women's writing.

As Reyes argues, madness in *WSS* is "a gender–driven metaphor [and response] for anger, depression, levels of insanity, and emotional disenfranchisement" (*Mothering* 87). Put differently, madness in Rhys's text is a valuable mode of defence in order to subvert patriarchal authority. In a similar manner to their women writers, the female protagonists in the texts of Rhys and Emecheta find madness an asset that helps them rebel against society. Joining Reyes's statement about women and madness, Marta Caminero–Santangelo argues that the "madwoman" stands for resistance and subversion in women's writing which functions as "an alternative to patriarchy" (4). This makes madness in Rhys's text an outlet for the subversion of Bertha's character as a mad creature in Brontë's *JE* as well as of its Eurocentric givens.

The subversive function of madness is evident when one acknowledges that Rhys provides Antoinette with a voice and a fictional space and audience to speak openly about her thoughts and fears which drive her mad. Along with placing Jamaica at the centre of her narrative, Rhys explores female madness from a radical perspective that is different from the one offered in Brontë's *JE*. These narrative changes in Rhys's representation of

madness in *WSS* are attributed to her rejection of madness as "equating 'the Creole' with 'the lunatic'" and to "a century's increased understanding of mental illness, Rhys—while retaining the detail that Antoinette's mother is disturbed and her brother is mentally afflicted—advances an alternate theory of the case [of madness]" (Moseley 229). This shows that Antoinette and her mother are driven to madness by the conditions of their unstable, transitional lives.

Sharing the emphasis of Caminero–Santangelo and Moseley on the subversive quality of madness in Rhys's *WSS*, Nursel İçöz states that Antoinette's madness nullifies Brontë's depiction of the white Creole woman, especially as *JE* reduces Bertha to "a pre–human state of speechlessness and reinforces her innate depravity," whereas Antoinette tells her own story in Rhys's text (195). Rhys goes beyond Brontë's oversimplified description of madness as a fit of hysteria with genetic causes in order to work out her own way of responding to Victorian representations of madness. That is, Rhys re–inscribes narratives of female madness in ways that define the postcolonial condition and disrupt normative discourses of female sanity. The emphasis on women and madness in Anglophone Caribbean women's texts such as *WSS* does not simply represent the disjointed female self. As Kathleen J. Renk argues, madness is a strategy of subverting the nineteenth–century discourse which represented the madwoman and the colonies as "the loci of uncontrollable sexuality equated with a madness that must be controlled by paternal surveillance and governance" (89).

Related to the aforementioned issues is Rhys's attention to the power men have over women, especially the ones declared insane by their husbands. Rochester is a case in point because he marries Antoinette for economic reasons, declares her mad, and imprisons her in the attic; consequently, he obstructs any intimate relationship with Antoinette whom he sees as a "Vain, silly creature" (*WSS* 165). Rochester deploys a tactic by which he can make his wife insane. He calls her "Bertha" to which she replies: "Bertha is not my name. You are trying to make me into someone else, calling me another name" (147).

Renaming Antoinette as "Bertha" signals her oppression which leads to the loss of her original identity. As Spivak writes, Rochester's renaming of Antoinette shows how "so

intimate a thing as personal and human identity might be determined by the politics of imperialism" ("Three" 250). Sustained by his privilege as a husband and a white man, Rochester objectifies Antoinette by creating a new identity for her as a mad woman. But Antoinette is not passive because she recognises that Rochester tries to complete his control over her on the island as well as when they move to England. By describing Rochester's renaming of her as a form of spiritual possession, Antoinette alludes to the power men hold over women like her. Yet Rochester's renaming of Antoinette is significant in so far as it involves a response; that is, whether or not the person named (Antoinette) will accept his/her assumed name.

Because resistance, no matter what forms it takes, is a complementary part of women's experiences of oppression, Antoinette rejects being called "Bertha" by Rochester. The rejection is most evocative in the attic scene, where she is told by the guard that she has attacked her English visitor; nonetheless, Antoinette says that "If I had been wearing my red dress Richard would have known me" (Rhys, *WSS* 187). Antoinette here identifies with the red dress because it confirms her identity as a sane woman who has lived on the island and who has had a red dress. This connection between the dress and identity hints back at the colour of the thread Antoinette has used in order to weave her name on the canvas as a gesture of self–assertion.

Rochester's pernicious intentions exposed in the act of renaming Antoinette elucidate why Rhys keeps Antoinette's madness for the last (dream–like) section of the novel. Antoinette's fragmented speech and blended memories which go back and forth in time defy any monolithic, simple reading of her identity as a madwoman. As Fanon argues, there is a cause or a story for (Antoinette's) postcolonial madness, and this story, for Catherine Rovera, is meant to "fit Rhys's primary concern—to give not only voice, but also a shape to madness" (114). The shape of madness fluctuates between dream and reality and hence between liminality which is the space which constructs Antoinette's identity as a white Creole woman. By making Antoinette's madness the aftermath of socio–cultural and historical conditions, Rhys highlights the tension between madness as clinical diagnosis and madness as a gender–oriented form of control. This tension points

to the fact that women like Antoinette are declared mad by the male dominator and not by the woman or the female victim.

Accordingly, Antoinette's madness, to borrow Valérie Orlando's words, is a social "impasse" which confronts women whose "cultural conditioning has deprived [them] of the very means of protest or self–affirmation" (13). Madness also is a mode of seeking subjecthood in postcolonial women's texts such as Rhys's *WSS*. Rhys's reformulation of madness creates a resistant literary space which reclaims women's subjectivity often fragmented by cultural constraints. Therefore, acting from the space of madness enables the constitution of a new female identity and script that challenge dominant male narratives. This makes Antoinette's madness a resistant space, much like Ramatoulaye's widow confinement and Firdaus's imprisonment in Bâ's *SLL* and El Saadawi's *WPZ* respectively.

The space of madness provides Antoinette (and Rhys) with the means of mapping out her own feminist discourse. Within this discourse, a woman is reborn because madness does not mean the end to women's subjectivities. Rather, it signals "the birth of true speech" that is revolutionary (Orlando 20). Hence, madness for Rhys is an alternative mode of vision which enables women to respond to a certain type of reality. The response shows that Antoinette is not Brontë's madwoman, thereby announcing a new stage of becoming for Antoinette consolidated by her decision to burn Rochester's estate despite being confined and unable to recognise her identity.

Antoinette's lack of self–recognition while being confined results from her "out–of–place experience" accompanied by "an out–of–body experience" as she speaks of herself in the third person (Huebener 24). Her subjectivity has weakened and so her madness is a condition of displacement which structures the final section of the narrative. Antoinette continues her dreamed walking in the dark hallway as the flames of her candles engulf the house. Although her warden says that Antoinette is "too far gone to be helped" (Rhys, *WSS* 187), it remains possible to argue that Antoinette is not totally defeated. For instance, Antoinette's narrative voice in the final scene indicates her triumph in the sense that it constructs her as a speaking subject. She can choose how to act; that is, to set Rochester's estate on fire and to attempt suicide. Also, the fact that she holds a candle and

walks along the dark passage suggests that "a flicker of coherent subjectivity remains. She may be too far gone to recover, but she has not disappeared outright" (Huebener 30).

One cannot totally conclude that Antoinette goes mad. What the final scene shows is a multilayered action of arson, madness, and suicide attempt. It portrays a woman who has been oppressed by several powers which have turned her from an innocent being into an angry speaking woman. This highlights an important issue raised in Chapter Two, namely the potential of women to choose and to act in diverse ways in order to subvert notions of oppression which are equated with the margins (women). For example, Firdaus in El Saadawi's *WPZ* chooses to kill her male predator and to tell her story despite being literally confined. Likewise, Ramatoulaye's choice in Bâ's *SLL* is manifested in several instances such as in her decision to write a healing letter to Aissatou and in her rejection of Tamsir's marriage proposal that will enslave her. Similarly, Antoinette chooses to burn Rochester's estate and to (ambiguously) attempt suicide as a reaction against her dislocation and oppression. While Brontë denies Bertha speech and reason, Rhys allows Antoinette a form of speech out of insanity. Antoinette has the potential to realise that she is in a strange place which makes her set the estate on fire. This makes Antoinette's madness a conduit for her alienating rage and a rite of passage toward her liminal identity.

Burning the estate suggests multiple things at once in order to challenge monolithic, fixed readings of postcolonial texts. For instance, it expresses Antoinette's desire to return to her mother(land) and to the surrogate love of Christophine. Despite the claims made by Rochester about Antoinette's madness, she remembers Coulibri: "As I ran or perhaps floated or flew I called help me Christophine . . . then I turned round and saw the sky. It was red and all my life was in it" (Rhys, *WSS* 189). Thus, the final fire does not end Antoinette's life because she is made to remain alive by Rhys.

Also, the arson can relate to England as the land of Antoinette's dreams. Antoinette's attempt to identify with Rochester's culture makes her dream of England as the place of belonging and stability. However, what she finds upon arrival in England is coldness and dissociation which juxtapose with images of England as a supportive motherland. Consequently, she burns the estate because she is unwilling to relinquish the aesthetic

image of England she has constructed. As Judith L. Raiskin writes, the arson points to the fact that Rhys's Creole female characters "suffer greatly when . . . they confront an England that in its coldness and brutality proves the storybook England to have been a lie" (qtd. in Giles 160). In other words, Antoinette cannot reconcile her hatred of England, symbolised by the confining attic, and her yearning for England as an imagined homeland. Eventually, the arson stands for the compelling yet terrifying experience which constructs the threshold space of Antoinette.

Burning Thornfield Hall can parallel the burning of the Coulibri estate by the slaves as an act of rebellion. For İçöz, this represents Antoinette as a freed, conscious "slave" in order to reveal the supportive bond between Antoinette and Christophine, where "the oppressed female's reaction by which the patriarchal captivity of the female other is subverted" makes the white Creole woman seek retribution for the emancipated black woman (200). Through the defiant act of arson, Antoinette brings Caribbean modes of rebellion into a confining English space in order to disrupt it, leaving her (metaphorical) signature as a freed white Creole woman in ways reminiscent of the signature she has stitched on the canvas.

Such different readings of the arson scene stress the fact that the ending of *WSS* is ambiguous. It is both positive and negative in ways that are harmonious with Antoinette's divided state of mind. The narrative conclusion points to Rhys's creative voice which signals her acceptance of ambivalence (liminality) as a state of being in order to resist authoritative readings of the human experience. Rhys's imagination enables Antoinette to journey out of her confinement into a new space where she will find peace. The space is one of transition and liminality because it does not lead Antoinette to an identified destination or to a coherent sense of home. This explains my reason for seeing the text as following a rite of passage identified as transition which locates Antoinette in a process of movement; one that is not static or totally resolved.

The rite of passage is represented by Antoinette's final walk along the dark passage which revives the memories of her life on the island. The ambiguous space where she walks is not identified: it is simply a "dark passage," she holds a candle to light up her way and this is where the novel ends (Rhys, *WSS* 190). The narrative conclusion suggests that

the space where Antoinette resides is a shifting one which dissolves fixed, normative categories and narratives of the colonial "Self" and centre. Antoinette's entrapment within a space of liminality symbolises her madness that is also a metaphor for the disruption of colonial and gender pressures. This space recalls the scene where Rochester is reading in a book about the practice of obeah in the Caribbean: "A zombie is a dead person who seems to be alive or a living person who is dead" (107).

The passage shows that zombification relates to the liminal space because zombies exist in a state which defies fixed distinctions, adding that zombies also instil fear because they embody shifting identities and states; that is, they are dead and alive. Thus, Rhys rejects categorisation because it is a mode of colonial and patriarchal control over those categorised. She recalls Bâ who also refuses to write or categorise *SLL* according to fixed Western literary genres. Rhys disrupts such a mode of control by mapping a space of indeterminacy for Antoinette in order to empower her; consequently, Antoinette is caught in a space of transition between two states, between death and life.

Antoinette's liminal state is also symbolised by the title of the novel, *Wide Sargasso Sea*. Recalling Carter Bridge of Lagos in Emecheta's *JM*, Sargasso Sea stands for the tensions which Antoinette cannot reconcile. By describing Sargasso Sea as wide, Rhys acknowledges the potential of the liminal identity (space) to "encompass a large portion of human experience . . . Sargasso sea is a dark passage of shifting shadows that is useful to cross, but which, in the face of the violent disconnections such as those that Antoinette experiences, can become its own desolate destination" (Huebener 31). Phrased differently, Antoinette's identity is fixed in the liminal space of uncertainty and ambivalence. A white Creole woman, she is doomed to reside in a wide space of transition which she has to cope with to survive. By rewriting *WSS* which maps a space of being for Antoinette, Rhys appears to have succeeded in coming back home. *WSS* has enabled Rhys to make a spiritual and psychological journey to her family home in the West Indies and this return is made possible through the written word which is a matter of survival and self–reclamation, as argued in the previous chapters.

Conclusion

This chapter developed a deconstructive, cultural analysis of Rhys's *WSS* as a postcolonial text situated against a background that is fragmented and shifting in ways harmonious with Antoinette's disturbed psyche. In writing *WSS*, Rhys, who is deemed an outsider, writes for herself and for an audience who will make her voice heard. The analysis of *WSS* highlighted the thematic–stylistic interrelatedness which included the use of symbols such as dreams and colours, the plurality of narrative voices, and acts of literary revision. This shows that Rhys resorts to the practice of literary revision in order to reveal the specificity of the white Creole women and to establish her own literary presence. Notions such as cultural homogeneity, binary oppositions, social stability, and global sisterhood are not applicable to the society represented in Rhys's text. This explains why the reading of *WSS* in this chapter has dealt with interrelated issues such as female dislocation, hybridity, internal and external colonialism, and preoccupation with liminal identities.

The chapter also discussed the theme of female madness as a means of voicing women's socially constructed fragmentation and oppression. Rhys's representation of madness in *WSS* not only provides motivations for writing Antoinette's story but also enriches the reader's understanding of the different representations of madness in postcolonial texts. Madness can be seen as a mode of resistance because it creates an alternative space of being. But unlike the empowering space of female writing and widow confinement in Bâ's *SLL*, the space which Rhys creates for Antoinette is related to uncertainty and to the loss and confusion of identities. This space asserts the in–betweeness of the white Creole woman and identifies her dual identity as a source of traumatic experiences with which she has to cope.

The next chapter analyses Devi's "BG" and Emecheta's *JM* which, in a similar manner to Rhys's *WSS*, represent diverse experiences of female oppression and resistance. Along with mapping instances of agency which emerge from women's roles as mothers, the chapter emphasises the contradictions inherent in the presence of motherhood as a joyful experience on the one hand, and motherhood as a patriarchal institution on the other. Integral to the discussion of motherhood is a network of powers such as class, patriarchy,

economic difficulties, and colonialism, all of which turn the traditional, caring mothers of Devi's and Emecheta's texts into lonely "Others." This complicates the representations of motherhood in postcolonial women's writing whose plurality and diversity attest to its metachronous aspect, as argued in the previous chapters.

Notes

1. See Wynter 363 and Donaldson 16–17 for a discussion of the issue.

2. Examples of white Creole writers along with Rhys are Phyllis Shand Allfrey and Eliot Bliss. For more details, see O'Callaghan, "Outsider's" 275–67.

3. For more debates about the issue of Rhys's literary place, see Gregg 2–3 and Reyes, *Mothering* 91–93.

4. For a further discussion of the variable of race, see Wynter 356–57.

5. See Ashcroft, Griffiths, and Tiffin, *Key* 20 and Valovirta, "Into" 333– 34 for a discussion of postcolonial literary practices of appropriation and subversion.

6. See Boyce Davies and Savory Fido, "Talking" xi for a discussion of the complex presence of Caribbean women.

7. See Barthes 4–5 for a definition of writerly texts.

8. Although Antoinette is clearly not Rhys, the rupture in the mother–daughter relationship suffered by Antoinette echoes that of Rhys whose relationship with her mother has been severed. For more details, see Rhys, *Smile* 33–36.

Chapter Seven

Mahasweta Devi's "Breast–Giver" and Buchi Emecheta's *The Joys of Motherhood*

A deconstructive, cultural reading of Rhys's *WSS* was developed in the previous chapter in order to analyse the theme of female oppression as tied to the white Creole lineage. The chapter also discussed acts of literary revision and thematic–stylistic disruption which helped derive instances of resistance. This highlighted the need to analyse Antoinette's madness as a liberating space which resonated with her interstitial belonging, thereby identifying her rite of passage as transition rather than of empowerment. This chapter also examines the theme of female oppression in Devi's "BG" and Emecheta's *JM* which is shared by the texts I have chosen. However, this shared theme is treated differently by the authors in ways that consolidate the metachronous aspect of postcolonial women's writing which reclaims diverse female voices and develops contextualised readings of the texts in order to inspire change.

In this chapter I analyse a different story of female oppression from the ones discussed in the previous chapters. As such, female oppression in Devi's "BG" is attributed to patriarchy, gender national images, and capitalist systems. The chapter also brings Emecheta's *JM* and Devi's "BG" for an interrelated analysis of the theme of motherhood which is another space of oppression. Both texts are read in this chapter as grounded treatises on the concept of motherhood and on women's experiences of joy and entrapment as they internalise the concept. This provides more insights into the varied representations of the maternal body which is a space of exploitation and resistance, thereby making agency a complementary part of female oppression. Identifying motherhood as a problematic site of critique and valorisation has guided the selection of Devi's and Emecheta's texts for analysis in conjunction with recent theoretical debates. Besides, the texts are ordered in this thesis as following a rite of passage identified as

separation because they, unlike the other texts analysed in the previous chapters, end with the protagonists' death rather than empowerment or transition.

Nationalism and feminism: an "unhappy marriage"[1]

A key issue in this thesis is the presence of the female body as a space of exploitation and resistance in postcolonial women's narratives. Devi's "BG," originally written in Bengali (1980), is one such narrative because it represents Jashoda's body as a site of oppression and counter–hegemonic practices, especially as it becomes "the place of knowledge, rather than the instrument of knowing" (Spivak, *Other* 260). Spivak's words suggest the need to analyse Jashoda's body as the place where the knowledge of nationalism and decolonisation as failure is figured and where gender, colonial, and nationalist conflicts occur. This helps expose the sham of agendas of decolonisation which do not work toward the welfare of an entire people.

The story of Jashoda, Devi's principal female figure, can be decoded as a metaphor for national failure and irresponsibility. In a similar manner to India, Jashoda's body, allegorically, is a site of tension exacerbated by patriarchy, class, and colonialism. A shared concern in postcolonial women's writing is reconstructing the traditional images and roles of women in relation to the nation. As Boehmer writes, the "durability" of the concept of the gendered nation in relation to liberation is an empowering route for women (*Stories* 4). In other words, the nation is a potentially productive narrative when it accommodates women and disrupts traditional roles which position women as inferior to men. However, women (writers) face difficulties because the nation which offers promises of emancipation marginalises women by fortifying traditions, gender roles, and the colonial legacy (Allan 102; Scott 9).

This is why the theme of the gendered nation encourages readers of Devi's text to consider how it positions women's experiences in tension with conventional images and practices. Hence, as Spivak argues, if the presence of Third World women is read against discourses such as nationalism, Marxism, and white, middle–class feminism, it will map out diverse facets of women's experiences (*Other* 241). The mapping necessitates

rethinking these discourses in order to destabilise the powers which objectify women from developing countries. Joining Spivak's critique of the aforementioned discourses, Robert J. C. Young argues that Devi's "BG" highlights two issues in postcolonial women's writing (350). The first issue connects contemporary debates about classist and Western approaches to acts of resistance to gender, class, and colonial oppression. The second issue explores the collapse of nation narratives in order to recognise the unacknowledged histories from below; that is, the struggles of women, tribal communities, and the underclass in Indian society.

With this in mind, it can be argued that Devi "BG" is not only the story of a woman who takes "motherhood as her profession" by working for thirty years as a wet nurse at the Haldars (222). Rather, it is a symbolic account of the collapse of the nation narratives under the weight of Jashoda's exploited body. The account underlines the potential to read the female body as an outlet for the indictment of nationalism, sexism, the duplicitous Hindu reverence for motherhood, the caste system, the colonial legacy, and other features of Indian culture. This explains why Devi writes women back into history in ways that promote "socially responsive" readings of women's texts (Glasgow, "Voices" 97). In other words, the kind of reading recommended by Glasgow situates women's narratives within their contexts in order to derive knowledge about the cultures represented and criticised by the authors.

Devi inserts individual female stories into grand narratives of history in order to be read as symbols and parables of a nation. For example, Jashoda is seen as comparable to India because she represents the nation which offers people support yet takes nothing in return (Spivak, "Literary" 109). This unequal exchange points to the condition of post–Independence societies, where women and lower–class people are exploited in the name of national independence and transition. Independence from British colonial rule, Young remarks, has kept intact existing gender and class hierarchies (352). This is evident in the narrative of nationalism which perpetuates class and gender oppressions and hence is considered a product of imperialism.

