



Fashioning women for a brave new world: gender, ethnicity and literary representation

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This essay adds to the ongoing dialogue on the literary representation of Caribbean women. It grapples with a range of issues: how has iconic literary representation of the Caribbean woman altered from the inception of Caribbean women's writing to the present? Given that literary representation was a tool for inscribing otherness and a counter-discursive device for recuperating the self from the imprisoning gaze, how do the politics of identity, ethnicity and representation play out over time? How does representation shift when one considers the gender and ethnicity of the protagonist in relation to that of the writer? Can we assume that self-representation is necessarily the most "authentic"? And how has the configuration of the representative West Indian writer changed since the 1970s to the present?

The problematics of literary representation have been with us since Plato and Aristotle wrestled with the purpose of fiction and the role of the artist in the ideal republic. Its problematics were foregrounded in feminist dialogues on the power of the male gaze to objectify and subordinate women. These problematics were also central to so-called third-world and post-colonial critics concerned with the correlation between imperialism and the projection/internalisation of the gaze which represented the subaltern as sub-human. Representation has always been a pivotal issue in female-authored Caribbean literature, with its nagging preoccupation with identity formation, which must be read through myriad shifting filters of gender and ethnicity.

Under any circumstance, representation remains a vexing theoretical issue. W. J. T. Mitchell alludes to three forms of representational relationships identified by semioticians – icon, symbol and index. Mimesis and imitation are *iconic* forms of representation that transcend differences between media. For instance, an avocado may represent a woman. *Symbolic* forms of representation are arbitrary and based on convention. Language, for example, is based on a system of signs to which we arbitrarily assign meaning. We need to agree

(or increasingly, in this postmodern era, to disagree) on the correlation between the sign and meaning. And *indexical* representation signals a relationship between the sign and the reality, based on linkages such as cause and effect and proximity. Add to these representational complexities the notion that a single individual may represent the group; the political issue of who is best qualified to represent who to whom; and the related concern – for whom should we shape our representations? Speaking to the foundational relationship between representation, aesthetics, semiotics and poetics, Mitchell states:

One obvious question that comes up in contemporary theories of representation, consequently, is the relationship between aesthetic or semiotic representation (things that stand for other things) and political representation (persons who act for other people) (1990: 12).

From the inception of their fictional expression, these issues have been pivotal for Caribbean women writers. In analysing these problematics of representation, O'Callaghan (2004) includes in the categorisation of women writing the West Indies, British women born in and or resident in the West Indies, whose early writings presented facets of West Indian culture and social relations which resonate with contemporary readers. The first known woman to represent the West Indies was Aphra Behn, whose shadowy bibliographical history locates her as born in England in 1640, but domiciled in Surinam for a period. Based on her experiences in the Indies, Behn, who is lauded as the first woman to make a living by writing fiction, authored a slave narrative, *Oroonoko or the Royal Slave*, in 1678. Significantly, she is mentioned in *A Room of One's Own* in Virginia Woolf's listing of the literary foremothers who wrote prior to the eighteenth century and gave shape and focus to women's writing. This locates the contribution of women writing the West Indies within the tradition of the global women's movement, as well as within the tradition of slave narratives. Both traditions produced literary expressions penned by individuals representing a besieged collectivity, as counter-discursive to false representation – enacting resistance to oppressive structures, through the power of the word.

The most significant early Caribbean female voice, that of Dominican-born Jean Rhys (1890–1979), generated troubling representational issues. Her writing raised pertinent questions about the basis on which we identify a literary piece as West Indian. And by extension, what criteria should we use to represent a novelist as West Indian? Authored by a member of the planter class, *Voyage in the Dark* (1934) emphasised the complexity introduced by the interface of gender with race, class, colour and social oppression. Given the

correlation between appropriation of power to tell one's own story, and the inscription of counter-discursives to denigrating narratives and stereotypes, Rhys' representational politics proved to be provocative because of her unapologetic appropriation of the tropes of enslavement and the middle passage for her fictional exploration of white women under siege. Ironically, it was the first significant fictional voice emanating from the planter class that announced preoccupations that have since become endemic for Caribbean writers throughout the diaspora. Rhys maps the spatial frame and the psychic discomfort of the writer with a vision of dislocation – a Caribbean homeland as paradise lost, ghostlike wanderings through adopted lands which can never become home, writing that proceeds out of a liminal, transitional space, one that is psychically uneasy but creatively fertile. As I have argued elsewhere, it is from the planter class and a white woman writer that we get the clearest early evocation of what Caribbean Nobel Laureate Derek Walcott has since termed "homecomings without home".¹

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

... despite the hegemonic hierarchy of values which would valorize the white and "high brown" woman above the East Indian and African descended woman, the black woman has been to date the most willing to articulate her unique vision of the world and to reveal the synergy that controls the interlocking relationship between individual and community (1998: 140).

