

Theses of the PhD Dissertation

**Non-Conforming Women in Neoliberal Cities:
Re-thinking Empowerment in Contemporary Diaspora
Fiction and Film**

Chattopadhyay Shrimoyee

Supervisor: Dr. Györke Ágnes



University of Debrecen

Doctoral School of Literature and Cultural Studies

Debrecen, 2023

1. The antecedents and objectives of the doctoral dissertation, the delimitation of the dissertation topic

The aim of this dissertation is to investigate the complex role space and movement play in the representation of South Asian diasporic communities in contemporary diaspora literature, the question of female empowerment in neoliberal Western cities, and the impact of trauma on female identities. I focus on the literary and cinematic portrayal of South Asian people's migration to the UK and the US after the Second World War. The literary narratives I explore include Jhumpa Lahiri's *The Namesake* (2003), Monica Ali's *Brick Lane* (2003), Jhumpa Lahiri's "Mrs. Sen's," from her collection of short stories titled *Interpreter of Maladies* (1999), Chitra Divakaruni's *The Mistress of Spices* (1997), and Bharati Mukherjee's *Jasmine* (1989). The cinematic narratives are the following: Gurinder Chadha's *Bend it like Beckham* (2002) and *Bhaji on the Beach* (1994).

In the selected narratives I discuss how the identities of the female characters are transformed in neoliberal cities, which I define as the cities that are the "loci for innovation and growth, and [are] zones of developed governance and local institutional experimentation" (Peck et al. 57). Investigating whether diasporic women acquire a sense of agency in these metropolises, my analysis showcases that although the promise of freedom neoliberal cities offer often turns out to be deceptive, the female characters become more empowered in the West compared to their positions in their home countries. Nevertheless, it has to be foregrounded that the degree of agency diasporic women acquire varies based on their intersectional differences, such as differences in religion, marital status, and class.

Although a number of books and articles have been published on the question of diasporic identities and gender in contemporary film and literature, the texts I analyse have not been studied in a comparative framework yet. Books such as Avtar Brah's *Cartographies*

of Diaspora: Contesting Identities, Inderpal Grewal's *Transnational America: Feminism, Diaspora, Neoliberalisms*, Sarah Ilott's *New Postcolonial British Genres: Shifting the Boundaries*, Yasmin Hussain's *Writing Diaspora: South Asian Women, Culture and Ethnicity*, Jigna Desai's *Beyond Bollywood: The Cultural Politics of South Asian Diasporic Film*, and Éva Pataki's doctoral dissertation *Space, Movement and Identity in Contemporary British Asian Fiction*, for instance, explore issues related to migration, such as alienation, nostalgia, the quest for identity, and the interstitial place constituted between home and host cultures. My dissertation contributes to the existing discourse on gender, space and diaspora in a number of ways. I focus specifically on South Asian women writers and directors, who are first- and second-generation immigrants in the West, in order to understand how their works depict female empowerment, which is an issue that has not been explored in the narratives I analyse in a comparative manner yet. I study both British and American settings, thus my work can serve as a basis for further comparative literary and cultural analyses on migration and integration in these countries.

The literary and cinematic texts I read emphasise how female identities are constituted in the interstitial place between “home,” which is the native land of the diasporic characters, and “exile,” which is the country of their destination. During the displacement from their home countries to the host nation, South Asian diasporic characters experience uprooting and re-rooting as they encounter various cultural norms which are different from their native traditions and customs. However, the narratives not only explore how the characters feel but they also often expose how others see them and the tensions that result from this clash.

The primary aim of this dissertation is to showcase the ways in which diasporic female identities are constituted in Western neoliberal cities. I study the impact of Western locations on female identity formation at various scales, including private places, such as apartments, and public locations, such as streets, for instance. I also investigate the subversive gestures

diasporic women perform, such as mimicry, which challenges Western norms, as Homi Bhabha argues, and parody, which subverts the patriarchal norms of their home countries. I also aim to map the intersectional differences that characterise South Asian migrants, and analyse, for instance, the ways in which religion and marital status have an impact on the agency of diasporic women. I also investigate how female protagonists recreate their cultural traditions in the host countries, especially through cooking traditional food, and how characters who escape from traumatic events in their home countries cope with these experiences in the West.