For example, there emerges a small group of educated, middle–class men in control of economic and political power. By contrast, a large impoverished population of labourers

and peasants has little or no access to the benefits of independence in India. In addition, the model of global sisterhood discussed in Chapter Three tends to be distant from the lives of oppressed women in India and in other developing countries. In this way, the narrative of national independence reduces Jashoda to an "Other." Jashoda, who is hired by the post–war wealthy Haldars as a wet nurse, is exploited by people from different classes such as the Haldars and Jashoda's family. Yet "If nothing is done to sustain her, nothing given back to her, and if scientific help comes too late, she will die of a consuming cancer" (Spivak, "Literary" 107). In other words, Devi "BG" narrates the grotesque putrefaction of Jashoda's maternal body after breastfeeding "thirty boys" at the master's house (237). The exploitation of Jashoda's lower–caste body highlights how decolonisation "falls prey to and replicates the very colonial structures of class and gender oppression it claims to oppose" (Morton 40).

From a postcolonial viewpoint, Jashoda's body disrupts the duplicitous myth of Mother India. As Jane Bryce–Okunlola states, the myth of feminising the land as a "Mother" such as Mother India and Mother Africa is an "idealistic, nostalgic concept" which is challenged by postcolonial women writers such as Rhys and Devi because it keeps women subservient and silent (202). As argued previously, Antoinette in Rhys's *WSS* establishes alternative mothering bonds with her Caribbean surroundings which offer her temporary moments of belonging. However, a breakage takes place in the supportive association she makes with her surroundings. This alludes to her enforced departure to England and to the difficulty of keeping intact such bonds due to her white Creole lineage, among other factors. Such acts of feminising the nation as a supportive mother finds implicit parallels with some slogans of nationalism such as "Fond mother, you have kept your seven million children Bengalis but haven't made them human—Tagore" (Spivak, "Literary" 109). This slogan dictates that citizens must give something to their nation rather than merely take from it. It also shows that possibilities of change expected from nationalism prove difficult to attain.

This signals the importance of mythical images such as "goddess–mother," "the earth," and "Divine Mother" in relation to Jashoda and to the dynamics of female oppression (Devi, "BG" 226). Sharing Bâ's argument in respect of images of Mother Africa and African

mothers cited in Chapter Two, Wisker argues that the myths and images which link women to the land symbolise "the restraints of representation against which many contemporary women writers rail" because these myths are invented in order to keep women "bemused, bound hand and foot" (*Post–Colonial* 181). Thus, feminising the land is a patriarchal practice which reinforces female exploitation and it is in relation to this myth that the nation becomes a disempowering route for women.

Therefore, Jashoda will fall apart under the constructed claims and expectations embedded in the mythical symbols and images of her nation. Spivak is justified in criticising the narrative of nationalism in Devi's "BG" as a form of female oppression because it "participates with the colonizer in various ways . . . In a certain sense, we witness there the ruins of the ideas of parliamentary democracy and of the nation when bequeathed to the elite of a colonized people outside the supposedly "natural" soil of the production of those ideas" (*Other* 245). The narrative of nationalism is a product of imperialism which perpetuates the oppression of Jashoda and other subaltern women. Nonetheless, Devi's text attempts to disrupt narratives of female oppression through the maternal body which functions as a site of resistance. As the next section will argue, locating "BG" within a deconstructive, cultural framework means focusing on women's potential to transform the confining contexts by using their bodies as a way of being and speaking. This makes room for women (writers) in order to defy oppression through diverse routes and strategies.

Deconstruction and Jashoda's maternal body

If Jashoda's agency and voice cannot be retrieved from the archives of nationalist histories, they can be re–inscribed through postcolonial women's writing which challenges dominant modes of representation in order to map alternative spaces of agency. These acts of mapping and deconstruction highlight the transformative and generative function of postcolonial women's writing, as argued in the previous chapters.

Devi's "BG" is one such text because it questions the ability of Western and elite models of change to speak adequately for women in developing countries. For example, the text

traces points of exclusion inherent in Marxism, nationalism, and Marxist feminism in order to highlight ethical risks resulting from elite intellectuals' attempt to speak *for* the oppressed. The risks, for some critics, imply that the different voices of Third World women will be contained within a totalising discourse of reductionism which does not consider the cultural specificity of women (Pandurang 116; Nash 4).

This encourages women writers such as Devi to represent localised experiences of women in order to deconstruct the claims of Western scholarship globally and the maintenance of colonial and neo–colonial powers locally. Accordingly, I take insights from Spivak's and Morton's readings of Devi's text in order to explore it from a deconstructive angle which will unveil issues of exclusion in the discourses of Marxism and Marxist feminism. This helps appropriate particular notions related to the Marxist model of change and to the Marxist feminist approach to female labour and value.

Devi challenges the Marxist concept of change because it overlooks the plight of colonised women in non–European cultures. Devi also criticises specific Marxist feminist assumptions which tend to link women's subordination to their dependency on men as well as to ignore the value of domestic work on the grounds that it is unwaged. Both assumptions do not acknowledge the potential of women such as Jashoda to produce value profit by depending on their maternal bodies. This highlights the inadequacy of certain discourses and writings which merely object to the exploitation of the female body when used as a metaphor for the nation, among other forms of oppression. Therefore, it is important to expound on the signification of the female body to function as a site of resistance and destabilisation, and this explains why Jashoda's body is analysed as a space of (re)production and disruption in this chapter.

According to Lise Vogel, Marxist feminism adopts a generalisation about women's exploitation which claims that it is "the provision by men of means of subsistence to women during the child–bearing period, and not the sex division of labor in itself, that forms the material basis for women's subordination in class society" (qtd. in Spivak, "Literary" 111). It is possible to analyse Jashoda's oppression from this standpoint of Marxist feminism which relates women's subordination to their dependency on men during pregnancy. However, Jashoda's story destabilises the above generalisation

because it is not applicable to the positions of Jashoda and her husband. Besides, it is Jashoda rather than her husband who is responsible for providing subsistence to her family during child–bearing and lactation periods.

Kangali, Jashoda's husband, becomes lame after being run over by the youngest son of the wealthy Haldars; consequently, Jashoda works as a wet nurse for the Haldars in order to provide food for her husband and children. Jashoda's multiple pregnancies and excessive lactation are her means of production and profit, whereas Kangali becomes her means of sexual reproduction. The positions of the couple blur the distinction between Jashoda and Kangali from a gendered viewpoint; that is, between the former as dependent on the latter for the provision of sustenance, thereby reversing the Marxist feminist generalisation defined earlier by Vogel.

Another Marxist feminist issue challenged by Devi is the interrelation of Jashoda's ambivalent position with the labour theory of value. This issue is worth considering because the labour theory of value, unlike Jashoda's story, tends to undermine domestic, sexual reproduction when the question of social reproduction is raised. Arguably, Jashoda's story weaves a gradual process of deconstruction embodied in the shift of the sexual division of labour after the metaphorical sale of her labour power. In addition, the sale exemplifies the transition from one mode of social reproduction into another. The extension of spaces of profit occurs through a network of reproduction and movement from the domestic as a natural process of mothering to the domestic as socio–waged wet nursing (Basu 130). This foregrounds how domestic economy relates to spaces other than those of the nuclear family and home; that is, to the female body as a mode of transformation.

Accordingly, the movement from the domestic to the social represents Jashoda's body as a contested site of knowledge, abuse, and disruption. Devi's representation of Jashoda's body at this point recalls Margrit Shildrick's assertion that "a resistant feminism must seek to explore the body anew" (qtd. in DeShazer 45). Exploring the female body "anew" means departing from its monolithic depiction as a space of exploitation into that of agency. As I argued in Chapter Two, the female body functions as a complex space because it constructs women as subjects and objects, agents and victims. For example,

Jashoda is a static, objectified figure when she is represented as a cultural icon for the nation. Nevertheless, she claims agency as the bread–winner of her family and "the milk–filled faithful wife who was the object of the reverence of the local houses devoted to the Holy Mother" (Devi, "BG" 234).

In what follows, it is helpful initially to use the vocabulary of Marxist labour theory in the analysis of Jashoda's socio–domestic labour. Jashoda's body is a space where the sexual division of labour is inverted and where Marxist models of change tend to be inappropriate for liberating exploited women such as Jashoda. Furthermore, Jashoda's milk production moves between use–value, surplus–value, and exchange–value. By definition, the concept of use–value refers to "the usefulness of a thing and as such is grounded in the inherent and natural properties of the thing" (Edgar and Sedgwick 425). Jashoda's milk has use–value as in the case of nurturing her children; however, the exchange–value arises when there is a superfluous flow of milk. Any of Jashoda's milk that is not used to feed her children can be exchanged. This exchange highlights the transformation of Jashoda's motherhood from a biological experience and rite of passage into a waged labour attributed to socio–economic necessity.

Jashoda, "the legendary Cow of Fulfilment," is rewarded for her surplus milk and lactation service (Devi, "BG" 227). She receives food on a daily basis from the Haldars in order to nourish her family. Besides, she is offered a constant sexual servicing from Kangali in order to continue breastfeeding her children and the Haldars' sons. In order to produce surplus milk for the master's household, the sexual division of labour is reversed because Kangali rather than Jashoda performs domestic tasks. Indeed, his situation resembles that of Nnaife, Nnu Ego's husband in Emecheta's *JM* because both men perform household chores, especially as Nnaife works as a domestic washerman. Hence, Kangali "took charge of the cooking at home. Made the children his assistants . . . Jashoda, eating well–prepared rice and curry every day, became as inflated as the bank account of a Public Works Department officer" (Devi, "BG" 228–29).

The significance arising from this passage is not only the reversal of gender roles or the fact that Jashoda's surplus milk is exchanged and consumed by the Haldars who own her labour power. Rather, it is the implicit reference to a "comprador" or capitalist system of

exploitation represented by the rich Haldars and to the limitations of some Marxist feminist views about the value of domestic work.[2] As such, Jashoda's career emphasises that a mother's domestic labour can secure her an active subject position in order to turn her work into a source of value as is evident in the exchange of milk with food. This exchange, according to Spivak, calls into question the aspect of Western Marxist feminism which "from the point of view of work, trivializes the theory of value and, from the point of view of mothering as work, ignores the mother as subject" (*Other* 258).

The aspect of Marxist feminism which considers women's work as reproductive, domestic, and unwaged distances Jashoda from her identity as a speaking subject. This is why Devi reconsiders these propositions upon which much of subaltern analysis depends. Also, the narrative reconsideration of the above propositions reveals other issues about Jashoda's labour as a wet nurse. Although Jashoda becomes an active agent by nursing the Haldars' children, her agency or career comes at a price, figuratively speaking. As Lopamudra Basu comments, working as a wet nurse results in two types of commodification and exploitation, namely the sexual/the female body and the emotional/female affect (131). Both types are emblematic of widespread changes resulting from "the advent of capitalist modernity" and so they question socio–economic hierarchies and patriarchal, nationalist practices which exploit Jashoda (131).

As argued earlier in this chapter, Jashoda's body has a dual function because it is a space of exploitation and alienation on the one hand, and a space of value production on the other. Besides, Jashoda's career as a wet nurse bestows upon her a new identity as an agent, where "Everyone's devotion to Jashoda became so strong that at weddings, showers, namings, and sacred–threadings they invited her and gave her the position of chief fruitful woman . . . Jashoda's worth went up in the Haldar house" (Devi, "BG" 229). But Jashoda's body also signifies exploitation or objectification, much like the bodies of Nellie, Firdaus, and Nnu Ego explored in this thesis. For example, Firdaus in El Saadawi's *WPZ* commodifies her body by working as a prostitute. Although Firdaus secures socio–economic mobility as a high–class prostitute, she undergoes experiences of verbal and sexual exploitation by her clients and pimps. Hence, the same female body which offers

Firdaus profit and mobility participates in her oppression, as will be argued in the next chapter.

Similarly, Jashoda's maternal body (breasts) which functions as an income–generating site is also a source of exploitation and dis–ease. This suggests that female agency in postcolonial women's texts overlaps with female oppression and suffering, thereby acknowledging that Jashoda's story "invoke[s] the singularity of the gendered subaltern;" that is, it does not generalise the experiences of female oppression (Spivak, *Other* 252). As argued in Chapter Three, women's differences challenge homogenising models such as the global sisterhood model because they tend to represent women as having similar experiences of oppression. For instance, a shared feature between Devi's Jashoda, Bâ's Ramatoulaye, and Rhys's Antoinette is that the three protagonists are women who come from developing countries and who share the experience of being oppressed; still, the reasons for their oppression are different and so are their identities and standpoints. This underlines the issue of singularity which accentuates women's differences, specificities, and the varying modes of subordination and resistance.

Even the same issue or power such as female employment which oppresses one woman can empower another, as is evident in Jashoda's career as a breast–giver. Although Jashoda's work is waged, it turns her into a tool of exploitation, unlike Ramatoulaye's teaching career in Bâ's *SLL* which has the potential to make a positive difference in her life. This example of how Jashoda and Ramatoulaye experience their roles and careers differently highlights an issue raised in Chapters One and Two, namely the importance of locating postcolonial women's texts in their contexts. This is due to the fact that contextualised interpretations of the texts construct postcolonial women's writing as a metachronous, prismatic discourse which is founded on diversity and interrelation, without erasing the specificity of each woman and narrative.

Because her breasts have become an income–generating source, Jashoda postpones a visit to the doctor even after discovering a lump in one breast. Diagnosed with breast cancer, Jashoda experiences alienation and betrayal from the breasts which reduce her to an object as well as "an abject" (DeShazer 45). It seems that cancer obliterates Jashoda's socio–maternal agency and dissociates her from family, leaving her to die alone. As the

narrative progresses, the leakiness of Jashoda's cancerous breasts turns into a space of bitter irony and indictment. As a breast–giver, Jashoda has "an alive body . . . [where] milk leaped out of her" (Devi, "BG" 238). Subsequently, she is deemed "Cow Mother" and "Mother of the World" (228). But because her breasts have developed cancerous, pus–oozing lesions, she is stripped of her agency and social status. Her identity shifts from a Holy Mother whom "Basini's crowd used to wash her feet and drink the water" to the master's servant who "cooked and served in silence" (234).

The shift in Jashoda's identity makes it possible to read "BG" as an ironic, figurative representation of an exploited, "leaky" body dying from breast cancer (DeShazer 44). It also exposes the socio–emotional distance between the patron families such as the Haldars and the hired breast–givers such as Jashoda. As Mary K. DeShazer remarks, the narrator of Jashoda's story uses ironic understatement and grotesquery in order to position Jashoda in the space of abjection, where she is physically declining, emotionally isolated, and hence "'cast out of the field of the social'" (47). The narrative usage of irony and grotesquery correlates to Jashoda's loss of agency which is manifested in an angry outburst at Kangali: "Jashoda showed him her bare left breast, thick with running sores and said, 'See these sores? Do you know how these sores smell? What will you do with me now?'" (Devi, "BG" 236). Even when Kangali seeks medical advice for Jashoda, she continues to have leaking sores that mock her.

Moreover, the exposition of cultural indictment is conveyed through irony in relation to Jashoda's bodily pain and to her points of view. Devi's indictment and mocking attitude toward Hindu culture expose son preference. As Katrak writes, there is a saying in India (and also in Syria, my home country) which signals the discriminatory tradition of son preference: "When a baby is born people shout very loudly, 'It's a boy,' or they say in a dead voice, 'It's a girl'" (235). This means that Jashoda, in a similar manner to Nnu Ego in Emecheta's *JM*, adheres to the tradition of son preference. This is evident in Jashoda's behaviour, where she "had forever scrubbed her breasts carefully with soap and oil, for the master's sons had put the nipples in their mouth" (Devi, "BG" 236).

In addition, grotesquery which DeShazer locates in "BG" occurs in a passage which alludes to Jashoda's abjection when she bathes, where bad smells emanate from her

cancerous body: “Stink, what a stink! If the body of a dead cat or dog rots in the garbage can you get a smell like this” (Devi 236). Jashoda’s cancerous breasts bring about her misery and death. She has lost the objects which have gained her enviable respect and sanctity: “Forlorn Jashoda . . . Jashoda’s good fortune was her ability to bear children. All this misfortune happened to her as soon as that vanished. Now is the downward time for Jashoda, the milk–filled faithful wife” (233–34).

From another perspective, Jashoda’s body indicates an implicit bond of mother–child affection. Her status as a giver necessitates the presence of a recipient within the circuit of exchange, where her children receive her milk for “immediate and future psycho–social affect” (Spivak, *Other* 250). Nonetheless, Jashoda’s story reveals the failure of the mother–child exchange because Jashoda’s children are irresponsible. The children’s irresponsibility toward their mother causes the failure of the mother–child bond which can support Jashoda and work against denying her presence as a visible mother. Accordingly, it is not that Jashoda denies her identity as a visible mother; rather, it is denied to her by the absent child as well as by other factors that have deformed the ideals of maternal reverence and affection.

Jashoda later realises the illusion behind the joys of mothering which she is not destined to experience. This explains why Devi alludes to the child’s absence by posing a question toward the narrative conclusion, where the reference is left unresolved for readers of “BG” to decode: “One must become Jashoda if one suckles the world. One has to die friendless . . . Yet someone was supposed to be there at the end. Who was it? . . . Jashoda died at 11 p.m.” (240). This reference underlines Jashoda’s presence as a multifunctional object. She is an object of exchange due to the economic (familial) demands placed on her maternal body. Besides, she is reduced to an image of “a distant person” by her children and to an object of sexual pleasure by her husband (239).

Acts of ignoring the mother as a subject and of her maternal body as a site of profit are important. On the one hand, they show that Jashoda’s career challenges certain Marxist feminist aspects which, Spivak argues, trivialise domestic work and overlook women’s ability to produce value profit as a source of economic independence (*Other* 260). On the other hand, they indicate that female exploitation is embodied in the division of labour

between the capitalists (the wealthy Haldars) and the worker (Jashoda). The indictment of Jashoda's exploitation stands as a painful example of "how Marx's critique of capitalism in nineteenth–century Europe is still relevant to the contemporary economic world" (Morton 93).

Following Morton, I argue that a drawback to Karl Marx's concept of exploitation is the restriction of his critique of capitalism to Europe. Marx was aware of the practices of European colonialism in the nineteenth century. Besides, Marx provided political and intellectual frameworks for many postcolonial and Third World theorists and activists such as Spivak. Nonetheless, the Marxist European models of change ignore the "gender–saturated nature" of the plight of colonised women (Donaldson 7). Consequently, Jashoda's career destabilises "sexual division of labour between productive labour . . . and reproductive labour . . . [which] has conventionally devalued and ignored the material specificity of women's domestic work, including childbirth and mothering, because these forms of work do not directly produce exchange–value or money" (Morton 126). Subverting the sexual division of labour bestows agency upon Jashoda because she moves from unwaged labour as a mother to waged one as a wet nurse and a breadwinner. "By commanding a professional fee [food] for this performance [career]," Jashoda is able to invert "temporarily" the socio–economic hierarchies which have exploited her (Basu 131).

This acknowledges the presence of women as speaking subjects as well as objects of exploitation perpetuated by nationalist, classist, and elite discourses. In short, Jashoda's story highlights the failure of national independence in India to advocate women's emancipation. It also criticises the inadequacy of socio–economic models of change to speak for the oppression of women in developing countries. Ultimately, the one who pays the price of the failure and inadequacy are women and mothers on whose bodies diverse forms of exploitation are inscribed. The following sections elaborate on the problematic presence of mothers as agents and objects in patriarchal societies, by offering a contextualised analysis of the theme of motherhood in Emecheta's *JM* and Devi's "BG."

Jashoda, Nnu Ego, and (m)otherhood

Before discussing the theme of motherhood in Devi's "BG" and Emecheta's *JM*, a synopsis of the main features of Emecheta's text will be highlighted in order to justify its analysis in relation to that of Devi in this chapter. Emecheta's *JM* is an "ironic" tale that illustrates not joys of motherhood but "externally enforced, internalised social and cultural pressures" which relate African women's abilities to bear children to their identities as good women (Wisker, *Post–Colonial* 149). Set in Nigeria, *JM* narrates the story of Nnu Ego, a rural Igbo woman and a caring mother who moves to live in Lagos, later a British colony. The story narrates how a woman's expectations of having a joyful experience of motherhood are not fulfilled due to the impact of colonialism, class, cultural tensions, and economic necessity, among other obstacles.

Nnu Ego's first marriage fails because she is childless. She consults several herbalists and is later told that the slave woman who is her "chi" will not give her a child.[3] For this reason, Amatokwu, her first husband, takes another wife while Nnu Ego returns to her father's house. She is later married off to Nnaife whom she does not like but prays that if her marriage is fruitful, she will love him. She gives birth to a baby boy who dies. Shocked by her son's death, Nnu Ego attempts suicide by jumping into the river below Carter Bridge but is rescued by a villager who comforts her. Nnu Ego gives birth to nine children of which only seven survive. Her husband, a washerman for a white couple, is drafted into the army during wartime; consequently, Nnu Ego takes the responsibility of feeding her children, where she experiences frustrating situations, all for the sake of her children's well–being. However, she dies as a lonely mother and one whose children disappoint but do not fail to give her the greatest burial in the town. The novel closes with Nnu Ego's refusal to answer the prayers of barren women to make them fertile. People say that she is a wicked woman even in death, yet they agree that she has given her all to her children and that this is the joy of being a mother.