The primary agenda of the period was to re-construct and valorise that which had been represented as unlovely, impure and insignificant. Hodge's *Crick Crack Monkey* (1970) represents one of the earliest attempts on the part of Afro-Caribbean women at self-representation. On behalf of the collectivity, she determined to write our own stories – to transfix onto the written page our role models and developmental paths. Concerned with reversing the process of denigration, disfigurement, self-contempt and erasure, Hodge's agenda has been to validate and authenticate a people by inscribing their mode of being in fiction. Stuart Hall describes such a process as generating "an imaginary fullness or plentitude, to set against the broken rubric of our past. They are resources of resistance and identity, with which to confront the fragmented

and pathological ways in which that experience has been reconstructed” (1990: 394). Her representation of mothering, in particular, is significant for this discussion.

In *Crick Crack Monkey*, Hodge writes with much nostalgia of the warmth and vitality of the Afro-centric rural working class – its intimacies, its network of supportive relationships, its adversities and its survival tactics. This is the formative environment for the powerful mothering women of the Caribbean. Hodge’s characters make a living from agriculture and small-scale marketing (Ma), or by depending on a series of male partners (Tantie). In contrast to the affirmation of these larger-than-life characters, Hodge treats the failure of the imperial mother/land harshly. The failure of the system to nurture and impart life and sustenance to a people is captured in the faded portrait of the white ancestress – the quintessential borrowed image of Olive Senior’s poem, “Colonial Girl’s School”. Metonymically frozen into a disapproving gaze, like the imperial order, the portrait is fading into antiquity, but resolutely frowning on generations of errant children because they do not reflect her departing glory. Hodge valorises instead the maternal ancestress, the African great-grandmother. In keeping with African cosmology, the individual belongs to the nurturing community comprising the unborn, the living and the dead. The great-grandmother has long since migrated to the land of the undead, but remains able to impart identity to successive generations through the power of naming. This has the potential to erase the denigrating speaking of the European external structure, but the transference is under threat due to a collective amnesia, induced by the horror of the New World experience.

Hodge is representative of the emergent Afrocentric Caribbean female writers of the 1970s, who, in the battle against erasure and in response to the imperative need to recover so-called “reluctant matriarchs”, asserted the visibility and vocality of a powerful matrilineage rooted in a distinctly Caribbean-Afrocentrism rather than Africa. Hodge’s representation of the Caribbean mother/woman is fundamentally an idealised, near-deified (though often contradictory) portrayal of foremothers – a literary genuflection that honours the amazing survival strategies exerted by lower-strata Afro-Caribbean mothers. Similar quests and representations resonate throughout the African diaspora, as literary daughters such as Alice Walker and Paule Marshall find themselves “in search of their mother’s gardens”.² Such representations are associated with the exalted philosophical position of mothers in traditional African society. Yet this literary phenomenon is a distinctly New World creation, related to the nationalist

quest for a Caribbean motherland to honour, within which to root and sprout a Caribbean female subjectivity. The excavation/recovery/recuperation/ inscription of a matrilineage ensures, in turn, the inheritance of a “true true name” for the literary daughters. However, as revealed by Jean King’s “Sad Mother Ballad”, self-representation of mothering is not always this generous and idealistic.

As vigorous, validating and necessary as the evocation of Afro-Caribbean mothering was for the post-independence period of nation-building, a different dynamic has been manifesting itself in the most recent wave of Caribbean women’s literature. The newest arrivals on the Caribbean literary scene have been the Indo-Caribbean woman writers. Predictably, their expression of voice had been constrained by late access to education, along with predisposition to early marriage and childbearing. The Indian woman was the icon of “pure” ethnic identity and bearer of the requirement to maintain a smooth, coherent communal face, thereby protecting the purity of a people under siege.