2. An overview of the methods used

My dissertation relies on transdisciplinary approaches, such as cultural geography, trauma studies, food studies, theories of neoliberalism and intersectionality, which provide the theoretical framework for my research. I apply close reading to analyse the diasporic narratives in this theoretical context, which consists in an in-depth analysis of the narratives, focusing on the specific tropes and details of significant episodes and scenes. With the help of close reading, I look at the specific ways in which displacement, identity and empowerment become intertwined and indispensable aspects of diasporic literature.

In order to investigate the movement of South Asian diasporic characters, I rely on Jon Anderson's notion of places and spaces. As the characters not only move from their home countries to the host nation but they also traverse in Western locations, Anderson's concept of geographical scales is used to explore the various scales at which identities are constituted in the narratives I explore. Doreen Massey's theory helps me understand that space is not some "absolute independent dimension," but it is "constructed out of social relations" (Massey 2). To explore the relationship between place and identity, I rely on Michel de Certeau's notion of walking in the city. These theories enable me to trace not only the impact

geographical locations in the West have on the formation of female identities, but also assist me in analysing how characters appropriate these places.

I analyse the impact of Western settings on diasporic female identity by dividing the locations into private places, such as the kitchen and the apartment in *The Namesake* and *Brick Lane*; public places, for example, the streets of London in *Brick Lane*; vehicular spaces, such as the bus in *Bhaji on the Beach* and the car in “Mrs. Sen’s,” and transitory locations, such as the football ground in *Bend it like Beckham* and ice-skating rink in *Brick Lane*. This classification helps me analyse how identities are constituted at different scales. Private locations, which are apparently claustrophobic in nature, often turn out to be refuges: for example, Mrs. Sen displays her culinary skills in the kitchen in Lahiri’s short story. Public locations may be transformed into empowering spaces: Tilo in Divakaruni’s novel, for instance, contests the patriarchal norms of her homeland by stepping outside her spice store in San Francisco. Interiors of vehicles are also depicted as transformative locations in the narratives. In Lahiri’s “Mrs Sen’s,” for instance, the protagonist’s decision to drive a car without her husband’s assistance may be considered as a cathartic event. Finally, transitory spaces, as defined by D. W. Winnicott, play a significant role in the female characters’ transformation: for example, both Ali’s and Chadha’s protagonists wear traditional attires at Western sport grounds which I read as transitory spaces, subverting the norms of the host culture as they assert themselves.

The narratives I analyse highlight that the main characters create an ambivalent space in the West. The transformation of the protagonists within the host nation is explained by Homi Bhabha’s concept of “third space” (Bhabha, *Location of Culture* 86), which he defines as a hybrid, middle ground that curves out a space for native cultures in the host nation (Bhabha, *Location of Culture* 86). Diasporic characters not only preserve some of their traditional customs in the host countries, but they also acquire norms of the host culture. This encounter

is not seamless, however; they always retain a sense of otherness, which I explore in the narratives with the help of Bhabhaian mimicry.

Diasporic characters use empowering strategies in the host nation, which I read as acts of subversion, following in the wake of Bhabha. Nevertheless, Bhabha does not take gender into account, which is the main focus of my dissertation. Therefore, apart from relying on his notion of mimicry, which refers to copying yet challenging Western practices, I introduce the term parody to analyse acts of subversion female characters perform in order to challenge the norms imposed on them by the patriarchal traditions of their home countries. Furthermore, I rely on Bhabha's concept of vernacular cosmopolitanism to analyse the disposition of the diasporic characters. According to him, diasporic immigrants can be divided into two broader groups: global and vernacular cosmopolitans. In contrast to the popular notion of cosmopolitanism as an elite phenomenon, Bhabha focuses on the migrants who escape violence and poverty in their home countries and move to the West. I read diasporic female characters as vernacular cosmopolitans since they, too, move away from their homeland in order to escape patriarchal oppression and financial crisis.