As stated earlier, representing women as national icons and symbols such as Mother Africa and Mother India perpetuates female exploitation. This explains why several critics and women writers such as Bâ and Devi have argued against the deformed social status

accorded to motherhood which contradicts the realities of women.[4] Because most colonial nations and colonised societies have been patriarchal, gender bias is likely to remain intact in the postcolonial scene. Besides, male writers have often created stereotypical images of women in their narratives of the nation. According to Susheila Nasta, the images represent women as "symbolic forces, [and] repositories of culture and creativity;" nonetheless, women are silenced by the power structures surrounding them (xiv).

Mother Africa and Mother India as nations can attain independence, unlike some African and Indian mothers who remain oppressed. However, there remains a possibility of reconstructing female images within every deconstructive textual reading. As Bryce–Okunlola puts it, motherhood is a site of struggle and an integral part of a woman's identity as a writer because it challenges the masculine appropriation of "power over the Word" (201). In other words, motherhood, much like epistolary writing in Bâ's *SLL* and narration during imprisonment in El Saadawi's *WPZ*, is a space for the expression of women's potential to challenge oppression and to claim agency. That is why women writers such as Devi and Emecheta demystify images of ideal motherhood in order to reveal negative experiences of motherhood.

Many people agree that children give happiness. From this premise as an ambivalent space of valorisation and criticism, Devi and Emecheta build their narratives. Although "BG" and *JM* are written by a Bengali author and a Nigerian one respectively, they reveal a shared consciousness of the fate of women who are restrained not only by the practices of their colonised nations but also by "the myths of their lands which glorify motherhood and label it as the be all and end all of a woman's existence" (Sen 61). For both authors, motherhood is a problematic issue in its impact on women and in its representation by women writers. The authors criticise motherhood because it is a confining space which relates to the "ideology of obligatory motherhood" prescribed by tradition and patriarchy in complicity with colonialism (Pandurang 119). At the same time, the authors support the experience of motherhood as a yearning in (childless) women. Supporting and criticising the theme of motherhood in a single text point to the complexity of the theme

and to the ambivalent positions of women such as Jashoda and Nnu Ego when they are represented as mothers.

Before proceeding with the analysis of both texts, it is important to argue that I am wary of the risk of generalising women's experiences and narratives. Avoiding generalisation is integral to this thesis and to the selected case studies. The selected texts of Devi and Emecheta do not construct the figure of the "universal woman" challenged by Aguilar because this figure does not exist (313). Women's realities and identities are neither homogeneous nor represented in a single text. Also, women's experiences, points of view, and cultural backgrounds are different and complex, as argued in the previous chapters. However, both texts narrate the stories of two women who make devastating (similar) choices and who, unlike Ramatoulaye in Bâ's *SLL*, spend their lives "in the pursuit of failed traditions, capsulated in the idea of motherhood" (Nnoromele 182). This pursuit leads to a kind of overwhelming pressure on women to have children, preferably sons, as discussed in respect of Jashoda.

Obsession with motherhood is said to secure women a better future and to trigger their self–esteem. Jashoda and Nnu Ego yearn to be mothers and this maternal instinct is undeniable. Furthermore, postcolonial women's narratives, according to Nnaemeka, "give a human face to motherhood. It is not surprising that in spite of the pains of motherhood, most mothers in the texts are not prepared to evacuate it . . . because they know that they are also the beneficiaries of the rewards of mothering" ("Imag(in)ing" 5). This explains why Jashoda and Nnu Ego dream of motherhood as a joyful experience while they criticise it as a deformed, patriarchal institution and role.

Motherhood and the wind of change

A shared feature between the texts explored in this thesis is the connection between women and the multiple powers which structure women's texts and identities. This denotes the complexity of Emecheta's *JM* which constructs "a dialogue of opposing discourses" such as feminism, colonialism, modernity, tradition, and the culture of Ibuza within the body of the text (Mathews 77). The discourses are threaded together in order

to provide the narrative background, therefore, motherhood as a female experience is affected by the play of these discourses or powers.

Tradition and modernity are among the powers which influence Jashoda, Nnu Ego, and the other female figures examined in this thesis. For example, Devi's Jashoda is more socially situated than Emecheta's Nnu Ego whose condition resembles that of Brodber's Nellie. A university student living in an urban setting, Nellie, much like Nnu Ego, experiences alienating cultural tensions and differences. This suggests that Brodber and Emecheta challenge cultural divides because they fragment their protagonists' identities. Physically, the protagonists exist in new, urban settings, yet morally they are tied to their communities.

Nnu Ego's story traces how that the transition of Nigeria from a tribal, social system to a Western capitalist system has affected women such as Nnu Ego who "have exchanged one form of patriarchy with another, while being stripped of former privileges and denied the right to new ones" (Derrickson 44). Nnu Ego's conflict between maternal desires and colonial ones is dramatised in her movement from agrarian stability and comfort to "citied destitution" (Allan 100). While people in Lagos are tempted by the trappings of the urban world, Nnu Ego remains attached to her rural community; consequently, she faces complex socio–economic and cultural changes which complicate her life.

After the loss of her first child, Nnu Ego attempts suicide because she is brought up to believe that children bestow value and joy upon a woman's life. The opening scene of Emecheta's narrative illustrates the complex dynamics facing Nnu Ego who runs down Lagos streets in a confused state of mind. She even blames herself for leaving the child alone while running a small trade in order to support her husband's paltry income. More importantly, the theme of Nnu Ego's cultural tensions is represented by Emecheta's choice of Carter Bridge in order to situate the suicide attempt. As I read it, the bridge signifies a state of "culture collision" (Derrickson 40); that is, of Nnu Ego's internalised contestations which create an in–between chasm she cannot reconcile.

The bridge also recalls Sargasso Sea in Rhys's *WSS*, as discussed in the previous chapter. Both locations stand for the cultural gaps and tensions experienced by Emecheta's Nnu Ego and Rhys's Antoinette in their attempts to reconcile with their

communities. This makes Carter Bridge a symbolic location which signals Nnu Ego's failure to adapt to both sides of the bridge; to the tensions in her life. Residing in a colonial culture necessitates that individuals negotiate foreign and indigenous values. As the analysis of Bâ's *SLL* has shown, Ramatoulaye succeeds in negotiating the tensions between tradition and modernity for the welfare of her family, thereby suggesting that the tensions are reunited to form an empowering female space.

However, since Emecheta's *JM* is tied to a specific context and female experience, it stresses points of difference and contradiction in women's realities and in their literary representations. Nnu Ego differs from Ramatoulaye with regard to the tradition–modernity paradigm because the former's successful negotiation with cultural tensions "proves hard to come by, especially during trying economic times when 'families who had left their farming communities to make a life from the cities' '*were caught in the middle*'" (Robolin, 81; emphasis original). In other words, Nnu Ego, in a similar manner to Rhys's protagonist, suffers from interstitial anxiety and ambivalence which fragment her sense of selfhood and lead to her psychological breakdown at the end of the novel.

What contributes also to the failure of such negotiation is Lagos. Life in urban Lagos awakens Nnu Ego to "the harsh reality of making ends meet on a pittance . . . It seemed that all she had inherited from her agrarian background was the responsibility and none of the booty" (Emecheta, *JM* 137). In this passage, Nnu Ego relates the cause of her anguish not only to her role as a mother but also to her position as a woman who is expected to perform the roles of her agrarian society within a new, urban setting. The tensions of tradition and modernity also relate to colonialism in further affecting women. For K. M. Mathews, Emecheta's novel extends its critique of motherhood in order to explore other issues such as colonialism and its impact on the experience of motherhood (77). This justifies the attempt to analyse the theme of motherhood in light of various contextualised powers in this chapter.

Colonialism, in some instances, exacerbates patriarchal practices and values, especially as women's lives appear to be more complicated by colonialism than they would have been in pre–colonial times (Ogundipe–Leslie 500; Azodo, "Role" 82). Eventually, the legacy of colonialism leaves sharper effects on Nnu Ego than on Jashoda and Adaku, Nnu

Ego's co–wife. Unlike Nnu Ego, Jashoda does not experience urban–rural conflicts because her plight as a mother is tied to socio–economic necessity and to the change of values and traditions, especially in relation to motherhood. Also, Adaku negotiates the tensions of traditions and modernity as well as the effects of colonialism for the benefits of her daughters.

However, Nnu Ego's experience of motherhood unveils the impact of colonialism as manifested in the change of roles and values. The scene where Nnu Ego's husband is castrated (figuratively) is an example of this impact. Nnaife and other men in Lagos "stopped being men long ago. Now they are machines" (Emecheta, *JM* 51). The situation of metaphorically castrating Nnaife as a "womanmade–man" signals his being oppressed by colonialism which creates in him an aggressive masculinity as a way of compensating for his castration (Pandurang 120). Besides, washing the undergarments of the white mistress renders Nnaife slavelike and pitiable in Nnu Ego's eyes. His job, in a similar manner to Kangali's, reverses the sexual division of labour because men tend to perform domestic tasks. It even criticises colonialism which fortifies gender hierarchies, where colonised men rather than women become servants.

This offers readers of Emecheta's and Devi's texts the opportunity to see how men, as the male primary care–takers, perform domestic chores, thereby challenging the assumption which positions men in the realm of social production while women in that of domesticity. However, although Nnu Ego and Nnaife are affected by colonialism, the effect on the former is sharper than on the latter due to gender. The outcomes of this effect have serious implications for Nnu Ego's identity as a wife and a mother. In Victoria Ramirez's words, the white man's rule intervenes throughout Nnu Ego's life "always to her disadvantage and always compounding the problems of a woman struggling to live by the traditional dictates and societal goals of her people in a hostile, exploitative urban environment" (64). Nnu Ego is subjugated by colonialism and patriarchy, among other hegemonies, all of which enslave her.

Emecheta uses slave imagery in order to expound on Nnu Ego's abject condition as well as to characterise Nnu Ego's life and relationships. There are instances in the narrative which allude to Nnu Ego's relation with slave imagery such as the presence of a

"painful lump on her head" (*JM* 27). The lump refers to Nnu Ego's vengeful "chi" or slave woman who is captured by Nnu Ego's father and sacrificed with his dead wife as an act of slave suttee. However, the "chi" influences Nnu Ego's decisions and negatively shapes her life, especially as it robs her of the joyful motherhood she desires. As I read it, the description of the lump as "painful" indicates Nnu Ego's plight which is intensified as the narrative progresses, where several implications for slave imagery may be identified.

For instance, Nnaife, during wartime, is asked by the British army to go overseas for a year's service; consequently, Nnu Ego takes the responsibility of feeding and clothing her children. This incident, an effect of colonial rule, makes Nnu Ego see herself as a slave, adding that it distances her from Nnaife who is her means of financial support. Also, slave imagery occurs when poor Nnu Ego accepts "a lot of old babies' clothes" from the white woman—a custom reserved for slaves in her culture—and where she feels that her life as a mother and a wife is a failure (Emecheta, *JM* 54). Ultimately, Nnu Ego's "chi" figures not only as "the guiding spirit of Nnu Ego; she is Nnu Ego. The protagonist . . . becomes an avatar of this captive servant, so that one embodies the other" (Robolin 78). This shows that Nnu Ego is enslaved by her love for her children, by her role as a wife, and by "the way men cleverly used a woman's sense of responsibility to actually enslave her" (Emecheta, *JM* 137).

Despite being a source of frustration, the difficulties faced by Nnu Ego awaken her and lead to her "metamorphosis" which turns her into "a feminist" (Umeh, "Joys" 43). Nnu Ego's metamorphosis can be read as an attempt by Emecheta to bestow agency upon her principal character who becomes aware of her situation. This makes Nnu Ego capable of reflecting on her social positioning, on the various forms of her oppression, and even on her participation in unjust practices such as son preference in terms of education. In this sense, Nnu Ego's self–reflexivity contributes to the description of Emecheta's *JM* as a "consciousness–raising" novel in which Nnu Ego "moves . . . into confrontation with others and with institutions, and into a new and newly politicised understanding of herself and her society" (Matthews 77).

Moreover, Emecheta's feminist (womanist) voice is conveyed in Nnu Ego's desperate prayer: "God, when will you create a woman who will be fulfilled in herself, a full human

being, not anybody's appendage?" (*JM* 186). This prayer is indicative of Nnu Ego's regret and predicament; however, it implies a gradual learning which empowers her to reflect on her slave–like position: "When will I be free? . . . I am a prisoner of my own flesh and blood . . . But who made the law that we should not hope in our daughters? . . . Until we [women] change all this, it is still a man's world, which women will always help to build" (187). This passage is among Nnu Ego's ruminations that reveal her situation because it associates slavery with motherhood.

Slavery resonates metaphorically with the stories of Jashoda and Nnu Ego who are caring mothers. Yet this does not mean that all mothers are enslaved and disappointed because the various experiences of motherhood attest to its different representations in postcolonial women's texts. Bâ's *SLL* is a case in point because it, unlike the texts of Emecheta and Devi, represents Ramatoulaye and Aissatou as strong and self–asserted mothers whose experiences of motherhood are aspirational and empowering. From another perspective, the image of the mother as a slave or a prisoner is not always constructed by gender oppression. As argued previously, the image is perpetuated by class, tradition, modernity, colonialism, and patriarchy. Still, it can be related to a woman's choice to challenge what oppresses her. Some readers of Emecheta's and Devi's texts will sympathise with Nnu Ego and Jashoda for their misfortunes as caring mothers who expect their children to be the source of future investment. Other readers will argue that Jashoda and Nnu Ego are not quintessentially passive objects. As some critics comment, Nnu Ego and Jashoda are partly responsible for their plight, and this points to women's attempts to either reinforce or deconstruct the rules and roles which subjugate them (Nnoromele 188; Dubek 210).

Devi and Emecheta criticise the patriarchal institution of motherhood because it perpetuates restrictive gender roles; still, they do not spare their protagonists from critique. In Shivaji Sengupta's viewpoint, Nnu Ego should "exert her personality" in order to "wrest some of the control from the outside . . . [and] to give vent to her desire and externalize it so that the men in her life would at least know what she wanted" (239). But Jashoda and Nnu Ego remain imprisoned in the restrictive kumblas of motherhood; the former by familial and economic necessity while the latter by maternal expectations. And

it is not until their last breaths that the two mothers pronounce what they have not recognised earlier; that the joys and dreams of motherhood are illusions in a world whose practices negatively affect mothers such as Jashoda and Nnu Ego.

Adaku and Nnu Ego: two women, different choices

Along with the character of Nnu Ego, the character of Adaku, Nnu Ego's co–wife, is worth considering. It denotes the presence of different and conflicting female standpoints and hence of several modalities of women grouped as African/non–Western. Recalling Bâ's representation of Aissatou and Ramatoulaye in *SLL,* Emecheta's creation of modern, liberated images or models of African women in *JM* is conveyed through Adaku.

Unlike Nnu Ego, Adaku develops survival strategies in order to overcome her predicament. According to Palmer, Adaku is "central to the author's design" because Emecheta, through the figure of Adaku, makes "extremely important points about female liberation and emancipation" (99). Adaku realises that she is "worse than a 'second–class citizen' in the Owulum family," so she decides to leave her unhappy marriage, thereby "saving herself from madness and premature death" (Umeh, "Procreation" 197). Adaku's decision to leave a polygamous life, much like Aissatou's in Bâ's *SLL*, is a literal way of protesting against society which exploits women. Adaku leaves Nnaife's house in order to work as a prostitute so that she can attain her goals.

Recalling Firdaus's career as a prostitute in El Saadawi's *WPZ*, prostitution secures Adaku socio–economic independence and mobility. There is no clear evidence in Emecheta's *JM* that Adaku practises prostitution save the rumours spreading in Lagos about leaving her husband's house. Perhaps Adaku deliberately reveals her choice of working as a prostitute in order to annoy Nnu Ego whom she criticises for being a traditionalist. However, Adaku's choice underlines her desire "to be a dignified single woman. I shall work to educate my daughters" (170–71). Adaku succeeds in becoming an independent, single mother and this reflects the choice of freeing herself from patriarchy, thereby establishing what Stratton calls "a countercommunity—a matriarchal family" (112).

Furthermore, the character of Adaku embodies Nnu Ego's bright side because she enacts what Nnu Ego wishes for in her prayer; that is, Adaku becomes a self–capable woman who prides herself on being a mother of daughters. For example, Adaku appropriates to her daughters' advantage the positive values of colonial education. She ensures that her daughters are sent to good schools and this makes her a role model for Nnu Ego—a role which relates to the empowering figure of Aissatou in Bâ's *SLL*. By contrast, Nnu Ego does not realise the value of female education. Her daughters attend school for a couple of years, yet their mother decides that they start petty trading in order to raise money. Ironically, the money will help pay the school fees of Nnu Ego's sons in order "to put them in a good position in life, so that they will be able to look after the family. When your husbands are nasty to you, they will defend you" (Emecheta, *JM* 176).

Therefore, while Adaku charts her progress, Nnu Ego fails because she, at this point, re–enacts gender discriminatory practices expressed in her attitude toward son preference and female education (the latter is important because it either empowers or disempowers women, as has been the case of Brodber's Nellie, Bâ's Ramatoulaye, and El Saadawi's Firdaus). Also, Nnu Ego fails because to survive in the world depicted in Emecheta's *JM*, a woman needs to be "independent, self–determined, ambitious and assertive" (Ezeigbo 22). It is not surprising that Adaku, unlike Nnu Ego, has these qualities on which she depends in order to secure transition and survival.

Adaku's plans are open to dispute. Her complex situation resembles that of Aissatou who, for some male critics, cannot achieve her goals even if she establishes an independent life, as argued in Chapter Five. Adaku's decision to challenge what subjugates her can be seen as a positive one; nevertheless, it denotes dependence on the patriarchal system which she challenges. Her intention to literally depend on "male companionship" for survival suggests that she cannot totally free herself from patriarchy (Emecheta, *JM* 171). Working as a prostitute can be the only choice available to Adaku but it does not imply that she will successfully accomplish her objectives due to socially constructed obstacles to a woman's independence.

In sum, Adaku's character and decision to lead a self–independent life convey a message regarding the presence of women such as Nnu Ego and Adaku. Both women

represent differences among (African) women: Adaku leaves a polygamous, underprivileged life in order to choose a new one; consequently, she is ostracised by her people. By contrast, Nnu Ego remains attached to her cultural traditions in an urban setting and later dies as a lonely, impoverished mother. Ultimately, Emecheta offers no final "solution" to what it means to be a (African) woman who is "contained neither by the confines of the old patriarchy nor by the confines of the new" (Derrickson 51).

The reader at this point is encouraged to interpret the contested paths of both women as embodying the notion of complex selfhood in women's lives and texts. A key issue in this thesis is that women's experiences, which are differently lived and represented, invite us "to listen to that voice of difference" which "divert[s] us from the monotony of sameness" created by homogenising feminist models and narratives (Trinh 266–67). In addition, differences connote the problematic presence of women in a postcolonial world which determines the degree or nature of their independence and relations with men. Each path in the end is seen as unacceptable or not accommodating for African women and is central to the debates which Emecheta's *JM* raises regarding the question of women. This highlights the metachronous aspect of postcolonial women's writing which does not only map spaces of resistance but also acknowledges the complexity inherent in women's narratives and voices.

Jashoda, Nnu Ego, and the shock of motherhood

Sharing the arguments of Bâ and Nasta discussed earlier in this chapter, Boehmer points to the risk of adhering to motherhood as constructed by patriarchal and nationalist narratives because they are gender–blind: "Subscribing to the unitary icon [of motherhood] may therefore threaten to defeat women's objectives of affirming their own particular mode of being" (*Stories* 93). While motherhood creates a sense of personal fulfilment and respect for some women, it subjugates other women and reduces them to icons.

As I argued in Chapter One, the selected texts are interpretative ones which derive situated forms of knowledge about the societies they represent and criticise. This means

that the protagonists' standpoints about mothering differ since they are tied to specific contexts which determine whether or not a mother's role will be empowering. Besides, women's attitudes toward their surroundings shape the choices they make and hence the varied degrees of agency they secure. For example, Aissatou in Bâ's *SLL* does not exclusively depend on motherhood in order to attain her goals. Rather, she shifts between multiple positions such as a translator, a friend, and an educated, single mother, all of which construct her character as a strong woman.

Unlike Aissatou, Nnu Ego and Jashoda depend on motherhood in order to fulfil certain aims; nonetheless, they collapse and are thwarted by the practices and the shifting values of their societies. For this reason, it is possible to draw a parallel between Jashoda's and Nnu Ego's reliance on their bodies in order to fulfil specific aspirations. Jashoda prides herself on being a mother, particularly of sons: "Motherhood was always her way of living and keeping alive her world of countless beings" (Devi, "BG" 222). She revels in having nursed her children and those of the Haldars who will secure her happiness and support. Besides, Jashoda is known for her "devotion to her husband and love for her children, whose unnatural renunciation and forgiveness have been kept alive in the popular consciousness by all Indian women" (225–26).