Indo-Caribbean writers are embracing vastly different ideological objectives and representational politics. Lakshmi Persaud has authored four novels to date. Her earliest novels, *Butterfly in the Wind* and *Sastra*, deal with acculturation and migrations. They locate the voice and subjectivity of her protagonists securely within a revitalised Hinduism, as a gracious oasis and shield against the chaotic disorder of the dominant and adversarial black-dominated Creole society in Trinidad. Janice Shineborne rejects an enforced creolisation, opting instead for reclamation/recuperation of “coolie” identity,³ while Ramabai Espinet defines the ambivalent position of the East Indian woman in relation to Creole society (“Barred”), and crafts “Indian Robber Talk”, claiming a syncretic creativity to be afforded by access to the entire West Indian cultural heritage.

I focus here on what the work of Shani Mootoo brings to the hotly contested representational issue in terms of ethnic and sexual representation. Mootoo, a visual artist, filmmaker, Indo-Trinidadian, Irish-born Canadian-resident lesbian writes politicised, transgressive fiction with the intention of slaying as many sacred cows as possible with her superbly crafted weaponry. Mootoo “planasses”⁴ the iconographical representations of femininity and masculinity, including breaking the taboo on explicit representations of lesbian sex acts within Caribbean literature. She indulges in a bewildering postmodern imaging and play of subjectivities. In “Out on Main Street”, for instance, Mootoo sets up a range of contradictory discourses to explore the relationships between individuals, genders, ethnicities and migrants, and how these interface with cultural artefacts such as language, food and dress.

The first-person narrative voice, again speaking on behalf of the collectivity, frames a multiplicity of potential responses to the central question of “Who are we?” In terms of ancestral belonging, her first-person narrator confesses, “We ain’t good grade A Indians”; and in relation to New World acculturation, the declaration is “We is kitchen Indians”. Mootoo likewise refuses to allow her character any fixed gender identity. Instead, she sketches as her first-person narrator, central character and mediator of the fictional universe, a butch lesbian who vacillates between an unfemme, strong-man “monkey” stance (who is jealous when men eye her excessively femme lover), and a femme “jiggly-wiggly” identity, geared to attract the same men – on the grounds that they overlook her as if she was “a gender they forget to classify” (1993: 48). Mootoo takes a shot here at the manner in which gender orientation disciplines the body into postures that perform hyper-masculinity – the strong-man “monkey” stance suggestive of excessive muscle and body mass, and hyper-femininity – “jiggle-wiggly” movements suggestive of excessive curvaceousness. In both cases, performance and excess are evident.

Clearly Mootoo sets out to undermine what Judith Butler terms the culturally determined grid of heterosexuality. The gender identities that she presents may be transgressive, but they are also extremely polarised, recreating a reversal of the terms of discourse, structural inequities, poses and patterns of oppressive maleness and female interaction. The text plays with static role reversal. The narrator puts on and takes off femme and unfemme mannerisms like a cloak. She apes the jealous husband who “owns” the sexuality of his partner by trying to restrict her partner Janet’s wardrobe, based on the level of male attention she attracts. And as is the case in the stereotype of oppressive male-female relationships, Janet responds verbally with quarrelling and nagging.

Beneath the ironic humour is a re-creation/make-believe reversal of male-female inequities that feminists have long sought to demolish. Is Mootoo deconstructing the assumption that female/female liaisons are free of the tired, unproductive, gendered, power-based games couples play? Perhaps, but I believe there is more to it.

Mootoo buys into the postmodern play of identities, signs and subjectivities with a vengeance. She represents identity as an infinite play of representations, ceaselessly duplicated until the signs themselves mask the absence of basic reality at the core. So her artistry does not answer to an impulse to represent reality through fiction. Rather, it becomes what Baudrillard (1998) identifies as an impulse to create fictional simulations; to generate ever-proliferating identities

that demonstrate the impossibility of ever arriving at conclusive meaning. In other words, Mootoo's characters will never be able to answer decisively the question "Who am I?" Instead, the writer produces a highly self-conscious, fictive labyrinth, a hyper-representation that preserves the fiction of identity formation. This in turn serves to defer the psychically intolerable admission that referentiality and meaning have ceased to exist. It is too early to determine the extent to which Mootoo's bold experimentation will create a paradigm for or become representative of yet another wave of Caribbean fiction.