To analyse why female protagonists prefer urban metropolises, David Harvey's theory of neoliberalism and the concept of neoliberal cities is used. Apart from relying on Harvey's notion of free market (Harvey 2), which refers to the limitations of neoliberalism, I turn to the work of Mitchum Huehls and Rachel Smith, who claim that neoliberalism becomes what we are, a mode of our existence (Huehls and Smith 9). Furthermore, I foreground that Western cities do not offer unlimited freedom drawing on the theories of Jamie Peck and Adam Tickell, who argue that "while the utopian rhetoric of neoliberalism is focused on the liberation of competitive markets and individual freedoms, the reality of neoliberal programs is that they are typically defined by the tasks of dismantling those alien state and social forms that constituted their political inheritance" (Peck and Tickell 29). With the help of these

theories my dissertation investigates the relationship between neoliberal cities and the identity formation of diasporic characters.

Drawing on the theory of Stuart Hall, which posits that “identification is always constructed through ambivalence” (Hall, *Essential Essays* 69), I trace the formation of diasporic identities in the West. But as Hall’s theory is particularly focused on the Caribbean diaspora, it is Avtar Brah’s argument that helps me explore how identity is “constituted in and through culture” (Brah 21) in the South Asian diasporic context. It is also inevitable to acknowledge the internal differences that characterise South Asian diasporic identities and how these characters face discrimination based on these differences. Kimberle Crenshaw’s notion of intersectionality, which “highlights the need to account for multiple grounds of identity” (Crenshaw 1245) among women of colour is used to probe into the differences that characterise diasporic women, such as class, marital status, language, and religion.

When the diasporic characters are away from their home countries, they try to recreate their cultural traditions through various means, for instance, by exchanging letters, listening to South Asian music, wearing traditional clothes, and preparing South Asian food, to name a few. To analyse the relentless efforts of first-generation female characters to preserve their native culture in the West, I rely on Avtar Brah’s notion of “homing desire” (Brah 189), which she defines as the desire of the diasporic immigrants to create a “home-like” place in the host nation. But the diasporic characters are aware of the fact that despite their efforts to preserve their cultural traditions in the host nation, “home” will always remain a “mythic place” (Brah 188) where they can never return to.

Theories of Anita Mannur, Pere Gallardo and Jopi Nyman are used to investigate the impact of food and culinary arts on the formation of diasporic female identities. Diasporic characters cook traditional food in order to feel connected to their homelands, as is seen in

the case of Lahiri's narratives, *The Namesake* and "Mrs. Sen's." Although the protagonists are in America, they try to recreate their native concoctions. For diasporic women, food becomes a symbol of nostalgia: as Mannur argues, "[food becomes the] central part of the cultural imagination of diasporic populations" (Mannur 7). However, food also becomes associated with resistance as characters assert their cultural traditions by mixing Western food with Indian ingredients in Chadha's *Bhaji on the Beach*, for instance.

To explore the impact of trauma on female identity, I rely on the theories of Cathy Caruth, Stef Craps, and Jeffrey Alexander. Caruth argues that trauma is sometimes "*not known* in the first instance [but] returns to haunt the survivor later on" (Caruth 4, italics in the original). However, Caruth's theory fails to acknowledge the non-Western experiences of trauma, which is an issue Stef Craps and Jeffrey Alexander call attention to, and which my dissertation investigates in Mukherjee's *Jasmine* and in Ali's *Brick Lane*: the protagonists, who come from Third World countries, are haunted by traumatic memories in these novels, which they attempt to resolve in the West.

3. The new academic results of the dissertation

My dissertation explores five key aspects of female empowerment, which I discuss in five chapters. These are the following: inclusion in the market economy in Western neoliberal cities; appropriation of Western locations; practicing solidarity despite intersectional differences; recreating native cultural traditions in the West; and overcoming traumatic experiences.

Western neoliberal cities offer refuge to the diasporic characters as these women become part of the market economy despite the obvious exploitation they experience. Furthermore, they gain agency to a certain degree compared to what they have been entitled to in their home countries. Diasporic characters can be read as vernacular cosmopolitans

because they leave their home countries to escape from the patriarchal oppression, as is seen in the case of the main characters in Ali's, Divakaruni's and Mukherjee's narratives. Their participation in the market economy can even be seen as a subversive gesture, which is evident in Ali's *Brick Lane*.