Likewise, Nnu Ego struggles to carry out her traditional duties as a wife and a mother. Her first marriage fails because she is childless and this makes barren women believe that "monstrous is the womb that refuses to give birth" (James 43). This belief points to the socio–emotional and physical displacements experienced by (some) childless women. As Gwendolyn Etter–Lewis argues, (barren) women such as Nnu Ego are treated as "dispensable commodities traded and changed at the discretion of their husbands" (166). This highlights the commodification of women within marriage and the asymmetrical positioning of men and women in society. However, Nnu Ego's second marriage to Nnaife is fruitful as she produces children in order to preserve her husband's lineage. This makes her believe that "When one grows old, one needs children to look after one. If you have no children, and your parents have gone, who can you call your own?" (Emecheta, *JM* 38). Yet Nnu Ego's maternal hopes are replaced by the shock and pains of motherhood.

Jashoda also experiences the shock of motherhood. As I argued earlier, Jashoda is faced with the task of keeping her family fed. She lacks educational skills which can allow her access to middle–class privileges; however, she finds the alternative to this lack by marketing her body. She nurses the Haldars' sons in return for food and sustenance. The exchange leaves detrimental effects on her body which develops breast cancer. In Spivak's words, Jashoda's breasts are "a survival object transformed into a commodity, making visible the indeterminacy between filial piety and gender violence, between house and temple, between domination and exploitation" (*Selected* vii).

Jashoda's body (breasts) functions as a means of interrogating the reverence of motherhood in post–Independence India. At first, Jashoda questions the concept of motherhood: "Is a Mother so cheaply made?/Not just by dropping a babe!" (Devi, "BG" 228). Later, she realises that mothers and mothering are illusions because she is abandoned by everyone. This explains why she enunciates her last judgment about motherhood and foster–mothers: "'If you suckle you're a mother, all lies! Nepal and Gopal don't look at me, and the Master's boys don't spare a peek to ask how I'm doing.' The sores on her breast kept mocking her with a hundred mouths . . . Why did those breasts betray her in the end?" (236). Motherhood in Jashoda's case is an experience of frustration and suffering. As I interpret them, the "sores" on Jashoda's breast denote the competing sides in her life, while their "mocking" signals the triumph of physical pain and socio–economic power over her maternal body and hopes. This suggests that Jashoda's identity as a mother is caught between two conflicting sides; between motherhood as a female experience and motherhood as a patriarchal institution ratified by several powers.

In a similar manner to Jashoda, Nnu Ego employs her maternal body as a source of fulfilment because she "ha[s] been brought up to believe that children made a woman" (Emecheta, *JM* 219). Although Nnu Ego does not literally market her body as does Jashoda, she fails as a mother and her maternal aspirations are not achieved due to socio–economic pressures. For example, Oshia, Nnu Ego's eldest son, is an obstacle in the plan of familial and economic comfort imagined by his mother. Surviving in a modernised, urban world, Oshia is not inclined to provide sustenance for his parents and brothers. He even relies on his parents in order to pay his study fees. This is attributed to the fact that Oshia

and his parents stand for "generational gaps" and conflicts, adding that the different value systems which children and parents live by are "incompatible" (Ojaide, "Being" 89).

Hence, Nnu Ego's future plans fail in a manner comparable to that of Jashoda because both women are not destined to be happy mothers. Spiritlessly, Nnu Ego confesses that she is disappointed by her children who have not shown any sign of loyalty. This makes her depend on the sympathy of the village women in Ogboli in order to survive. The numerous births and the heartaches following Nnu Ego's betrayal by her sons lead to her madness and premature death:

> She died quietly there, with no child to hold her hand and no friend to talk to her . . . The joy of being a mother was the joy of giving all to your children, they said. And her reward? . . . people failed to understand why she did not answer their prayers, for what else could a woman want but to have sons who would give her a decent burial? Nnu Ego had it all, yet still did not answer prayers for children. (Emecheta, *JM* 224)

Nnu Ego dies as a lonely mother whose maternal expectations are not accomplished. Therefore, among other readings which locate both texts in their cultural contexts, Emecheta's *JM* and Devi's "BG" denounce the experience of motherhood as a patriarchal institution and a confining space because it promotes the idea that a wife should only produce and care for her children.

Also of significance in the above passage is the implicit didactic element which refers to the role of female friendship. Nnu Ego's story is about a woman who dedicates her life to her children, to the extent that she does not realise the value of female friendship as a source of support during hard times. Joining Bâ in this thesis in underlining the importance of friendship, Emecheta argues that "The beauty in sisterhood is when women reach the age of about forty. The women who cultivated sisters either through marriage or through the village age–group start reaping their reward" (qtd. in Kuoh–Moukoury xvii).

In order to expound on her attitude toward female friendship in *JM*, Emecheta weaves several examples of philanthropic relationships between Ibuza women residing in Lagos. Ibuza women embody Emecheta's endorsement of female friendship as a route of

solidarity and survival. For example, Nnu Ego's women–centred monthly meetings did her good because Ibuza women "taught her how to start her own business so that she would not have only one outfit to wear. They let her borrow five shillings from the women's fund and advised her to buy tins of cigarettes and packets of matches" (52). Also, there is Cordelia who tells Nnu Ego that "We are like sisters on a pilgrimage. Why should we not help one another?" (53). The figure of Cordelia reveals the importance of female friendship during hardships—a role remarkably embodied by Ramatoulaye and Aissatou in Bâ's *SLL*.

These brief instances of female support suggest the presence of a traditional structure which unites indigenous women residing in Lagos. However, in a similar manner to other life aspects which undergo changes in Lagos, the structure of female support is affected by colonialism and urban lifestyles. While acknowledging the supportive role of female friendship, Emecheta foregrounds the powers which do not always enable women to maintain this role. Driven by the need to sustain her family, Nnu Ego resorts to petty trading which prevents her from connecting with other women. As Teresa Derrickson notes, the "economic strictures" of a patriarchal society and Nnu Ego's attempt to play by "the rules of a newly westernized setting" prevent her from making supportive relationships with other women around her (50). Socio–economic hardships minimise Nnu Ego's opportunity of connecting with other women, adding that the female support groups underline what is difficult for African women such as Nnu Ego to attain in urban settings such as Lagos.

As argued in Chapter Three, the pressures haunting women such as Nnu Ego go beyond patriarchy. Salome C. Nnoromele shares Derrickson's viewpoint regarding Nnu Ego's difficult situation but differently interprets Nnu Ego's lack of friendship. For Nnoromele, Nnu Ego must acquire "foresight, self–reliance, creativity, and flexibility [in order] to adapt to changing realities" (184). While Adaku has these qualities which enable her to survive, Nnu Ego lacks them because she adheres to failed institutions and values. This is evident when Nnu Ego makes an ill–advised decision and lets her obsession with motherhood prevail. The loss of her first child makes her misinterpret the situation because she believes that her child died because she "wanted to be a woman of Ibuza in a

town like Lagos . . . This time she was going to play it [her role] according to the new rules" (Emecheta, *JM* 81).

Emecheta places indirect irony in Nnu Ego's words in order to show that some women participate in complicating their lives by making wrong decisions. Nnu Ego misreads her situation because she decides to stay at home and to depend on Nnaife economically. Clearly, she is not playing by the "new rules" as she assumes; rather, she is re–enacting traditional gender rules and roles which did not exist for Igbo women who contributed to the mobility of their societies (Nnoromele 187). The attitude of Adaku stresses Nnoromele's viewpoint, where Adaku criticises Nnu Ego who "believe[s] in tradition. You have changed a little, but stood firm by your belief" (Emecheta, *JM* 218). As a traditionalist, Nnu Ego does not accomplish her hopes.

Also, the lack of supportive female ties relates to Nnu Ego's relationship with her daughters and her mother. As I argued in respect of Rhys's *WSS* in the previous chapter, the absence of a supportive daughter–mother relationship complicates Antoinette's life and intensifies her alienation. The absence of this relationship is also operative in Nnu Ego's life. Emecheta, through flashback narration, recounts the story of Ona, Nnu Ego's dead mother, in order to show that Igbo women such as Ona in pre–colonial times enjoyed a higher degree of "confidence, sauciness, and arrogance" than their colonial descendants such as Nnu Ego (*JM* 10). For Savory Fido, Ona is "a strong and original–minded mother," unlike her daughter who "searches in vain for happiness" and who "has no close relations with her daughters, and dies deserted" ("Mother" 341). The absence of a supportive maternal bond in Nnu Ego's life as a daughter and a mother makes life hard for Nnu Ego. Thus, the narrative closes with Nnu Ego's tragic death on the roadside. This manner of death, according to Nnoromele, has a salient cultural importance: "To the Igbos, dying on a roadside is the worst kind of death. Only animals and outcasts die that way" (188). This implies that through her obsession with a joyful experience of motherhood, Nnu Ego has made herself a stranger in her society.

Worth highlighting also is Nnu Ego's madness. Along with its presence as a space of resistance and alienation, female madness in postcolonial women's texts such as Emecheta's *JM* signals a woman's failure to negotiate conflicts and to adapt to new

settings and situations. For instance, Antoinette's madness in Rhys's *WSS* results from several factors which are operative within a patriarchal, classist, and colonial society. Also, Nellie in Brodber's *JL* undergoes a psychological breakdown which is attributed to the different contestations that alienate her sexually and emotionally. Likewise, Nnu Ego goes mad due to the failure to change with the times, to settle emotionally and socially within new surroundings, and to plan properly for the future. This denotes that Nnu Ego's madness is not a biological condition but a form of failure to adapt with society, especially as she spends her life hoping for one thing: to have children who will support her. Therefore, the constant investment in motherhood and the maternal shocks she receives all contribute to her madness.

Emecheta traces a gradual process of Nnu Ego's mental deterioration exacerbated by her adherence to traditions. For instance, obsession with motherhood makes Nnu Ego talk in her sleep and leads her to have nightmarish visions about children. Likewise, the loss of her child drives her to a failed suicide attempt. Ato, Nnu Ego's friend, brings up the state of madness, advising her to "take that lost look from your face . . . do you realise what people are going to say? They are going to say . . . she is now completely mad" (*JM* 74). Nevertheless, Ato's warnings do not prevent Nnu Ego from adhering to the expectations of motherhood. Overwhelmed by socio–economic necessity, colonial powers, and partial responsibility for her misfortune, Nnu Ego goes mad and dies alone.

While the selected texts/titles of Brodber and Bâ point to the potential of women to reclaim their bodies and voices, the titles, "Breast–Giver" and *Joys of Motherhood*, are pessimistic and even ironic. Jashoda is a caring breast–giver; nonetheless, she is betrayed by her breasts, sons, and "fostered" ones. Likewise, Nnu Ego dreams of motherhood joys; however, she realises that there will be little or no joy in a society corrupted by external and internal forces. Irony is also implied in her name: "Nnu Ego, a beautiful woman, means twenty bags of cowries or ten million pounds in the western world. When a child is beautiful, we say Nnu Ego" (qtd. in Ogundele 449). But Nnu Ego has neither enough money nor the opportunity to experience a joyful motherhood as her name denotes. As a result, Devi's and Emecheta's texts end with the tragic death of Jashoda and Nnu Ego, and

this explains why the texts are ordered in this thesis as following a rite of passage which drives Jashoda and Nnu Ego to separation (death).

Women, writing, and transformation

The deconstructive, cultural reading of "BG" and *JM* in this chapter derives instances of female transformation out of oppression. Nnoromele's aforementioned interpretation of the image of Nnu Ego's death is significant; still, readers are encouraged to look at the transformative side of postcolonial women's texts.

Nnu Ego's madness is a gloomy part of her story; however, Emecheta does not let her protagonist be defeated even if the latter goes mad and tragically dies. This relates to Emecheta's transformative vision which is an essential part of postcolonial women's writing, as argued in Chapters One and Two. Nnu Ego's power emerges after her death, mainly because Emecheta's *JM* is not only about her social conditioning into, and acceptance of, gender roles and traditions. Rather, *JM* is a symbolic account of female awakening created out of death and posthumous silence, much like Nellie's psychological breakdown in Brodber's *JL*, Antoinette's madness in Rhys's *WSS*, and Firdaus's (initial) silence and imprisonment in El Saadawi's *WPZ*.

Death, madness, silence, writing, and psychological breakdown are examples of the confining/resistant spaces discussed in this thesis. These spaces correlate with a woman's choice of action, and in Nnu Ego's case, acting is carried out by silence. This suggests the need to interpret oppression and resistance as complementary parts of women's texts and experiences. M.J. Daymond's analysis of Nnu Ego's silence is worth citing at length because it underlines the presence of female agency in narratives of oppression, thereby arguing that Nnu Ego's silence alters Emecheta's

> project from a narrative description, made from an external and more knowledgeable perspective on women's real situations, to a narrative exploration, made from within, of a woman with the capacity to respond to a new world, to reconceptualise herself in it and to express her judgement on it. This . . . silence changes from being that of uncomprehending defeat to that of chosen refusal . . . A refusal to use her traditional power has become Nnu Ego's most appropriate

> means of self–expression and, besides its coming from her own judgement, it represents the view that the reader is asked to reach. (279)

Despite her misfortunes, Nnu Ego is not totally defeated. Her posthumous silence, much like Firdaus's narration of her story in El Saadawi's *WPZ*, is agential because it implies choice. This means that silence, in a similar manner to madness, is a mode of resistance. It is common to associate silence with oppression and weakness in terms of literary representations of women. However, the narrative ending of Emecheta's text stresses the way in which silence is turned into a reaction against oppression and injustice.

As I argued in Chapter Two, narratives of female oppression and resistance are represented through acts of literary mapping. These acts reclaim diverse instances of female agency in situations which do not always allow women to act. Because Nnu Ego's space of agency is mapped through her death and posthumous silence, it "compels her to risk her personhood" in order to "seize power . . . through the process of suffering itself" by refusing to grant children to barren women (Ibrahim 156–57). Ibrahim's words show that Nnu Ego's rebellious silence signals the emergent consciousness of Third World women and its different representations in their writing. Nnu Ego and other female characters examined in this thesis are not represented as totally oppressed. This is due to the fact that women's texts describe the ways in which oppression intersects with privilege and agency, thus informing each woman's narrative and experience.

Likewise, Devi does not completely dislocate her protagonist from a space of agency. Jashoda reclaims power by making her body a site of value production in order to destabilise socio–economic views about domestic labour. Another site of agency emerges in Jashoda's awareness of motherhood joys as illusions and this adds to her disease and dis–ease. Yet the same illusions make her realise that ideals of maternal reverence have changed with the passage of time, as have the children whom she has nursed. Hence, Nnu Ego and Jashoda move toward an understanding of their subjectivities and of their patriarchal cultures.

Jashoda's and Nnu Ego's awakening begins with subverting oppressive practices and values such as idealised motherhood, double standards, and rigid sex roles which render some women helpless. For Nancy Topping Bazin, "Venturing into feminist consciousness"

is not without a price for Jashoda and Nnu Ego because they arrive at this awakening through experiences which are "so overwhelming and horrifying that each woman barely survives" (141–42). Jashoda and Nnu Ego gain strength and clarity of vision which they did not previously have. Bazin highlights the presence of women as subjects aware of their oppression, even if their awareness comes late.

Jashoda arrives at this understanding or awakening shortly before she dies and thus no further action is taken, but it is Nnu Ego who (silently) acts. Nnu Ego's agency occurs through her growing consciousness which makes anger conquer pain. Besides, Nnu Ego's transition from "weeping" because she is barren, to anger because she has spent her life caring for her seven children, is "the consequence of the feminist consciousness she has acquired through her experiences" (Bazin 142–43). This suggests that Nnu Ego's posthumous silence is not merely a vengeful reaction but also an act of commitment and compassion, carried out for the advantage of other women. This will save them from being confined by housewifely chores and roles and by the desire to have many children which places abundant socio–economic and emotional pressures on women. Therefore, "BG" and *JM* depict the varied conditions of women, their different points of view, and the possible ways of overcoming oppressions and achieving transformation.

Conclusion

The analysis of Devi's "BG" and Emecheta's *JM* in this chapter shows that these texts conjoin in their focus on the theme of motherhood as a problematic experience and space of oppression and agency. This emphasises the presence of the female body as a site of several forms of exploitation such as patriarchy, gendered national images, and capitalist systems. For this reason, the female body, through Jashoda's career, is discussed as a tool of challenge against nationalist and Western elite models of change which ignore women's oppression in developing countries.

The analysis has also stressed the diverse connotations of motherhood which is recognised as a female rite of passage, a cultural tradition, and a role which, for some women, is personally and socially empowering. The different connotations of motherhood indicate the presence of multiple and conflicting female experiences which

are exemplified in the characters of Jashoda, Nnu Ego, and Adaku. This shows that a woman's dedication of her life to motherhood rather than to supportive roles such as friendship can have a negative impact on her. Women who adhere to motherhood ideals as constructed by society are entrapped by them and are eventually destroyed. Guided by my deconstructive vision, the reading of "BG" and *JM* has located spaces of female agency such as posthumous silence, labour, and female awakening. These spaces underline the complementarity of female resistance and oppression in women's texts and realities.

The next chapter continues to perform a deconstructive, cultural analysis of El Saadawi's *WPZ*, where a different experience and space of female oppression and resistance will be examined. The chapter analyses diverse forms of female oppression such as excision, marriage, employment, and prostitution, all of which deny Firdaus the right to live as a human being. Nevertheless, the chapter foregrounds issues of female agency which are derived from multiple avenues such as writing as an outlet for challenge and self–expression, the power to kill not only by a knife but also by truth in order to expose inequities, and Firdaus's commanding voice which adds a new dimension to the physical meaning of prison as a confining space in postcolonial women's texts.

Notes

1. For a discussion of the phrase "unhappy marriage," see Hartmann 191–202.

2. The concept "comprador" refers to a class of capitalists and hence to the presence of hierarchies in decolonised locations. For a definition of the concept, see Ashcroft, Griffith, and Tiffin, *Key* 55.

3. The "chi" is a figure recognised as an African life force which controls life affairs in Igbo culture. See Qnukawa 107–17 for a discussion of this figure.

4. For Bâ's argument on this issue, see Wisker, *Post–Colonial* 139.

Chapter Eight

Nawal El Saadawi's *Woman at Point Zero*

The previous chapter carried out a deconstructive, contextualised reading of Devi's "BG" and Emecheta's *JM* which deal with motherhood as a problematic issue which has rewards and pains. It discussed the different modes of representing motherhood and the female body as spaces of oppression, along with strategies of textual resistance in order to challenge the powers oppressing women. Spaces of resistance included the female body, female labour, and awakening. Similarly, this chapter develops a deconstructive, cultural reading of El Saadawi's *WPZ* in order to analyse the theme of female oppression which, despite being shared by the selected texts, is treated differently by the authors. This signals that the reasons behind Firdaus's oppression in *WPZ* differ, as are the modes of representing her oppression and resistance.

The chapter analyses Firdaus's oppression which is tied to marriage, patriarchy, female excision, class hierarchies, and employment, among other factors. It also accentuates women's potential to undergo a process of unveilings which transforms them into agents, as is evident in Firdaus's narrative voice which speaks from the margins of society (prison). Firdaus's voice suggests that El Saadawi's text creates a kind of thematic–stylistic interrelatedness in order to represent the theme of female oppression and resistance. This signals El Saadawi's commitment to appropriate traditionally encoded attributes such as voice, murder, and prison in order to map a space of female rebellion and utterance. These aspects have guided the choice of *WPZ* for analysis in conjunction with recent postcolonial feminist debates.

But because El Saadawi's text, in a similar manner to Devi's and Emecheta's texts, ends with death (Firdaus's execution), it is ordered in this thesis as following a rite of passage identified as separation rather than empowerment and survival. Such differences in representing women in postcolonial contexts stress the zero point (nothingness and objectification) at which some cultures position women such as Firdaus, and the fact that

postcolonial women's narratives neither align with a monolithic, fixed story of female empowerment nor adopt a similar mode of literary representation. This justifies the description of postcolonial women's writing as a metachronous discourse of literary mapping, and one whose diversity and complexity speak to us today as women surviving in a contemporary world which is still, in many cases, (neo)colonial and patriarchal.

Firdaus and the fearless narrative voice

El Saadawi's *WPZ*, originally written in Arabic (1975), was banned from publication in Egypt due to what were perceived as its strident portrayal of several forms of female oppression (Ball 71; Saliba 132). These forms include religious hypocrisy, poverty, class, patriarchy, and sexual and verbal violence experienced by women at home, at work, in the street, and within society at large. It is a compelling story about Firdaus, a lower–class woman who becomes a city prostitute and a prisoner sentenced to death for killing a male pimp. Above all, the novel, as Palmer argues, is about the triumph of women over the forces that oppress them and "deprive them of their *humanity*, their freedom and their right to *choose*. It is ultimately about the liberation of women and their gaining *agency* and *ownership* over their *lives* and *bodies*" (150; emphasis added).