From the inception of Caribbean women's writing to the present, female authors have functioned as visionaries, ceaselessly pushing back the boundaries to create new paradigms for gender representation. Their fictions testify to pervasive underlying assumptions in relation to community. Gender has created commonality between women writers and readers. In each period, we see indicators of women writing to, about and for women. Yet the diverse ethnic and socio-cultural configurations of the Caribbean dictate that women also (and in some cases, primarily) write out of ethnic and cultural communities, writing the ambiguous politics of racialised identity and belonging into their fictions. Persaud's creations, for example, demonstrate that gender has not always been sufficient to override the othering generated by ethnic dissociation.⁵ Note also that successive waves of secondary migrations have served to strengthen rather than weaken the process of identity formation based on ethnicity. This is not to imply that Caribbean women writers write unproblematically out of subject locations based on ethnicity. In the case of Rhys, for instance, the white Creole subject location has been contradictory and problematic, but most of all, it has been prototypically West Indian.

What can be said about the evocation of place? Afro-Caribbean women writers from the 1970s, responding to the urgent need to restore the personhood of the African subject, set out to redress the hatred and denigration of racism, in terms which laid claim to West Indian selfhood, landscape and social reality in positive terms. Their representational constructs privileged a Caribbean style of adaptive Afrocentric matrilineage, which was interpellated as crucial for connection to the Caribbean landscape and for forging an authentic, rooted, nationalistic social order. On the other hand, the Indo-Caribbean voices emerging in the 1990s have echoed the prototypical exilic condition of Caribbean writers, even when they strongly affirm ethnic belonging. Significantly, these writers write home into the Caribbean socio-cultural landscape, grappling to define Caribbean identity while simultaneously testing the limits and potentialities

for integration into largely unaccommodating metropolitan host cultures. Much ink has been spilt over issues of homelessness, nostalgia, the centrality of the natal place, the creative schizophrenia and aesthetic fertility of the exilic condition. These issues have resonated in the work of numerous canonised male and female West Indian writers.

The most recent wave of writing demonstrates that female identity based on belonging to place is losing ground, although identity formation rooted in nostalgia in relation to a lost homeland is not. The Caribbean landscape is hauntingly inscribed as home again and again, including by persons of Caribbean parentage who interpellate themselves as Caribbean writers. Always crafting new literary icons, women writers are now traversing new transnational, transgendered, transgressive terrains (Dionne Brand and Patricia Powell also fall into this category) in which gender constructions do not sit easily with traditional ethnic identity formations. In the case of Mootoo, her gendered positioning as lesbian overrides her ethnic positioning. Yet she writes frankly and powerfully of a highly eroticised homoerotic domain, which carefully recreates all of the tired strictures of male-female inequity.

At each stage, the women writers mentioned here fashion iconic representations of women for brave new worlds. Yet, in relation to the womanist objectives of crafting liberatory spaces for and valorising representations of women, the latest icons seem to suggest that the more things change, the more they remain the same. What, then, is the prognosis for the future? The clearest indicator is the need to explore women's lives through critical approaches that balance the variables of race, class and gender in mutually interrogative relation.

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Footnotes

- 1 This argument is outlined in my essay entitled "Homecoming without Home: An Intertextual Reading of *Wide Sargasso Sea* and *No Telephone to Heaven*".
- 2 Yet the search and its outcomes extend beyond simple idealisation. For example, Alice Walker went to the extent of presenting herself as the relative of Zora Neale Hurston as she pursued the [her]story of this rebellious female precursor, erected

a monument to mark her humble grave, and published a narrative in her honour, thereby restoring her as a foremost literary foremother.

- 3 The term “coolie” has been used in the Caribbean and elsewhere as a derogatory reference to persons of Indian descent. In much the same way that terms such as “queer” and “black” have been recuperated and deployed for purposes of self-representation and affirmation, Indo-Caribbean female writers are selectively recovering and embracing the term “coolie”.
- 4 The term “planass” means to hit with the flat blade of a cutlass.
- 5 For a fuller discussion of this contention, see my essay “East/West/Indian/Woman/Other: At the Crossroads of Gender and Ethnicity”.

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