Locations in the West are appropriated by the South Asian diasporic characters as they practice their own cultural traditions at these places, transforming them into lived spaces, to use Michael de Certeau's term. They perform mimicry to subvert Western norms, which often takes place at transitory sites, such the ice-skating rink in *Brick Lane*, where Nazneen ice-skates in a sari, and the seaside in *Bhaji on the Beach*, where characters season French Fries with Indian spices. Besides mimicry, which is used to subvert the norms of the host culture, diasporic protagonists also challenge the patriarchal norms associated with their home countries. For instance, Chadha's film *Bhaji on the Beach* opens with the portrayal of a larger-than-normal image of the Hindu deity, Vishnu. I read this episode as an instance of parody. The size of the image and the sound effects add a melodramatic aspect to the scene. This scene mocks the god-fearing attitude of Indian people and reveals that the protagonist, who used to abide by the norms of her homeland, evolves into a more empowered individual.

The narratives I explore suggest that religion is the most significant aspect of the characters' identities, which I have studied with the help of the analytical framework of intersectionality. Characters such as Ashima and Mrs. Sen, who are Hindus, are in a more privileged position compared to Nazneen and Jess, who are Muslim and Sikh, respectively, as they have to obey religious norms that are more difficult to deal with than the norms imposed on Hindus. Despite the intersectional differences, instances of solidarity abound in the narratives I have analysed, yet solidarity depends on the recognition of intersectional differences, otherwise it may turn into another form of oppression, as my analysis demonstrates. Besides religion, marital status also becomes a significant aspect of

intersectional difference: my dissertation showcases that women who are widowed or separated from their husbands, as Jasmine and Nazneen, for instance, become more empowered than characters who are emotionally and financially dependent on their husbands, such as Mrs. Sen.

My analysis reveals that food and culinary arts express the main aspects of homing desire. Food is not only a symbol of cultural ties, but it also acts as a medium for female expression in the narratives, for instance, Mrs. Sen in Lahiri's short story uses her culinary skills to dissipate homesickness and negotiate her nostalgic feelings. Attitudes towards food also become a marker of difference between first- and second-generation diasporic characters: while first-generation protagonists are obsessed with their traditional recipes, the subsequent generations prefer Western dishes to their parents' native food. My analysis also reveals that native culinary practices may even become a safe channel to release emotional anguish for migrants who experienced traumatic events, such as Jasmine, who otherwise distances herself from her home culture.

The narratives analysed show that protagonists escape from both collective and individual traumas. In Mukherjee's *Jasmine*, the main character moves to America to escape from the political riot in her home country, which is the collective trauma the novel engages with, and the loss of her husband, which is her individual trauma. Ali's *Brick Lane* shows that collective trauma can also become intergenerational, which is experienced by Nazneen, who is haunted by her mother's suicide. As these narratives engage with the traumas of the postcolonial world, they both shed light on historical events that are hardly known to Western readers, such as Sikh separatism in India, and offer insights into non-Western conceptualisations of trauma.

Finally, the narratives I have studied reveal that during displacement, female characters adopt four different attitudes, which, nevertheless, may intersect. Some of them attempt to find a balance between the traditions of their home countries and the host nation, for example, Ashima in Lahiri's *The Namesake* and Tilo in Divakaruni's *The Mistress of Spices*; they may refuse to integrate into the host culture, as Mrs Sen in Lahiri's short story; some characters reject their own cultural traditions due to traumatic experiences, as Jasmine in Mukherjee's novel; and some may adopt a more playful and subversive attitude towards both cultures, which is characterised by mimicry and parody, as Chadha's films showcase.



Registry number:
Subject:

DEENK/49/2023.PL
PhD Publication List

Candidate: Shrimoyee Chattopadhyay

Doctoral School: Doctoral School of Literary and Cultural Studies

MTMT ID: 10067387

List of publications related to the dissertation

Foreign language international book chapters (1)

1. **Chattopadhyay, S.:** Intercultural Movement and Food Culture in Monica Ali's Brick Lane and Gurinder Chadha's Bend it like Beckham.
In: Place and Space in Anglophone Literature and Arts. Ed.: Jaroslav Kušnir, Cambridge Scholars Publishing, Newcastle, [Közlésre elfogadva], 1-7, 2022.