In a similar manner to the other texts analysed in this thesis, Firdaus's story moves from private depictions of women's lives into an exposure of sanctioned practices of female oppression and abuse in order to unveil the duplicitous nature of patriarchal societies. A deconstructive, cultural analysis of Firdaus's story in this chapter locates two interconnected narrative levels. On one level, the story, in Meta L. Schettler's words, "circles around numerous incidents of sexual abuse beginning with clitoridectomy and child molestation . . . [w]hile simultaneously revealing the effects of abuse" to reclaim women's desire for reconnection with their bodies (227–28).

On the other level, it is an act of expression and unveiling which exposes the "'awra" or what is hidden not only of Firdaus's body and voice but also of society in order to unmask its exploitative nature (Ball 71).[1] In the attempt to unveil the inequities of her society through narrating her story, Firdaus undergoes a process of awakening which disrupts

the patriarchal space where she is figuratively and literally imprisoned. This explains why it is important to consider Firdaus's narrative voice which represents her as a narrator and a participant in the actions recounted.

Firdaus's narration of her story during imprisonment can be read as a response to the problematic question, "Can the Subaltern Speak?" or to the question of whether arrest and criminality, judgement and punishment, by bestowing attention (even in this case, a violent attention) on the subaltern, actually opens a space in which the female subaltern can speak (Spivak, "Can" 271). While Spivak's problematisation of the subaltern concept can suspend the presence of strategies of female resistance, it implies that "considerations of . . . insurgency and resistance" arise from literary texts which provide an alternative site for subaltern women's resistance (Zhaoguo 21). Accordingly, El Saadawi's stance in *WPZ* seems to confirm Spivak's suggestion of mapping physical and figurative sites of resistance in literary works. In Firdaus's case, resistance emerges from agential acts of narration and of killing her exploitative male pimp, both of which assert her identity as a rebellious woman.

WPZ represents a postcolonial feminist reconfiguration of narrative sources because El Saadawi figures her text as an orally presented autobiography in order to reclaim Firdaus's voice silenced by society. El Saadawi structures *WPZ* in the form of three chapters. The main chapter, Chapter Two, narrates the story of Firdaus, "a woman driven by despair to the darkest of ends," and is told to the author/psychiatrist from the cell of the condemned (iii). The other two chapters frame the story with El Saadawi's remarks on her struggle to meet Firdaus (Chapter One) and later on the strong impact which Firdaus has left on the author (Chapter Three).

This narrative structure is as productive as that of Bâ's *SLL* which takes the form of a letter. The structure in El Saadawi's and Bâ's texts underlines the importance of narration (writing) as a means of controlling the meaning of women's lives. In this sense, *WPZ* explores the possible ways in which women "realise the shape of their lives, and the inter–relation between this realisation and the nature of their societies . . . in which their voices must be heard" (Busia, "Rebellious" 88–89). Busia's words suggest that the narrative voice which insists on being heard by readers and by the author is that of

Firdaus who is a prostitute and a criminal. Although Firdaus is literally confined by patriarchal authorities, she tells her story which the psychiatrist listens to without interruption. Accordingly, the marginalised, lower–class woman becomes the pivot around which the whole narrative revolves. Firdaus confidently speaks in a voice which articulates the plight of other women who, in a similar manner to Firdaus, belong to the underprivileged class and who attempt to defy the obstacles created by society.

Firdaus's voice is important to the understanding of her reactions and attitudes. Joining El Saadawi, I argue that Firdaus's voice is the voice of a real woman without a veil (figuratively) because "she has lifted the mask of deceit from her face and no longer feels a need to pretend that she is in love, or to simulate virtue and devotion" (*Hidden* 167). Hence, the narrative voice presents Firdaus as a female "Other" metamorphosed into a speaking subject; into a woman who acts, loves, feels pain, and more importantly, is no longer afraid of death and of the male gaze.

Moreover, the narrative voice exposes the complex web of relations and life styles which force women to become prostitutes. Women's identities as prostitutes, much like those of the mad female characters discussed in this thesis, are socially constructed rather than inherent. This is evident when readers of El Saadawi's text realise that Firdaus has become a prostitute because her attempts to achieve a sense of selfhood, to benefit from her school certificate, and to secure a life–long employment are thwarted by her parents, her uncle, her husband, and other cruel men.

Firdaus's story takes the form of a dramatic monologue in order to narrate oppressive experiences and moments of awakening. The narrative form stresses the role of language in narrating women's stories and in asserting their identities. In a similar manner to Bâ's *SLL* in its epistolary form, El Saadawi's *WPZ* deals with female access to language as an avenue for the expression of life, for the choice of not remaining silent, and for the destabilisation of "gendered stereotypes" which oppress women (Govender 55). This means that Firdaus's telling of her story signals a refusal to be silenced. Her choice not to remain silent or figuratively veiled is emphasised by her opening, defiant words, "Let me speak. Do not interrupt me" (El Saadawi, *WPZ* 11).

Commenting on Firdaus's authoritative voice, Sally McWilliams argues that it "controls not only the space within the room in which she is detained, but also . . . disrupts the psychiatrist's presumed control over the situation" (258). If we, readers of *WPZ*, examine the comments of the authorial voice in Chapter One of the novel, we find that they signal its being controlled by Firdaus who articulates acts of narrating and listening to her story (the authorial voice does not always mean or refer to the author). This reversed relationship where Firdaus controls the narrative scene and voice is expressed in the remark of the authorial voice:

> 'Who is this woman called Firdaus? She is only . . . [a criminal and a prostitute]' But the words within me stopped short. Suddenly we were face to face. I stood rooted to the ground, silent, motionless . . . It was as though I died the moment her eyes looked into mine . . . I was brought back suddenly by a voice. The voice was hers, steady, cutting deep down inside, cold as a knife. (6)

By making the lower–class woman's voice dominate the cell and her text, El Saadawi disrupts oppressive masculine systems and class hierarchies among women. This situates Firdaus and other women at the centre of El Saadawi's literary project of transition and challenge. Therefore, the authorial remarks on Firdaus in the preface and in Chapter One of the novel establish the distinctiveness of Firdaus.

In the preface to *WPZ*, El Saadawi mentions that she has met the real Firdaus in the Qanatir prison, where she was conducting research on female prisoners and neurosis. El Saadawi's meeting with Firdaus makes her conclude that Firdaus is an exceptional woman who "vibrated within me" (iii), adding that Firdaus "had more courage than I" (106). These words stress that Firdaus, despite being exploited by society, rises above it all. As Palmer states, Firdaus will provoke in those who have met her, such as El Saadawi and the warden, respect and admiration "that will be the envy of many and an inspiration to do battle against the forces of repression" (151). Palmer points to El Saadawi who considers Firdaus better than herself: "Compared to her, I was nothing but a small insect crawling upon the land amidst millions of other insects" (*WPZ* 3). What triggers such authorial remarks is the sense of fearlessness, pride, and confidence that Firdaus shows.

This sense complicates Firdaus's character because she cannot be judged as either a criminal or a victim, but as both.

As argued in Chapter Two, Firdaus is similar to the other female characters explored in this thesis in so far as all are women whose identities and experiences are based on binaries; they are simultaneously victims and agents, with powers and traits that are destructive and empowering. Firdaus's ambivalent identity is emphasised by the prison doctor whose (unusual) sympathy toward her makes him say that "I do not really feel she is a murderer. If you [the psychiatrist] look into her face, her eyes, you will never believe that so gentle a woman can commit murder" (El Saadawi, *WPZ* 1–2). In prison, Firdaus remains uncompromising because she refuses to meet visitors "and won't speak to anyone. She usually leaves her food untouched, and remains wide awake until dawn" (1). She even refuses to appeal to the higher authorities that her execution verdict be converted to imprisonment for life. Also, El Saadawi is silenced by Firdaus who finally agrees to speak and who commands that the psychiatrist listens to her without interruption because "I have no time to listen to you . . . Tomorrow morning I shall no longer be here" (11). Firdaus's words and silence reverse the hierarchy between the psychiatrist and Firdaus, placing the former in a state of "dis–ease, and compelling her to relinquish her authority in order to approach Firdaus's story" (Saliba 135).

For her part, Firdaus refuses to be seen as a victim or a criminal, but as a victor. According to Anna Ball, Firdaus is a revolutionary character not because she kills a man, but because she challenges her society which structures "morality and acceptable sexual practices in Egyptian Arab culture . . . and within an otherwise totalizing system of abuse and victimization" (74). Ball's argument recalls a statement made by Firdaus which presents her as triumphant:

> I only arrived at the savage, primitive truths of life after years of struggle . . . When I killed I did it with truth not with a knife . . . It is my truth which frightens them [men]. This fearful truth gives me great strength. It protects me from fearing death, or life, or hunger, or nakedness, or destruction. It . . . prevents me from fearing the brutality of rulers and policemen. (El Saadawi, *WPZ* 102–03)

Firdaus is a victor because she kills her male predator but also because she has the power of vision which enables her to condemn the socio–economic discourses which oppress her. Besides, Firdaus's powerful statement sanctions the use of language; that is, of telling the truth as a form of power in order to disrupt society and to heal one's self. In this sense, Firdaus, in a similar manner to El Saadawi, can be seen as a political prisoner. As Marilyn Slutzky Zucker argues, Firdaus resembles El Saadawi because both women have been imprisoned and are "hated and feared" for telling the truth (237). The truth unveils the practices and effects of patriarchal control over women and indirectly over the lives of other oppressed people.

Also, Firdaus's statement suggests that the impulse to write Firdaus's story is not just related to El Saadawi's literary talent or profession as a psychiatrist. As Meneesha Govender remarks, El Saadawi is impressed by Firdaus's story because Firdaus "exudes the honesty and conviction" which women who have been silenced by society lack (56). Therefore, El Saadawi inserts her narrative comments in order to distinguish herself as both a feminist writer and a socio–literary activist. This distinction resembles the efforts of Emecheta and Bâ, among other authors in this thesis, when they shift the focus of their novels from a description of women's subjective experiences into an interrelated critique of the wider society from women's standpoints (Chapter Three further discusses the notion of women's standpoints).

Accordingly, El Saadawi deploys her comments in order to highlight the shift in Firdaus's story from a "superficial" analysis of women's conditions to a deep realisation of "the tragedy women are made to live, or a profound understanding of the real factors that have made them victims of unrelenting justice" (*Hidden* 167). This shift in the parameters of understanding Firdaus or the "Other" encourages readers of *WPZ* to link the writing of Firdaus's story to El Saadawi's position as a woman. As argued earlier, Firdaus refuses initially to meet the psychiatrist. This refusal, for Ramzi Saiti, establishes Firdaus's authority and dignity which make El Saadawi more eager to meet her (155).

From another vantage point, Elisabeth Bekers reads Firdaus's refusal as critical of the psychiatrist's identity as an outsider because she "belong[s] to a different (higher) social class" and is "at liberty to leave the prison" ("Captive" 72). As the preface and Chapter

One of *WPZ* show, El Saadawi visits the Qanatir prison in order to study the personalities of female prisoners. The psychiatrist's study contains the speaker's voice in the attempt to publish female prisoners' stories as research cases on women, neurosis, and criminology. For McWilliams, the psychiatrist enters the prison bound by her "methodological and epistemological ideologies of subjugation" because there is "no need to hear your voice. Only tell me about your pain. I want to know your story" (258–59). But the psychiatrist's desire to speak for Firdaus is not fulfilled.

Firdaus's refusal to meet the psychiatrist makes her silence suggestive and agential, as is Nnu Ego's posthumous silence in Emecheta's *JM*. Firdaus's initial refusal to speak does not only initiate communication on the part of the psychiatrist but also empowers Firdaus to recognise that to speak while being imprisoned means to exist and to challenge. This recalls a key issue highlighted in Chapter Two, namely the significance of a woman's choice regarding how to act, and of whether her choice is translated into action or into self–imposed silence.

Because the psychiatrist initiates communication with Firdaus, she becomes an important mediator and a confidante who listens to another woman, especially as both women survive in an oppressive society. But Firdaus's narration of her story does not only underline the power of voice or of listening to others. Rather, it presents the female vision and voice as a strategy of being. Put differently, when a person such as the psychiatrist sits in front of another person such as Firdaus, "all the walls of protection come down; he or she is fully exposed, because human beings can, respectively, read each other's bodies or decipher the meanings conveyed by changes in tone of voice . . . [to] reveal suppressed emotion" (Ogede 406). Ogede foregrounds the healing power of the female vision and voice, and the fact that this power transforms the prison where Firdaus is confined into a new space where utterance, empathy, and connection with other women are made possible. This also relates to the transformative function of spatial mapping in postcolonial women's narratives, as argued in the previous chapters.

Another issue highlighted by Firdaus's story is the similarity of oppression between Firdaus and El Saadawi, especially as both women have been imprisoned. Following Lionnet, I state that Firdaus's telling of her story is a "rehearsal" for El Saadawi's "descent

into the hell of an Egyptian prison. Saadawi is, and will become, Firdaus, the double that compels her. . . [to be] provided with a moving link to her own experiences as an excised woman" (143). In a similar manner to Firdaus, El Saadawi is excised as a little girl and is later imprisoned due to her protest against society. El Saadawi's society has silenced her as a psychiatrist, a female writer, and an activist by means of female excision, political detainment, exile, literary censorship, and vocational dismissal.

This explains why El Saadawi's protest is expressed by her writings which are "written by a pen sharp as a scalpel" (Valassopolous 87), while Firdaus's protest is carried out through killing a man and through unveiling the truth of her society. Through this female bond, El Saadawi comes to terms with Firdaus despite their differences. Lionnet here demonstrates the shifting relationship between the author/El Saadawi and Firdaus, where El Saadawi's position as an objective investigator collapses and merges with Firdaus who is a prostitute and a prisoner. This enables El Saadawi to occupy the position of a confidante within the novel, as is Aissatou who is Ramatoulaye's confidante to whom Ramatoulaye's letter is addressed in Bâ's *SLL*. Merging El Saadawi's writing of *WPZ* and Firdaus's narration of her story contributes to the polyvocal and deconstructive nature of the text. It signals a displacement of hierarchies as well as reconciliation or identification between women who are different in their class, career, and education but whose experiences of oppression as women are similar.

Therefore, Firdaus is not a mere case study about female criminality and neurosis, nor is *WPZ* a text which simply narrates the story of an exploited woman who will be soon executed. *WPZ*, much like the other texts analysed in this thesis, is a dynamic, resistant space in ways reminiscent of Mohanty's "imagined communities" of women ("Cartographies" 4). In this space, Firdaus and El Saadawi are divided by several differences; however, they unite in order to share experiences of oppression and to unmask the masculinist world which exploits them. This emphasises that the universal can be linked to and known through the particular, and that the subjective experience of Firdaus as a female "Other" enables El Saadawi to relate to her as a woman and "to bring her back to life" through the written word (Lionnet 143).

Merging female subjectivities is evident in the way El Saadawi and Firdaus remember past things and events. Describing her meeting with the real Firdaus, El Saadawi says, "I was full of a wonderful feeling, proud, elated . . . I held the whole world in my hands . . . I was on my way to meet the first man I loved for the first time" (*WPZ* 6). Likewise, Firdaus narrates her experience with Ibrahim whom she loves but is later betrayed by: "It was as though I held the whole world captive in my hands. It seemed to grow bigger . . . my eyes sparkled like diamonds" (82). These two passages reveal how the separation between female experiences, emotions, and bodily lines or between the authorial self and the narrating "Other" collapses. Also, the passages show that Firdaus and El Saadawi narrate experiences where past and present, along with self and "Other," come together in order to construct women's identities and, in this case, to awaken memories of happiness and betrayal. The interrelatedness of the past and the present underlines the metachronous aspect of women's narratives and lives that do not follow a linear time sequence but move backward and forward in order to remember and heal.

Hence, El Saadawi concludes her remarks by emphasising Firdaus's rebellious voice: "her voice continued to echo in my ears . . . spreading . . . the power of truth, as savage . . . yet as simple and as gentle as the child that has not yet learnt to lie. And because the world was full of lies, she has to pay the price" (*WPZ* 105–06). In a corrupted, repressive society, a fearless voice like Firdaus's turns into a dangerous weapon which defies several forms of patriarchy and speaks with strength and urgency, which I read as pointing to El Saadawi's dissident writings, as the next section will argue.

Female agency between narration and writing

Firdaus's voice stresses the potential of women's stories to be heard and inscribed and of oral and written forms of expression in order to challenge patriarchy. As the analysis of Brodber's *JL* has shown, narrating and transmitting stories to others have to do with survival and empowerment, as in the case of Aunt Alice's stories which help Nellie survive and be connected with her body and community. In a similar vein, El Saadawi immortalises the dead (real) Firdaus by having her story narrated and written, thereby

making the act of writing integral to Firdaus's narrative and to the analysis of *WPZ* in this chapter. This refers to the links made in the previous chapters between postcolonial women's writing and activism and to the presence of the written word as an outlet for challenge and transformation.

El Saadawi makes connections between writing and activism in that she positions Firdaus's story against a background pervaded by various practices and relations which disempower women. Nevertheless, Firdaus does not remain passive because she interrogates social values and structures which marginalise her, thereby "engaging in either overt resistance or employing subversive means to destabilize patriarchy and male tyranny" (Eke 50). Thus, it is possible to read *WPZ* as a story about female dissidence performed through the narrated and the written word which is creative and transformative. As Anastasia Valassopolous argues, writing by women enables them to restore "what belongs to them. This healing tool [writing] is, however, one that is viewed as creative for her [the female writer], but destructive for the other whom she will expose" (93). In other words, El Saadawi's written words resonate with Firdaus's narrative voice in so far as they have the potential to demystify oppressive systems imposed upon women under several names such as father, family, husband, and nation. It is possible to question why El Saadawi writes Firdaus's story as a novel and not as a case study on women and neurosis, since the novel is based on El Saadawi's meeting with the real Firdaus in the prison. This recalls Brodber's attempt to write *JL* as a novel because this genre rewrites the black female body in history through literary rather than objective forms of knowledge.

In a similar manner to Brodber, El Saadawi chooses the form of the novel in order to inscribe Firdaus's story and to take it beyond the confining walls of Firdaus's cell. What distinguishes the novel from sociology or other forms of objective forms of knowledge is the emphasis on women's agency which is represented through women's standpoints, voices, and subjective experiences. As argued in Chapters One and Two, the potential of postcolonial women's narratives to reclaim diverse female voices is a central issue in this thesis. While objective forms of knowledge tend to present women as objects of analysis, literature by women represents them as subjects of analysis and agents of change.

Firdaus tells El Saadawi about her hatred of writing symbolised by newspapers because it promulgates deception and allows no room for women to inscribe their own words: "Each time I picked up a newspaper and found the picture of a man who was one of them [kings and rulers], I would spit on it. I knew I was only spitting on a piece of newspaper . . . Nevertheless I spat" (*WPZ* 11). Firdaus's words explain her initial refusal to meet the psychiatrist and to have her story written. Also, her attitude toward writing is emphasised by the prison doctor who says that Firdaus "asked for pen and paper, then spent hours hunched over them without moving . . . Perhaps she was not writing anything at all" (1). It seems that Firdaus relates writing to men and to their discourse of domination, and this is why she does not write anything.

By contrast, narrating her story to the psychiatrist "gains[s] momentum and the power of regeneration when they [female stories] are spoken and when they are received" (Schettler 227). This is why she tells her story orally; after all, she could have written it before her execution, especially as she has asked for pen and paper. But she leaves the task of inscribing her story to the psychiatrist who will make Firdaus's triumph more pronounced. This makes Firdaus's story "a means of using the colonizer's tools against him, of 'writing back' against the oppressor" (Saiti 156). Thus, El Saadawi inscribes Firdaus's story in a form that will survive even if Firdaus dies. Its inscription, as Harlow argues, means that Firdaus's defiance is "part of the public record" of socio–literary opposition to Egyptian society ("From" 512).

Also, El Saadawi echoes the attitudes of Bâ and Head toward writing because those authors call upon women to make writing integral to their daily struggles, as argued in Chapter Two. This underscores the function of women's writing which, in El Saadawi's words, "slows us down, makes us think, rethink, contemplate, connect different disconnected ideas. While we write we are not silent" ("How" 8). Therefore, El Saadawi's literary protest distinguishes her from other (male) writers in her society who lose their genuine voice because they mask social realities. Her position as a woman writer unites with Firdaus's voice in order to reveal the agonies of oppressed women in societies which perpetuate female oppression. However, women's voices and writings empower them to tell their stories and to challenge their status quo. This helps write stories of struggle

which “rewrite . . . the social order” in order to “include . . . new relational possibilities” that go beyond socio–familial and classist constraints (Golley 157).

Female excision and the lost pleasure

Female excision is one of the forms of socio–masculine violence which El Saadawi criticises with direct vitriol. As Susan Arndt remarks, *WPZ* “probe[s] the oppression of women in Islamic societies and their deprivation of rights, with a particular focus on the interplay between sexuality and violence” (149). This relates to the control of women’s sexuality which begins in childhood, when genital excision is performed on little girls in patriarchal, Muslim societies such as Egypt.

Female excision signals the transition from childhood into womanhood. For Iniobong I. Uko, Firdaus’s tragedy derives from being a female “destined in advance to taste of misery, and to have an essential part of their [women’s] bodies amputated, ‘torn away by cold, unfeeling cruel hands’” (99). Uko here points to the scene where Firdaus’s mother decides to excise her daughter because she asks how “she had given birth to me,” given that this question signals Firdaus’s entry into womanhood (El Saadawi, *WPZ* 13). As a result, Firdaus’s mother “brought a woman who was carrying a small knife or maybe a razor blade. They cut off a piece of flesh from between my thighs” (13).

The description of female excision in this passage is brief yet evocative. Sharing Uko’s argument, Dubek argues that women such as Firdaus are oppressed not only by men but also by other women (201). As I argued in the previous chapters, the destructive side of women is apparent in the characters of Binetou’s mother and Aunt Nabou in Bâ’s *SLL* and of Aunt Becca in Brodber’s *JL*. These female figures oppress other women due to social–moral and individual motives and constraints. Likewise, the presence of Firdaus’s mother, of the one who performs the excision, and later of Sharifa, Firdaus’s female pimp, underlines women’s complicity in re–enacting repressive, gender practices.

El Saadawi here criticises women’s complicity in their daughters’ excision by evoking feelings of betrayal in Firdaus toward her mother. However, readers of *WPZ* should realise that Firdaus’s mother does not hate her daughter or want to make her suffer by

excising her. As will be argued later, Firdaus's mother is a submissive wife who has limited, if any, choices regarding how to deal with her daughter's entry into womanhood, among other things. This accentuates how the issue of female–female oppression is tied to religion and class in the society El Saadawi depicts and criticises. Still, Firdaus feels that her mother has betrayed her by participating in her excision. While the kumbla of sexual frigidity temporarily alienates Nellie from her body in Brodber's *JL,* that of Firdaus which results from her excision literally alienates her from her self.

As I come from a patriarchal, Muslim culture (Syria), I recognise that male circumcision is performed in Muslim cultures such as Syria and Egypt as a tradition and a health precaution against genital infections, and so it is not related to issues of honour and chastity. By contrast, female circumcision is a tool of gender oppression, "designed to curb women's sexuality and ensure their submission" (Bekers, "Writing" 68). Damaging effects include haemorrhage, inflammation, psychological shock, and sexual frigidity. This latter is a key issue in El Saadawi's text as well as in this chapter. For this reason, Firdaus's story tells of the consistent expressions of loss due to the psychological effects of her excision which is also an experience of bodily pain and void.

While the bodily pain lasts for a few hours or days after excision, the psychological pain is permanent. It makes Firdaus feel no pleasure: "I felt the sudden touch of him [Bayoumi], like a dream remembered from the distant past . . . My body pulsed with . . . a pain that was not really pain but pleasure . . . [I] had lived in another life that was not my life, or in another body that was not my body" (El Saadawi, *WPZ* 48). Excision announces Firdaus's chaste entry into womanhood; however, it does not make her feel the sharp pleasure she has experienced with Mohammadain, her childhood friend, when they used to play in the fields. Therefore, Firdaus's circumcision means desiccation and deprivation, much harder than the kumbla of sexual alienation which Nellie resides in and out of which she can emerge in Brodber's *JL.*

This reference to the lost, old pleasure is a recurrent theme in El Saadawi's *WPZ* and is expressed by "half–forgotten images" and "distant" feelings (26). Later in the novel, Firdaus expresses a yearning for sexual gratification which is replaced by void and pain: "Deep inside my body I could feel . . . a pleasure akin to pain . . . like a thing arising out of

an ancient wound, in an organ which had ceased to be mine, on the body of a woman who was no longer me" (56). The repetition of feelings of sexual void and loss ensures that Firdaus's excision assumes a symbolic significance in the text. Firdaus's excision symbolises the fact that she has always been deprived of the right to happiness and self–determination due to being a woman in a patriarchal (Muslim) society. Furthermore, it shows that pain and sexual frustration merge with pleasure and sexual yearning in this case.

For Elizabeth S. Anker, Firdaus is not conditioned to separate pleasure from pain; rather, she "collapses those energies into one another, with the effect of destabilizing artificial, idealized conceptions of both dignity and bodily integrity" (142–43). While Firdaus's story highlights the issue of female sexual violence, it acknowledges the right of Firdaus and other women to enjoy bodily (sexual) pleasure. This emphasises the need to bridge the chasm between the female body and voice created by society and other repressive powers such as patriarchy. Moreover, Firdaus uses certain words which recall her experience of circumcision. The words link pain not only to the lost pleasure but also to violence, no matter what forms the latter takes.

For instance, she recounts her experience as a prostitute with the journalist Di'aa who tells her that "'You are not respectable' . . . but before the words 'not respectable' had even reached my ears, my hands rose to cover them quickly, but they penetrated into my head like the sharp tip of a plunging dagger . . . like . . . the edge of a knife which had cut its way through my ears, and the bones of my head to the brain inside" (El Saadawi, *WPZ* 70–71). The pain experienced by Firdaus is caused by verbal violence which is harder than physical violence, to the extent that Di'aa's words are as sharp as the knife with which she was excised. The physical and verbal violence endured by Firdaus violates not only her body but also her dignity as a woman and a human being.

This shows that Firdaus's sexual frigidity is not only an effect of her excision but also a response to the brutal treatment she receives from her clients and other men. By representing excision, lack of freedom, and sexual harassment as part of Firdaus's repressed womanhood, El Saadawi highlights the oppressiveness of gender identity which is established through female excision. The next section explores other forms of

socio–sexual oppression which render Firdaus's womanhood a space of exploitation in a phallocentric society.

Firdaus's womanhood: a rite of sexual bondage

Firdaus's story exposes the lowest position(s) of womanhood, exemplified in her experiences as a daughter, a niece, a wife, an employee, a lover, and a prostitute. For Orabueze, these experiences render Firdaus's womanhood "a metaphor for sexual slavery" because they highlight the subjugation of women in Egyptian society (125). This explains why it is necessary to analyse how Firdaus is treated as a sex toy by men in a society where women are abused as daughters, wives, employees, and prostitutes.

However, it is important to mention that the deconstructive, cultural reading of *WPZ* in this chapter does not merely analyse stories of female oppression. The reading locates moments of unveiling and realisation which make Firdaus aware of her situation. And as has been the case of the other texts explored in this thesis, Firdaus's agency and power of vision are inseparable from her oppression which turns her body into a space of sexual slavery. The first link to the imagery of sexual slavery occurs in the description of Firdaus's rural family. As Irene Salami–Agunloye argues, Firdaus's family constructs the world as masculinised while "women are appendages" and "objects" of the male gaze (177). This is evident in the character of Firdaus's father whose life is founded on moral hypocrisy and binaries such as male/female and master/slave. Firdaus's father is a lower–class peasant who, in a similar manner to the village men, "head[s] for the mosque to attend the weekly prayer" and who nods his head "in admiration, and in approval of everything his Holiness the Imam had said" (El Saadawi, *WPZ* 11–12). Other acts performed by the father include growing crops, selling a poisoned buffalo before it dies, exchanging his virgin daughters for a dowry, and stealing harvests from neighbouring fields.

The description of the father's adherence to religion is juxtaposed with his behaviour at home. His selfishness and brutality are suggested by the slave–like labour to which he subjects his wife and young daughters. For example, Firdaus's mother, out of obedience

and fear, allows her husband to enslave her and to "make her bite the dust each night" (El Saadawi, *WPZ* 12). Also, Firdaus as a young girl takes the responsibility of washing her father's legs and of "sweeping the dung out from under the animals, carrying manure on my head, kneading dough, and baking bread" (16). Commenting on the character of Firdaus's father, Palmer argues that the father has reduced his wife to "a willing slave" and his daughter to "a beast of burden" because they have been conditioned to believe that everything must be done for the husband's/father's satisfaction (155). This recalls Firdaus's narration of her father's selfish personality: "Our hut was cold, yet in winter my father used to . . . occupy my corner in the oven room. And instead of staying by my side to keep me warm, my mother used to abandon me alone and go to my father to keep him warm" (El Saadawi, *WPZ* 17).

Unlike Ramatoulaye and Aissatou who are strong mothers in Bâ's *SLL*, Firdaus's mother seems to have no choice but to obey her husband who is the head of the house, with control of money, food, and "the bodies of women within the family unit" (Zucker 243). This suggests that the mother, in a similar manner to Ibrahim's fiancée and to the wife of Firdaus's uncle, belongs to the submissive type of women who submit to their husbands and privilege them over their children. Salami–Agunloye is justified in describing the mother's behaviour as a "Submission to the point of deprivation" because the mother's choices are dictated by her husband (179). The mother tries to please her husband in everything even if this is to the detriment of herself and her children. For example, Firdaus describes her mother's behaviour in the case of food: "when there was no food at home we would all go to bed with empty stomachs. But he [her father] would never fail to have a meal. My mother would hide his food from us at the bottom of one of the holes in the oven. He would sit eating alone while we watched him" (El Saadawi, *WPZ* 18–19). In doing so, the mother's submission of her mind and body results in a slavish loyalty to Firdaus's father, thereby creating a distance between Firdaus and her mother whose identity and maternal love Firdaus starts to question.

Apart from the fact that Firdaus and her mother perform heavy tasks, they are not rewarded with paternal affection. The lack of support and love in Firdaus's family makes her question the identity of her home and her parents: "I stared at the mud walls like a

stranger . . . to find myself . . . in a home which was not mine, born from a father who was not my father, and from a mother who was not my mother" (El Saadawi, *WPZ* 16). The "breach of the natural love and sacrifice" in Firdaus's family makes her unable to identify her parents and her home (Orabueze 128). Familial alienation leads to Firdaus's emotional distress which is symbolised by images of helplessness and drowning "that kept pulling me in different directions . . . Forever sinking and rising . . . between the sea and the sky, with nothing to hold on to except the two eyes" (El Saadawi, *WPZ* 17). Through these images, readers of *WPZ* will realise how Firdaus's fear and emotional instability are caused by an enslaved mother and a cruel, egotistical father.

After her parents' death, Firdaus moves to live with her uncle in Cairo. Leaving her parents' house makes her wonder "whether one can be 'born twice'" (Ibrahim 153). The first words Firdaus utters upon her arrival at the uncle's house are important: "When I opened my lids again I had the feeling of looking out through them for the first time, as though I had just come into the world, or was being born a second time" (El Saadawi, *WPZ* 20). Firdaus's words imply that her life in the city will make her experience moments of rebirth that are crucial to the narrative structure. The moments suggest that she is now exposed to the outside world and to its men. More importantly, they make Firdaus aware of her own looks and body when she stands in front of the mirror in the uncle's house. This awareness gives her a sense of identity: "Who am I? Firdaus, that is how they call me" (20).

But Firdaus's life in the city is not without difficulties. In a similar manner to Emecheta and Brodber in this thesis, El Saadawi highlights the urban hardship experienced by (rural) women when they move to cities. The urban setting of *WPZ* is crucial to the association of womanhood with sexual slavery, although Roger Kurtz argues that surviving in the city enables women to secure "some measure of personal emancipation," particularly if they find employment (qtd. in Orabueze 131). But Kurtz's statement is not applicable to Firdaus's life in Cairo. Recalling Emecheta's Nnu Ego, Firdaus realises that women surviving in urban places will not easily attain the freedom and privileges they desire due to the obstacles created by patriarchy, among other power structures.

Firdaus's life with her uncle makes her happy and emotionally stable; still, there is a price to pay for happiness. The uncle sends Firdaus to a primary school and buys her new clothes. When she receives her primary school certificate, the uncle buys her a wrist watch and takes her to the cinema. The time Firdaus spends as a student presents a moment of rebirth which reveals not only the value of female education but also the harsh reality of her society: "I discovered that all these rulers were men. What they had in common was an avaricious and distorted personality, a never–ending appetite for money, sex and unlimited power. They were men who sowed corruption on earth . . . and as a result I discovered that history tended to repeat itself with a foolish obstinacy" (El Saadawi, *WPZ* 27). Female oppression is a complex process which operates through the intersection of gender and class in order to grant men the right to control women. The act of unveiling in this passage is aided by Firdaus's education which makes her expose the irresponsibility of men. This suggests that socio–religious hypocrisy and female exploitation which take place in domestic spaces are a microcosm of what takes places in society as a whole, thereby alluding to the enslavement or abuse of Firdaus in the house of her uncle.

In return for the uncle's care, Firdaus does the household tasks and is sexually molested by him. Firdaus's uncle recalls the character of Aunt Becca in Brodber's *JL* because both characters repress female sexuality and alienate young women from their bodies. This is apparent when the uncle teaches Firdaus decency through religion by reiterating rules of female conduct, especially as he is "A respected Sheikh and man of religion" (El Saadawi, *WPZ* 36). For example, the uncle tells Firdaus that "dancing was a sin, and that kissing a man, too, was a sin" (22). When Firdaus expresses her desire to attend university, the uncle rejects this because university corrupts her; it is "a place where she will be sitting side by side with men" (36).

The uncle's words show that men, unlike women, are privileged to have good education, and that men and society render women "outsiders" due to gender, hence women's needs and feelings are rarely taken into consideration. Paradoxically, Firdaus's uncle says that education will corrupt her; however, he fails to notice that his sexual harassment of Firdaus is in fact a far worse form of corruption. According to Simone A.

James, the uncle's patriarchal mandates and religious beliefs are "a blueprint for silencing and stifling female subjects as well as subjugating them to a life stifled by male authority and governance" (41). As I read them, the words "stifling" and "stifled" recall the images of the alabaster baby, the sexless doll, and the kumbla of female respectability in Brodber's *JL*. Both the words and the images imply rules of decency and modesty that a woman should follow in order to become accepted by society. Yet they turn out to be another means of keeping women figuratively veiled and dissociated from their bodies.

Also, the issue raised through the uncle's sexual abuse relates to the hypocritical nature of Egyptian society. The latter, in a similar manner to the Senegalese society depicted in Bâ's *SLL,* fabricates roles and traditions in order to disempower women in the name of religion. Furthermore, the urban comfort enjoyed by Firdaus does not last because her uncle gets married. The uncle's middle–class wife beats Firdaus and makes her do the household chores. Later, the uncle and his wife connive to marry Firdaus off to an old man in order to get rid of her and to make use of her dowry. The behaviour of the uncle and his wife combines gender bias, religious hypocrisy, and female antagonism, all of which thwart Firdaus's life as a successful intellectual. Besides, the uncle and his wife deny Firdaus the right to higher education and to a positive future that will develop her personality and her role in society.

Consequently, Firdaus makes the first of her attempts to escape from a situation which represses her. She leaves her uncle's house to escape the trap of arranged marriage which recalls the marriages of Antoinette and Binetou in Rhys's *WSS* and Bâ's *SLL* respectively. Walking alone down Cairo streets opens Firdaus's eyes to discover the inequities of the world, "as if a third eye had suddenly been slit open in my head" (El Saadawi, *WPZ* 40). This moment of awareness draws Firdaus's attention to class differences in her society and to the fact that she is a lower–class woman in a world divided into the poor who "wore shabby, torn clothes and downtrodden shoes" and the rich who "rode in cars [and] had broad, fleshy shoulders" (40–41). This fills Firdaus with a sensation close to sadness due to the world's hostility, and to the fact that the street is not a safe place for women like her. Therefore, she goes back to her uncle's house where she will be married off to a repulsive old man.

Marriage is one of the facets of womanhood which stand for sexual exploitation because it affects women from all classes, whether they are "unlettered peasants or educated city–dwellers" (Bekers, "Writing" 67). El Saadawi positions Firdaus against an oppressive marital background from which life gradually fades because Firdaus who "had not yet turned nineteen" is forced to marry Sheikh Mahmoud who "was already over sixty" (*WPZ* 43). The husband is a righteous man with "a big pension and no children . . . [and who will] find in her an obedient wife, who will serve him and relieve his loneliness" (36). The incidents Firdaus narrates about her marital life paint a picture of female slavery, humiliation, and imprisonment within marriage. As Palmer reads it, Firdaus's marriage means that she goes back into a confining space where she is "abused, beaten, and tamed. Mahmoud is really just another variation of the repulsive and repressive father figure, representative of all the various male and societal forces that use and abuse Firdaus" (162).

Palmer points to Firdaus's marriage to an ill–mannered husband who beats her until she bleeds and then forces her to have sex. Firdaus surrenders to her husband's physical assaults, offering him a lifeless body that absorbs pain and humiliation: "He leapt on me like a mad dog . . . I surrendered . . . my body to his body . . . as though life had been drained out of it, like a piece of dead wood . . . or a pair of shoes forgotten under a chair" (El Saadawi, *WPZ* 45). This passage deploys images of death and lifelessness (of being "an object") in order to stress the violent subjugation which (some) women such as Firdaus undergo at the hands of their husbands. Moreover, it shows that Firdaus's recourse to sexual passivity allows her to resist socio–sexual onslaughts and to protect herself while being exploited by various forms of male sexuality.

Even when Firdaus complains about her husband's cruel behaviour, she is advised by the uncle's wife to remain silent: "A virtuous woman was not supposed to complain about her husband . . . [because] Her duty was perfect obedience" (El Saadawi, *WPZ* 44). These words awaken Firdaus to the fact that marriage is a system of oppression established on women's suffering. Besides, Firdaus's marriage exposes the iniquities of arranged marriages to oppressive, selfish men and of the social hierarchies which force the poor to marry their daughters to rich men for socio–economic gains. This highlights the impact of

rigid social stratification on women, where Firdaus's uncle can marry into a middle–class family despite his poor background, unlike Firdaus who is condemned to marry either an old, repulsive man from the middle–classes or a man from her own (poor) social background. Eventually, men achieve socio–individual mobility as in the case of Firdaus's uncle or vocational promotion as in the case of Ibrahim who marries his manager's daughter. Therefore, I am inclined to argue that marriage and wifehood are forms of socio–sexual and economic slavery in Firdaus's society which does not allow any space for a woman's independence except that of death.

Prostitution, employment, and other repressive spaces

It is possible to argue that space is an important issue in El Saadawi's text, as has been the case of other texts analysed in this thesis. Firdaus leaves the repressive space of marriage and domesticity in pursuit of a better space and a way of living. Throughout the novel, Firdaus goes from one domestic space into another in order to secure a sense of belonging. But her father's, her uncle's, and her husband's houses represent oppressive spaces that, in a similar manner to their gazes, restrict her. This is why Firdaus decides to find solace in alternative spaces such as the streets which become her new home. It is also why she goes outside of the traditional space of domesticity and obedience assigned to (Muslim) women in patriarchal societies.

While the unknown life on the streets proves frightening because it renders Firdaus the target of masculine gazes and threats, it grants her a degree of independence denied to her in domestic spaces. She runs away from her husband's house to find herself walking down Cairo streets. Unlike Nnu Ego who allows herself to be enslaved by patriarchy and traditions in Emecheta's *JM*, Firdaus refuses to be enslaved by her husband, so she runs away. Running away is an action that empowers Firdaus because it enables her to challenge the exploitation of her body by men who justify their actions within religion. Ridding herself of the constraints of marriage, Firdaus "enters the world with the intention of giving her life a new direction and meaning" (Salami–Agunloye 181). Her

supposedly new life begins when she meets Bayoumi, a café owner who pretends to be good.

Bayoumi offers Firdaus food, clothing, and refuge, yet the reality of Firdaus's situation shows no signs of happiness. As Ibrahim states, Firdaus "flees various situations . . . Each time an opportunity for freedom presents itself to Firdaus, a closer look shows that there is nothing but another form of bondage" (153). The form of oppression is embodied in the physical attributes of Bayoumi who resembles Firdaus's father: "His nose resembled that of my father. It was big and rounded, and he had the same dark complexion" (El Saadawi, *WPZ* 47). The resemblance between both men should have warned Firdaus that Bayoumi is another exploitative man who allows his friends to have sex with her. The time spent at Bayoumi's house recalls the torture and humiliation Firdaus has experienced in her husband's house. She offers Bayoumi a passive body, "emptied of all desire, or pleasure, or even pain, feeling nothing" (50).

The different types of men met by Firdaus transform her body into a site of power and contest. She finds herself playing the role of a high–class prostitute whose clients are policemen, a prince, Di'aa, and Fawzy, among others. The one who introduces Firdaus to the world of prostitution is Sharifa, a female pimp whom Firdaus meets after leaving Bayoumi's house. Sharifa, whose name in Arabic means a chaste woman, advises Firdaus to become "harder than life" in order to survive and to become a successful prostitute (El Saadawi, *WPZ* 51). Sharifa's advice implies that she has suffered abuse by men, and that only men benefit from women's exploitation in a phallocentric society.

In a similar manner to Adaku who manipulates male companionship for her own benefit in Emecheta's *JM,* Sharifa is a clever woman toughened by her experiences which expose men's brutality and irresponsibility. As a result, Sharifa decides to use the male system—sexual abuse and money—to her advantage by working as a prostitute. Following Orabueze, I argue that prostitution in El Saadawi's text becomes "a means to an end . . . [and] a metaphor for survival and freedom . . . because it gives her [Firdaus] all the good things she has never had in her life either as a daughter, or as a wife, or as a student" (135).