Foreign language scientific articles in Hungarian journals (3)

2. **Chattopadhyay, S.:** Home and Homelessness in Jhumpa Lahiri's "Mrs. Sen's".
Pro&Contra. 5 (1), 5-24, 2021. EISSN: 2630-8916.
DOI: <http://dx.doi.org/10.33033/pc.2021.1.5>
3. **Chattopadhyay, S.:** Beyond Borders: A Review of Jopi Nyman's Displacement, Memory, and Travel in Contemporary Migrant Writing.
Pro&Contra. 1, 97-101, 2018. EISSN: 2630-8916.
DOI: <http://dx.doi.org/10.33033/pc.2018.1.97>
4. **Chattopadhyay, S.:** Crossing Borders in Search of "Home": Gender and Empowerment in Jhumpa Lahiri's The Namesake.
Eger j. Eng. stud. 17, 41-52, 2017. ISSN: 1786-5638.

Foreign language scientific articles in international journals (1)

5. **Chattopadhyay, S.:** Home and Away: The Projection of Bengal in Indian Diaspora Fiction.
Bangabidya. 10, 568-575, 2018. ISSN: 2277-7717.





Foreign language conference proceedings (1)

6. **Chattopadhyay, S.:** "Recreating a Smaller Bengal within Neoliberal Urban Locations": Female Empowerment in Monica Ali's Brick Lane and Jhumpa Lahiri's The Namesake.
Bangabidya. 11-12, 256-265, 2022. ISSN: 2277-7717.

The Candidate's publication data submitted to the iDEa Tudóstér have been validated by DEENK on the basis of the Journal Citation Report (Impact Factor) database.

22 February, 2023





Nyilvántartási szám: DEENK/49/2023.PL
Tárgy: PhD Publikációs Lista

Jelölt: Chattopadhyay, Shrimoyee

Doktori Iskola: Irodalom- és Kultúratudományok Doktori Iskola

MTMT azonosító: 10067387

A PhD értekezés alapjául szolgáló közlemények

Idegen nyelvű, külföldi könyvrészletek (1)

1. **Chattopadhyay, S.:** Intercultural Movement and Food Culture in Monica Ali's Brick Lane and Gurinder Chadha's Bend it like Beckham.
In: Place and Space in Anglophone Literature and Arts. Ed.: Jaroslav Kušnir, Cambridge Scholars Publishing, Newcastle, [Közlésre elfogadva], 1-7, 2022.

Idegen nyelvű tudományos közlemények hazai folyóiratban (3)

2. **Chattopadhyay, S.:** Home and Homelessness in Jhumpa Lahiri's "Mrs. Sen's".
Pro&Contra. 5 (1), 5-24, 2021. EISSN: 2630-8916.
DOI: <http://dx.doi.org/10.33033/pc.2021.1.5>
3. **Chattopadhyay, S.:** Beyond Borders: A Review of Jopi Nyman's Displacement, Memory, and Travel in Contemporary Migrant Writing.
Pro&Contra. 1, 97-101, 2018. EISSN: 2630-8916.
DOI: <http://dx.doi.org/10.33033/pc.2018.1.97>
4. **Chattopadhyay, S.:** Crossing Borders in Search of "Home": Gender and Empowerment in Jhumpa Lahiri's The Namesake.
Eger j. Eng. stud. 17, 41-52, 2017. ISSN: 1786-5638.

Idegen nyelvű tudományos közlemények külföldi folyóiratban (1)

5. **Chattopadhyay, S.:** Home and Away: The Projection of Bengal in Indian Diaspora Fiction.
Bangabidya. 10, 568-575, 2018. ISSN: 2277-7717.





Idegen nyelvű konferencia közlemények (1)

6. **Chattopadhyay, S.:** "Recreating a Smaller Bengal within Neoliberal Urban Locations": Female Empowerment in Monica Ali's Brick Lane and Jhumpa Lahiri's The Namesake.
Bangabidya. 11-12, 256-265, 2022. ISSN: 2277-7717.

A DEENK a Jelölt által az iDEa Tudóstérbe feltöltött adatok bibliográfiai és tudománymetriai ellenőrzését a tudományos adatbázisok és a Journal Citation Reports Impact Factor lista alapján elvégezte.

Debrecen, 2023.02.22.