Unlike marriage, prostitution makes a Firdaus determine her "value" and create her own space: "The higher you price yourself, the more he [man] will realize what you are really worth, and be prepared to pay . . . what you demand" (El Saadawi, *WPZ* 55). Firdaus demands a high price for her body, chooses rich and clean clients, and resists by making her body passive in these sexual encounters. For some readers of El Saadawi's text, it is the wrong type of value because it is a commercial one which contrasts with Firdaus's school certificate which can be socio–economically more enabling. But a closer look at Firdaus's story reveals why she becomes a prostitute. Citing Simone de Beauvoir, Nowaira argues that "'One is not born, but rather becomes, a woman'" (70). Similarly, Firdaus is not born, but becomes, a prostitute because prostitution is the only choice she has. It grants her independence, particularly after realising that her identity as a woman has been denied by familial and marital ties. Therefore, Firdaus becomes "a young novice in Sharifa's hands. She opened my eyes to life . . . [and to] obscure areas of myself, unseen features of my face and body, making me become aware of them . . . for the first time" (El Saadawi, *WPZ* 54). This presents another moment of unveiling for Firdaus who can choose, reject, and negotiate.

While Aunt Becca in Brodber's *JL* alienates Nellie from her body, Sharifa educates Firdaus to become aware of her body and its potential to generate money (see also Jashoda who works as a wet nurse in Devi's "BG"). Such attitudes towards the female body stress different modes of representing and using the female body to either connect women with or dissociate them from their bodies. Also of importance is the change which occurs in the narrative setting when Firdaus describes her life as a prostitute. The first (indirect) reference to this change is apparent in the description of Sharifa's eyes as green and hence different from her mother's black eyes. This suggests that something productive will take place, namely Firdaus's entry into the world of prostitution where she will be reborn.

As a prostitute, Firdaus's body is "filled with a warmth as soft as the touch of the silken clothes in which I dressed, or the silken bed in which I slept" (El Saadawi, *WPZ* 55). She enjoys socio–economic independence, where her "bank account kept mounting all the time" and where she had free time to relax and to go to the cinema and the theatre (69).

In addition, prostitution makes Firdaus realise the value of money for women. The ten pound note paid to Firdaus by a client is another eye–opening moment, especially as it is the first time she holds money: "It was as if he had lifted a veil from my eyes, and I was seeing for the first time . . . [It] tore away the shroud that covered up a truth I had in fact experienced when still a child" (64).

As a little girl, Firdaus once asked her mother for a piastre, but the mother said that she has no piastres because it is her father who has money. When Firdaus asks her father for a piastre, he "hit me on my hand and shouted, 'I have no piastres'" (El Saadawi, *WPZ* 64). But now Firdaus possesses the ten pound note and it is no longer considered forbidden if owned by women. Money here symbolises the power which Firdaus gains in order to break free from men. As an agential space, money grants Firdaus respect as well as pleasure which she has failed to experience during her sexual encounters. Furthermore, it "open[s] her eyes to the nature of reality and the way the world works" (Palmer 166–67). This gives her a sense of freedom and power. While denied to their wives and daughters, the money that men use to attract women such as prostitutes (and female workers) is a tool of female enslavement. Accordingly, El Saadawi exposes examples of injustice or "lack of fairness and equality" which are evident in the issue of money (Ojaide, "Contexts" 115). In this sense, money in El Saadawi's text is a metaphor for male power which must be destroyed by those who are controlled by it; by Firdaus when she tears up the three thousand pounds as an act of defiance, as will be discussed later.

Along with money, prostitution makes Firdaus lose the fear of streets she has felt after leaving her uncle's house. Nevertheless, signs of Firdaus's upward mobility turn out to be illusory because her new life as a prostitute, for all its luxuries, is a prison where there is neither pleasure nor freedom: "I never even left the bedroom. Day and night I lay on the bed, crucified, and every hour a man would come in" (El Saadawi, *WPZ* 57). This passage implies that Firdaus is not willingly participating in her own exploitation, and that her resort to prostitution is the only choice which offers her a certain degree of independence and comfort. Ironically, her belief that a prostitute's life is better than that of a wife or of a daughter is misleading. She discovers that prostitution is another form of exploitation for a lower–class woman like her.

This moment of awakening results from several reasons, such as Di'aa's words that she is not respectable, the fact that Sharifa and Marzouk are exploitative pimps, and the fact that men do not like being rejected by women/prostitutes. The latter is evident in the incident where Firdaus is forced to have sex with a policeman, otherwise he will arrest her. In this sense, the worst stage of Firdaus's life is prostitution, and the assumption that poor women like Firdaus can secure socio–individual mobility by working as prostitutes is not applicable to Firdaus's situation. Even Firdaus's decision to use her school certificate in order to find a job thwarts her. Women's participation in the work force can potentially secure them economic independence, but the attempt is futile.

As such, Firdaus's position as an employee provides El Saadawi with the opportunity to expose another repressive female space. Firdaus works for three years as a company employee in order to secure a respectable career. But the time spent at the company awakens Firdaus to the fact that her male employers and colleagues, in a similar manner to her clients and husband, subjugate women to sexual harassment. This makes female employment another confining space in Firdaus's life. As Saiti writes, "If Woman is to venture out of the domestic and into the work space, she finds that she is as trapped as when she was at home by the same society that refuses to look beyond her physicality" (162).

That is why Firdaus criticises female employees who offer themselves to male colleagues in return for "a mere rise in salary, an invitation to dinner, . . . or just to ensure that they would not be treated unfairly" (El Saadawi, *WPZ* 75–76). These work attractions reduce female employees to sexual objects dominated by the male gaze, lest they lose their jobs. Therefore, Firdaus's employment represents another act of unveiling mixed with feelings of humiliation. In a judgmental tone, Firdaus realises that as a prostitute she has "been valued more highly than all the female employees . . . An employee . . . pays the highest price for things of the lowest value . . . if I lost my job, all I would lose with it was the miserable salary, the contempt I could read every day in the eyes of the higher level executives . . . the humiliating pressure of male bodies on mine when I rode in the bus" (75–76). Female employment is disempowering within a male system that orients society according to its ideologies. Therefore, Firdaus leaves the company and goes back to

prostitution, but this time as a rebel against a society which has on many occasions abused her.

Sharifa has advised Firdaus not to surrender to life: "My skin is soft, but my heart is cruel, and my bite deadly" (El Saadawi, *WPZ* 54). For me, Firdaus now internalises Sharifa's advice regarding how to live and act. Firdaus's life has been a series of misery and exploitation, entrapment and escape; still, she refuses to continue living as such. When Firdaus becomes a prosperous prostitute, Marzouk demands money from her in return for protection. She rejects Marzouk's offer because his protection means her exploitation and even demands that "I want to be one of the masters and not one of the slaves," in response to Marzouk who say that "A woman on her own cannot be a master . . . Can't you see that you're asking for the impossible?" (95).

Because the word "impossible" does not exist for Firdaus, she defies Marzouk by leaving the house. He prevents her, offering her violence instead of protection. Therefore, she stabs him several times to death in self–defence. Firdaus later discovers that her society cannot protect her from Marzouk and other men, especially as he has friends "among doctors who offer their services if one of the prostitutes he controls becomes pregnant, and among . . . [policemen] who help him and his prostitute to stay out of jail" (Palmer171). This suggests that the whole social system, which Firdaus challenges, is under criticism due to its corruption and hypocrisy. Eventually, Firdaus becomes a murderer.

As I argued earlier in this thesis, postcolonial women writers create agential female spaces out of the margin. These spaces denote (wilful) acts of resistance and assertion of the female voice. Firdaus therefore emerges from the margin with a power that makes her kill the pimp in order to escape being categorised as a victim. The image of Firdaus as a killer relates to Brinda J. Mehta's argument which associates women with "fitna;" that is, with instability and chaos (12). This association reveals men's fear of "an active female principle" which threatens "the inviolability of hegemonic rule through women's 'invisible' powers of transformation and destabilization" (12). Put differently, the act of killing the pimp captures Firdaus's power and "fitna" which are obscured by society because they emanate from the unknown and the margin; that is, from women. This

underlines women's potential to challenge their societies and the status quo by refusing to remain silent. As the selected texts emphasise, women deploy different modes of expressing themselves and of coping with their environment. For example, Brodber's Aunt Alice cannot cope with her identity as a woman so she withdraws into dumbness. Likewise, Devi's Jashoda adheres to traditional motherhood combined with a commodification of her body as a wet nurse in order to support her family. But in Firdaus's case, the way she copes with her social conditioning is remarkable because she translates, rather than internalises, sexual oppression and pain into a physical action manifested in killing the pimp.

Killing the pimp disrupts socio–cultural powers which lead women to neurosis and self–inflicted violence. It confirms Zucker's argument that society sanctions women to silence themselves and to subdue their pressures neurotically and psychologically, but it is unacceptable for them to respond violently as if they were men (247). In this context, I argue that El Saadawi purposefully bestows masculine attributes on Firdaus (the power to kill) in order to valorise women's potential to act in the pursuit of freedom and dignity. As Hélène Cixous writes, "When the 'Repressed' of their culture . . . come back, it is an explosive return, which is absolutely shattering, staggering, overturning with a force never let loose before" (qtd. in Orabueze 127). Cixous's evocative words convey the anger and the renewed strength of oppressed people such as Firdaus when they choose to challenge oppression. The revolutionary Firdaus at first responds to men's physical and verbal assaults by surrendering to them or by attempting to "uproot . . . [them] from my head the way they extract a bullet, or excise a tumor from the brain" (El Saadawi, *WPZ* 72). But by the end of the novel, a transformation takes place in Firdaus's character from a frigid prostitute and an oppressed woman to a revolutionary figure. She realises that the self–mutilating ways she uses in order to defy men do not fulfil her desire of revenge; therefore, she stabs Marzouk to death.

Firdaus's description of the scene of killing recalls that of her excision, but with a sharp difference. The act of excision signals her fear and subjugation to patriarchy, unlike the act of killing Marzouk which confirms her courage and determination not to live by the identities constructed by society. Consequently, Firdaus "raised the knife and buried it

deep into his neck, pulled it out of his neck and then thrust it deep into his chest, pulled it out of his chest and plunged it deep into his belly . . . I was astonished to find how easily my hand moved as I thrust the knife into his flesh" (El Saadawi, *WPZ* 95). This passage unveils a moment of liberation over control and intimidation. Such a transformative moment is significant because Firdaus defies being categorised as the female "victim" of plural forms of male oppression.

As a result, the act of killing turns into an outlet for the pain suffered by Firdaus. El Saadawi here reverses gender roles and attributes in order to grant Firdaus agency which is often reserved for men in her society. Although she is writing a text about female oppression and resistance, El Saadawi appropriates some masculine features for Firdaus who becomes the female predator while the male pimp is the victim. Commenting on the significance of this reversal, Saiti argues that it positions the victimiser in the place of the victimised in order to "show the colonizer what it means to be colonized, and to question the various foundations upon which those in power base their alleged superiority" (168).

With her renewed self–assurance and pride, Firdaus stresses that "My body was as light as a feather . . . my head held high . . . My footsteps broke silence . . . they were the footsteps of a woman who believed in herself, knew where she was going, and could see her goal" (El Saadawi, *WPZ* 96). Aided by her rebellious self, Firdaus breaks free from the constraints of patriarchy. Some readers of El Saadawi's text might question why Firdaus does not escape punishment instead of having a new client who pays her three thousand pounds as she demands. The answer is that she no longer feels afraid of her society or of losing her life. Unveiling the truth is a courageous move which symbolises Firdaus's transition into a victor rather than into a victim or a criminal.

This is made manifest in the power of visions which makes her conclude that "Men impose deception on women and punish them for being deceived, force them down to the lowest level and punish them for falling so low, bind them in marriage and then chastise them with menial service for life, or insults, or blows" (El Saadawi, *WPZ* 86). Firdaus's words emphasise that she is sentenced to death not only for killing Marzouk but also for exposing men's deception and brutality. Undeniably, Firdaus's story brings together female sexuality, abuse, and pain which lead her to "a final masochistic pleasure in her

own destruction, as she awaits an execution that she also perceives as a victory" (Ball 77). In other words, Firdaus's triumph signals her rejection of the precepts of morality and victimisation which have defined her existence as a woman.

The act of murder represents a genuine liberation, especially as she refuses to ask for pardon from the prison authorities because "I no longer desire to live, nor do I any longer fear to die. I want nothing. I hope for nothing. I fear nothing. Therefore I am free . . . [This] fills me with pride" (El Saadawi, *WPZ* 101). In sum, Firdaus rebels against her society and, as a rebellious woman, she chooses death because "The rebel says No . . . to reject categorically the humiliating orders of the master . . . to say No means that death is preferable to life, if the latter is devoid of freedom. *Better to die on one's feet than to live on one's knees*" (Orabueze 138; emphasis added). Therefore, Firdaus chooses to die rather than to live in a society which confines her literally and figuratively. Her death is a form of liberation and a desire not to live what she considers a life of lies, hypocrisy, and exploitation.

Their eyes, my prison, and transformation

As argued in the previous sections, Firdaus's voice is a site of agency and unveiling, while her body is integral to the search of her identity. As I read it, Firdaus's body is written as a kind of deprivation and loss due to female excision, as a source of profit in the case of prostitution, and is used a tool of resistance against sexual assaults. Eyes are also a significant part of Firdaus's story and are emphasised at many occasions in the novel. They indicate that Firdaus's life is haunted by several male gazes which symbolise "restrictions placed upon a woman's presentation and choices in a patriarchal culture" (Moore 18).

In a similar manner to Rochester's masculine gaze which threatens Antoinette's sanity and belonging in Rhys's *WSS*, the male gaze in Firdaus's life functions as a restrictive space which defines her as the object of another person's gaze, thereby indicating either oppression such as the eyes of her father or sexual threat such as the eyes of Bayoumi and her husband. This suggests that Firdaus's life is a series of "dispossessions" in a society

where “power is masculine” and access to that power is “a masculinisation” (Busia, “Rebellious” 91).

However, not all eyes are identical in the novel because two kinds of eyes can be categorised, namely male gazes and female looks. The binary categorisation recalls the difference between the look and the gaze highlighted in Chapter One.[2] Unlike the male gaze which signals dominance and threat, the looks (eyes) of Firdaus’s mother and of Miss Iqbal, the school teacher, signal solidarity. They are “eyes that watched me . . . Two eyes that alone seemed to hold me up . . . two rings of intense white around two circles of intense black” (El Saadawi, *WPZ* 16–17). This signifies the nurturing roles of women whether they are mothers, friends, and teachers and of their relationship which creates an “exchange of looks” which are “dialogic” and disruptive of hierarchies among women (Hitchcock 80).

Emecheta and Bâ join El Saadawi at this point in so far as they underline the importance of female friendship as a means of survival, irrespective of differences which, in some cases, divide women. Firdaus’s relationship with women offers “brief respites from the unrelenting brutalization she experienced in the hands of men,” especially as Sharifa and Iqbal advise Firdaus to “turn toward herself, and in the process of revealing her story to other women she experiences the greatest understanding and self–comprehension” (Schettler 226). As a result, the exchange of female looks underlines the emphasis of several women writers and critics on the significance of female friendship and mother–daughter relationship as a strategy of survival during hard times.

By contrast, there are the male gazes which rest on Firdaus’s body and threaten her “like death . . . I was not confronted with a hand holding a knife or a razor, but only with two eyes” (El Saadawi, *WPZ* 42). As Hitchcock remarks, the male gaze denotes the erasure of the female voice and hence functions as “symbolic and systemic violence” which “ha[s] become a tool of patriarchal control” (72). This helps relate the gaze to men and money in El Saadawi’s *WPZ* because Firdaus becomes a property to be possessed and exchanged by men as they do with money. Firdaus gradually understands the connection between money, men, and power, so she tears up the three thousand pounds given to her by a client rather than spending them.

Tearing up the money is emblematic of Firdaus's desire to destroy "all the men I had ever known . . . tearing away the very flesh of my fingers to leave nothing but bone, ensuring that not a single vestige of these men would remain at all" (El Saadawi, *WPZ* 98). This highlights Firdaus's ability to escape the space of confinement which is created by the link between money, masculine abuse, and self–denial, thereby reclaiming her selfhood in order to demystify the male gaze and its supremacy. Despite the distinction between the gaze and the look, their connotations get mixed in Firdaus's story because feelings of support in her mother's eyes no longer exist. This change results from the mother's submission to her husband which alienates her from Firdaus and this creates confusion regarding the position of the mother.

Earlier in the novel, Firdaus says that a new woman replaces her mother in the house, but she is exactly like her mother. Here it is not clear whether the father takes a new wife or whether the woman is Firdaus's mother whose identity is put into question. However, what is important is that both the mother and her daughter are oppressed by patriarchy and that "the brilliance of the eyes and the rings of light have been dimmed by a repressive [patriarchal] force" (Palmer 157). Also, the ambivalence of the mother's eyes hints at the complexity and contradiction in Firdaus's life which are expressed by the binary colours of the eyes, white and black. Hence, the eyes of women and men in Firdaus's life function as a space of tension which complicates her presence and prevents her from establishing productive relationships which can change her destiny.

This is apparent when the nurturing eyes of Firdaus's mother, of Miss Iqbal, and of Sharifa reflect illusory support combined with betrayal. The mother has participated in Firdaus's excision which means she has betrayed her daughter. Also, Sharifa turns out to be economically exploiting Firdaus, while Miss Iqbal's betrayal relates to her unrequited love and closeness to Firdaus. These women forsake Firdaus and prove to be as untrustworthy as men; nevertheless, the eyes of men and women empower Firdaus. This is part of Firdaus's strength which disrupts the oppressive space where she is incarcerated.

As I argued earlier, El Saadawi reverses gender roles and attributes in order to empower Firdaus who, on many occasions, has suffered as other women in her society

do. As such, she has acquired some attributes of power often associated with men in her society. For example, "She looks men in the eye, earns and spends her own money, speaks in commanding language and in the end . . . takes on a violently masculine position, refusing the female–nuanced role of victim" (Zucker 247). These attributes map Firdaus's identity anew; she is a victor despite being convicted. This makes the image of the prison a crucial part of the novel as well as of the analysis in this chapter. El Saadawi establishes the significance of the prison image in the narrative preface to *WPZ*. The image alludes to the various powers which restrict Firdaus, adding that it refers to El Saadawi's and her husband's imprisonment due to their socio–political activism. As I interpret it, the prison goes beyond its physical dimension in order to include references to figurative prisons represented by people and their eyes such as Firdaus's father, Bayoumi, and other men; by physical spaces such as the houses of Firdaus's father and husband; by the room where Bayoumi incarcerates her; and by Sharifa's house where Firdaus practises prostitution.

A physical space of confinement, the prison places Firdaus at zero point constructed by men and society; that is, in the space of nothingness which reduces Firdaus to a valueless commodity and to an object of the male gaze. Nevertheless, given that this "zero point" of subjectivity can also mean the centre (the epicentre of an explosion), it makes Firdaus speak the truth. This represents Firdaus's position as simultaneously denoting lack *and* subversion, especially as her initial silence, narrative voice, and imprisonment have turned her zero social positioning into an agential space of utterance. Yet because she cannot exist as an independent speaking subject within society, she must be hanged.

It is possible to argue that the problem is not that Firdaus does not seek to change the circumstances in which she lives. Rather, the problem arises from her oppressive society which, on many occasions, has failed to deal with Firdaus as a woman and a human being. This is why she prefers to die on the gallows rather than surviving as an object of the exploitative male gaze. Eventually, Firdaus's imprisonment is not a sign of weakness and surrender because *WPZ*, in a similar manner to the other texts analysed in this thesis, restructures resistant female spaces and stories. Mapping empowering female spaces signals El Saadawi's struggle to write back in protest to the patriarchal centre. She

protests against the subjugation of women within restrictive spaces and practices, especially as the latter force women to accept life situations as presented to them by society rather than by their own choices and desires. Furthermore, the women's prison where Firdaus meets El Saadawi is a space where dialogic contact and struggle take place. This refers to Firdaus's prison story which exemplifies a woman's struggle against isolated spaces such as the prison whose meaning is complicated in the novel. Although the prison signifies male control and a "rupture of internal/external continuity or cohesion," it produces a new subjectivity; that is, "an 'other' self, against the norm or tradition" (Eke 59–60).

The prison becomes a new space for the formation of a new female subjectivity which refers to the relationship constructed in the prison between the author and Firdaus, as discussed earlier in this chapter. This makes Firdaus's presence dissident in order to reformulate the prison as a space of listening, empathy, and connection with other women. By subverting the power of the male gaze and of the authorities symbolised by the prison, El Saadawi reclaims the silenced voices of women who exist at point zero within the hierarchies of their cultures. Therefore, *WPZ* is not just a story about a woman's experiences of oppression; rather, it is also a consciousness story about Firdaus's power of vision which is supported by her refusal to remain silent. This emphasises that the way Firdaus understands her situation and society at the end of her life differs from her understanding of people and society as a child (Simola 170).

For my part, I argue that Firdaus can be described as an Egyptian Draupadi who recalls the Indian Draupadi in Devi's short story, "Draupadi." Both women experience a series of sexual abuse and oppression; however, they refuse to see themselves as victims. Draupadi subverts the space of her exploitation inscribed on her body in order to define herself as triumphant. She stands "naked" with "her two mangled breasts" to make Senanayak, the male predator, afraid of her (Devi, "Draupadi" 196). Likewise, Firdaus does not remain passive; rather, she defies her oppression and commodification by men. This is evident in her aggression toward Marzouk and in her narration of the story while maintaining a sense of dignity and power in the prison. This bestows upon Firdaus the

strength in order to create her subversive identity and to rid herself of the fear of men and society.

It is true that the title, *Woman at Point Zero*, indicates the depth of misery in which Firdaus finds herself due to the hardships she has faced. However, it acknowledges Firdaus's capacity to challenge her condition even if she does not radically change her life and her society. This makes "point zero" a space of agency and attention rather than a fixed space of oppression and nothingness. Besides, she has the potential to influence women who read her story. Women can learn from Firdaus not to remain silent, mainly because El Saadawi's text has given Firdaus not only the right to speak but also an audience, whether it is fictional or real. Firdaus's story provokes in us as women a desire to say "No" to the powers which deny us the right to live, to work, and, above all, to be human beings. In doing so, we can unsettle the socially constructed spaces of oppression which permeate our lives in order to configure more empowering ones for the future as well as for the well–being of other women.

Conclusion

This chapter carried out a deconstructive, cultural analysis of El Saadawi's *WPZ*, where it discussed the function of language and narration as conduits for the reclamation of the female voice and agency. This emphasises the possibility of narrating one's life as a mode of rebellion, as is evident in Firdaus who speaks to challenge her oppression. Also, the chapter argued that the female body entraps women in different folds of bondage such as family, marriage, and employment, all of which are sanctioned by corrupted, oppressive societies.

Also of importance is that women are not always victims and passive recipients of masculine assaults. This relates to the process of veiling/unveiling performed by Firdaus which makes her aware of her oppressive surroundings. Therefore, the chapter highlighted the function of spatial mapping in *WPZ*, where confining spaces such as prison, the male gaze, marital home, and employment are appropriated in order to grant

Firdaus independence and agency. The chapter concluded by stressing the need on the part of women not to let oppression silence them if they are keen on changing their lives.

Notes

1. "'Awra" is an Arabic term used in my Syrian Muslim culture and other ones in order to refer to parts of the body such as genitals and voice which are private and hence are covered up. For more details, see Ball 73–77.

2. See hooks, "Oppositional" 208; Nnaemeka, "Imag(in)ing" 6; and Hitchcock 79 for a discussion of the function of the "look" in postcolonial contexts.

Chapter Nine

Conclusion: The Way Forward

Conclusions

Coming to the UK to do my MA and PhD research in the field of Critical Theory has been a critical stage in my life as a female lecturer of English literature in Syria. The change of location and hence of ways of looking at things has alerted me to the varied and interconnected factors behind women's subordination. The diverse stories of female oppression analysed in this thesis are not merely caused by patriarchy as I thought whenever I came across the word "feminism" or the issue of female liberation. This has offered me the possibility of analysing the factors behind female oppression by recourse to postcolonial women's writing which is seen as a discourse of transformation and of its writers as literary activists who establish a link between the social and the literary in their texts.

In this thesis, I have attempted to provide a broader meaning of narratives of female oppression and resistance. The narratives function as spaces of utterance and agency which include not only the geographical locations of Third World women but also their literary and critical productions and feminist remits. This makes postcolonial women's writing a discourse of socio–literary activism and a conduit for the reclamation of women's voices and bodies which are represented, deconstructed, and reconstructed.

One of the goals of my research is to read postcolonial women's writing as a transformative and metachronous discourse without overlooking interconnected notions of oppression and resistance, given that they are a complementary part of women's texts and realities. The transformative role of postcolonial women's narratives underlines the potential of women's (de)constructive voices and standpoints to envision a practical shift in discourses of identity reconstruction and liberation on various levels. Because the shift implies that narratives of female oppression and resistance do not emerge from a vacuum

but are tied to women's specificities, the narratives are read in this thesis by establishing a kind of mediation between the local and the literary as well as between events and their causes. Notions of female diversity and particularity justify my hypothesis that postcolonial women's writing is a metachronous, dynamic discourse which has the potential to constitute a cultural, literary, and historical archive of women's subjective experiences and of different authorial concerns and modes of representation.

Accordingly, this thesis has set out to re–read a number of core postcolonial women's texts written in former colonial societies, in the period 1966–1980. The re–reading is of texts which, arguably, anticipated several main debates later articulated in postcolonial feminist criticism, thus (re–)reading them through a contemporary, critical lens that is deconstructive and culturally situated. This opened up the possibility of reading the selected texts in the present rather than leave their interpretations closed off in the past because they still speak to us today. These issues highlight the metachronous aspect of postcolonial women's narratives which are operative in the past, at present, and in the future. Here I refer to the narratives as constituting a metachronous discourse of literary mapping which engages with a dialectical process of transformation that moves forward in order to inspire change on the part of readers and critics, and backward to women's texts and experiences from diverse locations and times. This process signals the ambivalent meaning of the term "postcolonial" that does not always refer to a fixed, historical period or to an era of (female) decolonisation due to its varied thematic and structural representations, as I argued in Chapter One.

Moreover, the analysis of the texts has emphasised that attending to postcolonial women's writing offers insights into the diverse possibilities of representing women. The insights are informed by local contexts out of which the selected texts arise, while simultaneously engaging with a literary discourse of transformation. As a result, the selected texts have provided detailed and different representations of women from several Third World cultures, enabling us to avoid errors of reductionism which characterise some feminist discourses, as I argued in Chapter Three. This is not to argue that a return to postcolonial women's texts will deliver an unproblematic, shared narrative or voice of Third World women. Rather, the return is an attempt and a

recommendation informed by my pedagogical position to acknowledge and work through the varied narratives and ambivalences about women's voices and experiences inscribed by the texts. Eventually, there will emerge more varied, nuanced, and necessarily provisional readings of what it means to be a woman whose identity and experience are socially constructed and literarily/ narratively reconstructed.

Furthermore, the textual analysis has shown that postcolonial women's writing constitutes a critical archive about the heterogeneous and contextualised epistemology of Third World women. The discourse is produced by postcolonial women writers about several female modalities and is consumed by readers from various cultures. Besides, it does not exclusively represent stories of female oppression; rather, it reclaims women's voices through the use of different themes and structural styles in order to map spaces of resistance. This signals the possibility of producing texts from diverse female margins and spaces in order to articulate what is suppressed or neglected in the masculine order; that is, female creativity, voice, and body, all of which are brought together in the body of the text.

The different narrative conclusions in the previous chapters point to differences not only in ways of representing women but also in degrees of agency, inequality, and choice of action between the principal female figures. This adds a great deal of interpretive variety and complexity to the texts which defy neat conclusions about homogeneous female oppression which the reader makes. Through female characters such as Bâ's Ramatoulaye, El Saadawi's Firdaus, and Rhys's Antoinette, the selected authors represent different experiences and models of women, where a woman is traditional and modern, oppressed and rebellious, silent and active.

Female diversity emphasises that postcolonial women writers portray female characters who are reflective of "the social ills as well as the cure. Their novels imply that women must begin the process of change by internalizing their own versions of social and economic equality" (Uraizee 224). This explains why the authors appropriate negative female images and roles constructed by dominant discourses such as patriarchy and nationalism. The appropriation of these images is a central issue in this thesis and is explored through a deconstructive, cultural reading of the texts. Deconstructing and

reformulating women's texts and identities help derive various instances of resistance rather than freezing them in immobile, generic categories of subjugation.

Instances of female agency are mapped out of restrictive/liberating spaces such as home, death, posthumous silence, madness, and nervous breakdown. Such spaces accentuate the fact that postcolonial women's narratives, consolidated by my deconstructive, cultural reading of the texts, challenge the attempt to subsume women's subordination under one power such as colonialism. This underscores incommensurable, shifting identities of women within a specific culture and across cultures. In addition, textual and cultural differences destabilise the model of global sisterhood and the figure of the "universal woman" which represent women as similar and subjugated by one form of oppression—patriarchy. Also, they display the relationship between categories such as class and literacy on the one hand, and the subsequent inequality among women on the other.

For instance, although both women are subordinated by gender, among other power structures, Ramatoulaye who is a middle–class woman in Bâ's *SLL* does not experience the same socio–economic hardships experienced by Nnu Ego who is a lower–class woman in Emecheta's *JM.* This example highlights the differences in the authors' concerns and modes of representation. For Rhys, the white Creole lineage along with gender in *WSS* dictates a woman's political identity that is composite and shifting. For Brodber, the colonial legacy, class, and female sexuality determine the construction of the female body in *JL,* while for Emecheta gender power relates to colonisation, class, and the modernity–tradition tension exemplified in the theme of motherhood in *JM*.

The implication of these differences for the nature of postcolonial women's writing is that women's narratives and identities are in a state of flux and reconstruction and that the authors are alert to the intersections of class, race, gender, and tradition in shaping their lives and texts. This emphasises that cultural specificity secures women spaces of conflicting relations simultaneously; that is, of oppression and inequality as well as of empowerment and privilege. Devi's "BG" is a good example here because Jashoda is honoured as a wet nurse but is later exploited and abandoned by her family. This example underlines the fact that women differently experience constitutive categories of

identity such as class and patriarchy and that the effects of these categories on women also vary. It also negates the assumption that women are equally dominated/empowered and that modes and degrees of marginalisation and resistance are undifferentiated.

Examining these intersectional powers together in this thesis has demonstrated that postcolonial women (writers) are part of a continuum in which they move in various positions and under numerous pressures in order to attain different aims. Accordingly, the plurality of female subjectivities and narratives creates a politicised, metachronous discourse of solidarity and resistance while it crosses textual and cultural boundaries. Eventually, principal female figures such as Devi's Jashoda, El Saadawi's Firdaus, and Bâ's Ramatoulaye are individuals who are constantly displaced and replaced, oppressed and empowered. By this, they speak with multiple voices which reside within a discourse that is evolving and kaleidoscopic, much like the kumbla of Brodber's *JL*. Therefore, it is important to locate postcolonial female narratives within their different contexts in order to read them through the contexts which produce them. Here I point to the necessity of promoting postcolonial women's writing as "a grounded theory" in order to deal with race, gender, and class dynamics as "more dense and delicate than those categorical terms often imply" (Robolin 85). This contextual approach helps arrive at models of complex female selfhood located within literary and cultural terrains.

In light of the aforementioned issues, the guiding spirit of Chapters One and Two is that postcolonial women's narratives have the potential to reclaim different female voices and standpoints, and that developing localised readings of these narratives is an effective avenue of female transition. This has consolidated the argument that female diversity, connectivity, and difference shape the narratives of postcolonial women writers which deploy various themes and structural styles in order to represent women. Therefore, it is important to read postcolonial women's narratives not exclusively as sites of subordination but also as rich reservoirs of stories about female recuperation and self–assertion, made possible through the written word which creates resistant spaces out of confining ones.

Chapter Three has underlined the aforementioned issues through a theoretical lens. It discussed feminist theoretical issues which share certain aspects with postcolonial women's writing and hence have guided its choice as the research subject. Both underscored the need to expose the variable powers which produce diverse female voices and texts. This necessitated the attempt to deconstruct the global sisterhood model in order to locate alternative models of theorising women in more heterogeneous and relational ways. The models envision various routes of transformation in theoretical and literary discourses.

Chapters Four to Eight developed deconstructive, cultural readings of the selected texts in order to derive examples of female empowerment and recuperation out of oppression. The texts narrate diverse female stories and modes of representation and this stresses that postcolonial women narratives, through literary mapping, constitute a metachronous discourse of transformation that is diverse, multiple, and challenging. Chapter Four analysed Brodber's *JL* as a postmodern and postcolonial text whose narrative format, language, and female characters make it a rich example of a black woman's reclamation and acceptance of her body and identity. The chapter analysed Nellie's oppression as caused by socio–sexual and racial tensions which are inscribed on her body and mind. It also discussed how female transformation is made possible through the female body which functions as a space of multiple potentials and tensions. Given that gender issues such as sexual fragmentation and transformation can be mediated through thematic, linguistic, and narrative styles, the chapter dealt with the female body and language as confining/resistant spaces. This suggests that a woman need not abandon her body, language, and community in the name of an abstract image of an intellectual, asexual woman progressing from adolescence to womanhood and to engagement with society.

Chapter Five analysed Bâ's *SLL*, discussing gender–related issues which constituted forms of empowerment such as friendship and of oppression such as polygamy and woman–woman subjugation. The discussion helped me focus on women's potential to shift toward liberation and self–assertion through diverse avenues such as writing as an outlet for pain and anger, motherhood, education, and choice. This explains why I

explored the function of language–gender interrelatedness which is a mode of resistance and survival. It opened up the possibility of creating female spaces of rebellion out of restrictive ones such as mirasse and widow confinement. The chapter also stressed both the presence of women and men as agents of change and the multiple roles which a woman can play to transform her condition. This suggests that a woman can succeed in being a mother, a wife, a mother–in–law, and a worker at the same time to redefine her place in private and public spheres.

Chapter Six analysed Rhys's *WSS* as a postcolonial text which recuperates the white Creole by rewriting her narrative overlooked in Brontë's *JE*. The analysis underlined that acts of literary reclamation do not simply reconstruct a history for the female "Other." The white Creole female protagonist in Rhys's text is composed of conflicting cultures and plural powers such as patriarchy, class, colonisation, and race, all of which construct her liminal identity and lead to her madness which is a form of resistance. However, it is possible for this hybrid figure to reconstruct her presence in order to challenge the powers fragmenting her through accepting the version of reality she holds; that is, liminality which defines her presence.

Chapter Seven also developed a deconstructive, cultural reading of Devi's "BG" and Emecheta's *JM*, where it discussed the cause of the protagonists' oppression as linked to motherhood which is affected by patriarchy, class, colonialism, and nationalism. The chapter provided insights into the different representations of the maternal body which is a site of exploitation and resistance. Besides, the chapter dealt with both texts as grounded treatises on the concept of motherhood and on a mother's joy and entrapment as she internalises the concept. The death of Nnu Ego and Jashoda in both texts stands as a reminder not only of how motherhood joys and expectations can be turned into agonising memories, but also of how men and society play a part in the reversal of women's fortunes. Because instances of resistance are a vital part of a woman's narrative of oppression, the chapter explored spaces of female agency such as labour, the female body, awakening, and posthumous silence in order to show that women are capable of disrupting the powers which exploit them.

Chapter Eight analysed El Saadawi's *WPZ* which offered a somewhat gloomy sense of what it means to be a rebellious woman in a patriarchal society. The chapter discussed the various modes of female oppression such as womanhood, religion, marriage, female excision, and employment. Nevertheless, the chapter located sites of agency in Firdaus's compelling voice and in her potential to undergo a process of awakenings that transforms her into a speaking subject. Accordingly, female agency is attained by reconstructing female spaces such as murder, prison, and courage in order to appropriate narratives of female oppression. This stresses that women's narratives do not align with a monolithic, fixed narrative of oppression and empowerment but rather shift between both extremes which construct a woman's experience and narrative.

Future visions

This thesis has sought to explore the significance of the cultural analysis and criticism of postcolonial women's texts for the recuperation of women's voices and spaces in diverse postcolonial locations. It has focused on the potential of postcolonial women's texts to function as critical tools for transforming the status of marginalised women across cultures. The texts, as effective tools, seek to build a democratic society in which women and their writing become an indispensable part of the larger struggle of society across several aspects of human experience such as politics, history, gender, class, and sex. For this reason, my suggestion for further research visions in the area of critical, cultural analysis is twofold.

Firstly, cultural and literary criticism can be employed as an integrated discourse in order to study other cultural and literary productions such as art, plays, museum, and photography which are useful tools of critiques and also a historical archive. I add to this suggestion the adaptation of women's narratives to be produced as stage performances, TV series, and films in order to reach a wider audience. In fact, the different ways of receiving a literary or cultural production invite us to rethink an alternative method to represent women's narratives with the aim of empowering other women in various

locations and situations. This suggestion lends a wider dimension to the notion of a woman's space of enunciation.

A woman's text, both written and oral, signals the presence of other sites which are reflective of her experiences of oppression and resistance. This research vision is directed toward the study of various techniques of representation which deal with gender issues such as identity politics, memory, sexuality, colonisation, and transformation. The aim of this suggestion is not only to create and remember women's narratives but also to make use of the socio–artistic, emotional, and revolutionary aspects of women's daily experiences depicted in the aforementioned representations/narratives. This helps stimulate our critical thinking and mobilise our awareness and affect about the complex issues and struggles facing women today, locally and globally. In this way, postcolonial women's writing tends to be not only oppositional and challenging but also critical and transformative. Its mode of resistance underlines the function of the written word as a conduit for challenge and opposition as well as for reconstruction and progress.

The second research vision explores the connections between women's studies (gender), literature, and culture within the academy. This vision has a pedagogical goal related to my position as a female lecturer of English Literature from the Third World (Syria). I am inclined to argue that there exists a lack of awareness or emphasis on the issue of women's studies and feminism included in the curricula taught in diverse institutions in Syria. This issue relates to the methodology of teaching women's studies for undergraduate and postgraduate students of English Literature in my home country.

As a student in the Department of English Literature in Syria, I was introduced to feminism as a critical movement or a school of thought engaged in critiques and debates in order to attain women's rights and to make their presence equal to that of men. This narrow meaning of "woman"/feminism and what it denoted led students to focus on literary texts which represented the unequal conflict between man and women and, accordingly, to attempt the application of critical approaches such as deconstruction to destabilise the powers oppressing women. This one–dimensional way of analysing women's texts and of their experiences as colonised by patriarchy resulted in constructing the sexes in binary opposition, and more importantly, in re–enacting the

notion of global sisterhood and homogeneity of female oppression which this thesis sets out to deconstruct.

Assuming a globally shared female oppression reduces the rich meaning of women's diverse experiences and standpoints to a daily conflict with men, irrespective of other factors which shape women's identities. By contrast, a reading which acknowledges the plurality of female oppression questions the presence of several groups of women and of the inequalities and differences among women globally, locally, and even within the same family (between mothers, daughters, and daughters–in–law). The word "inequalities" here has several meanings when used in the context of groups of men and women. Within the former, it signals the rights that are granted to men but are denied to women, thus giving a negative sense of control and hierarchy. Within the latter context, "inequalities" between groups of women is a more flexible term, much like the terms "postcolonial" and "Third World women." It signifies differences between women and the specificity of each woman's situation that is dependent on her surroundings and is structured by race, education, class, and gender, among other power structures. This flexibility is reflective of the heterogeneity and collectivity of women and of their narrative voices.

Therefore, it is important to discard the narrow application of feminism or women's studies in order to move toward a broader account of feminism as both part of a university curriculum and a human cause to engage with. As argued before, my awareness of the presence of several groups of women and of their specificities has made me more attentive to the way I, as a lecturer, teach students about feminism. This paves the way toward the pedagogical aim of this second research vision. In its relation to women's studies curricula, the above pedagogical aim necessitates focusing on "woman" as both the subject and object of experience and on gender issues as located in history, politics, culture, and literature.

What I emphasise at this point is the discourse of diversity, relationality, common interests, and particularities of women in ways reminiscent of Mohanty's argument raised in Chapter Three. For instance, I will not teach students a course on feminism which privileges the presence of local women at the expense of ignoring or underestimating that of other women in different locations.

It is productive to teach ourselves and our students to respect and acknowledge the presence of various women and of diverse women's texts and social realities, as highlighted in the previous chapters. This underlines the potential to formulate strategies of change and solidarity between women in Third World and First World cultures without prejudice. This kind of teaching recalls Mohanty's feminist model explained in Chapter Three, in so far as it depends on a comparative and critical framework without overlooking the importance of women's specificity in constructing their lives and narratives.

Consequently, students become more attentive to issues of race, class, colonialism, sexuality, and language, all of which intersect in order to shape diverse narratives of oppression and struggle. Such a research suggestion equips us as teachers and researchers with a better understanding of the experiential presence of women and of the connections between women and their texts from varied backgrounds. It also envisions the possibility of designing women's studies curricula around cultural and socio–historical representations of women in order to foreground not only tales of oppression but also those of transformation and negotiation. This classroom feminist pedagogy offers students a politicised academic scholarship in order to deal with women's studies as a university subject and to make possible students' activism and engagement with this issue outside the academy, locally and internationally.

Hopefully, the points discussed in this second vision will form the basis of the stories and issues we need to integrate into the feminist scholarship taught in diverse institutions. They help formulate which issues and narratives to pass on to students and to the wider community. This will encourage active projects in order to transform women's rights cross–culturally and the way we think about this discourse in critical, literary, and cultural studies.

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