

## In and Out the Global Village: Gender Relations in a Cosmopolitan World

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The feminization of culture, thus, became a feminist revision of culture, specializing in bringing women from the margins of history to the center of academic attention.  
Rey Chow

If cross-cultural movements are nowadays the basis upon which our societies are structured, one of our greatest challenges today is to try to understand the circumstances under which they happen and, above all, what their consequences are. The transnational flow of subjects and peoples beyond delineated borders, frontiers and spaces has led to the questioning of the belief in a fixed and univocal concept of a nation (as Benedict Anderson argues), in a centralized national identity and in the notion of cultural authenticity—beliefs that have been central to the establishment of a national literary tradition in many countries. Today, however, the notions of displacement and deterritorialization, often understood as, “the detachment of knowledge, action, information, and identity from a specific place or physical source,” as Hoffman defines it, have predominated in contemporary literary production, forcing a revision in the way we discuss national literatures (44).

In this context, it is relevant to observe how the migratory movements and experiences in transit define the present transnational scenario and how contemporary writers undertake the task of recording the experience of mobility from different perspectives, be it an internal/inward movement, through domestic mobility, or an external/outbound one, through the

displacement across borders. Cross cultural movements very often take place in the form of migrant and diasporic literatures, either through the migrant that looks inwardly at the new culture, the one that looks outwardly to the place of so-called “origin” or the one that is caught in-between, in transit between worlds, spaces, languages, and perceptions. Mobility also often provides a view from the outside in—as outsiders look in—or inside out—as located subjects look out at varied geopolitical spaces.

In this context, many contemporary writers have recently focused on the production of transcultural fictions that negotiate new possibilities of locations and positionings, new identities in translocal and transnational movements and, by doing so, they have engendered new perceptions of the often multiple societies and cultures with which they inevitably become associated. A questioning of the effects of mobility often brings to the fore the undeniable fact that transnational and translocal movements may change not only the experience of subjects in transit and their perception of a place, but, first and foremost, they influence the experience of those who inhabit those spaces on a more permanent basis, that is, those who “stay put” or the “natives” who also have to deal with the impacts and consequences of transnational movements (Brah 209).

Seen from this perspective, identity and place become deeply interconnected in the ambivalent experiences of subjects in transit. As James Clifford points out, “in cosmopolitan perspective, identity is never only about location.... Identity is also, inescapably, about displacement and relocation, the experience of sustaining and mediating complex affiliations, multiple attachments” (“Mixed Feelings” 369). In other words, identities or the formation of subjectivities become, in our contemporary world, a process in flux, a temporary belonging rather than a unifying concept. It is possible, therefore, to speak not of a national or personal identity/subjectivity per se but of identities that will be defined by a process of being in the world—a kind of transient citizenship, a situatedness that points to how subjects situate and position themselves in a specific spatial context. The experience of culture mobility is, above all, not only a historical condition but also an intellectual reality, as Rey Chow puts it, “the reality of being an intellectual” (15) in our contemporary world. In the case of migrant or diasporic writings, culture mobility seems to be part not only of the fictional world described, but also of the writers’ active roles as intellectuals – often very active ones.

More importantly, Clifford states, diasporic discourses “reflect the sense of being part of an ongoing transnational network that includes the homeland, not as something simply left behind, but as a place of attachment in a contrapuntal modernity” (“Diasporas” 311). Our challenge today is, however, to ask how this new diaspora of the contemporaneity is different from other histories of dispersed peoples. For Clifford, diaspora consciousness is “constituted both negatively and positively” (“Diasporas” 311) in that the modern diaspora partakes of a double logic in the sense that it often resists and uses hegemonic forces. Several contemporary critics share Clifford’s ambivalent feeling towards diasporic movements. “The same geographical space,” Avtar Brah, for example, states, “comes to articulate different histories and meanings, such that ‘home’ can simultaneously be a place of safety and terror” (207).

In this new contemporary paradigm, feminist literary criticism and gender studies have played a central role in addressing new challenges brought about by this change of perspective, often problematized in works by contemporary women writers that discuss the issue of gender relations in a transnational scenario. We may notice how contemporary writers, who were, until recently, mostly concerned about presenting the predicament and dilemmas of living in transit, now approach the issue through a variety of topics, regarding the role of women and gender relations in this new contemporary socio-cultural scenario. As Spivak puts it, “if the colonial subject was largely a class subject, and if the subject of post-coloniality was variously racialised, then the subject of globalisation is gendered” (“Claiming Transformation” 123). Spivak’s argument calls our attention to the role of women as the target of international civil societies that becomes incorporated as an integral part of the global project for the establishment of a new social and economic order (“Claiming Transformation” 123).

It interests me how we can approach the challenge of discussing contemporary literature by women in view of these phenomena. As Diana Brydon puts it, it is not enough to reject these issues arguing against the disastrous effect of globalization. It is necessary to address the complexity of the notion and, consequently, to devise means to create productive, engaging counter-discourses or discourses that create the possibility of agency (61-63). In this present scenario, it is important to address the roles of cosmopolitan intellectual women that envisage this phenomenon

through the consequences and the challenges it brings to gender relations and how the process itself has produced effects within and beyond the category of gender.

Contemporary diasporic women writers usually address gender issues as they portray the discursive construction of subjects in a context of cultural and social displacement, transnational dialogues and diversified forms of cultural contacts. Despite living in national states and assuming a “national” citizenship, they bring their experience as “ex-centric” (Hutcheon 12) and hyphenated subjects to their literary production; thus, contributing to question values and destabilize concepts, such as that of the nation. They invariably offer a distinctive and subjective perception of the country they now live in—a perception that is unavoidably informed by their gendered diasporic experience.

As part of a “new diaspora”—a term employed by Gayatri Spivak to explain this contemporary migratory phenomenon—, these narratives depict the central role that women play in this new social-cultural context (“Diasporas” 249-52). For Clifford, keeping in mind gender as a category for analysis of forms of dislocation provides a powerful insight into the experience of diaspora. It is, therefore, necessary, in his view, to consider the effects of diaspora experience in gender relations (“Diasporas” 313-14). Along the same lines, Spivak argues that women as diasporic subjects are placed in a highly uneasy and rather questionable position. For Spivak, this new diaspora of contemporaneity, as opposed to the old one that was the result of religious oppression, war, slavery, imperialist politics, has as a new element the differentiating role of women. Nevertheless, despite the role of women as a key figure in this new diaspora, she stresses the fact that it is important to consider the different forms of oppression that women all over the world suffer, but “not in the same way” (“Diasporas” 249-52).

Overall, as several critics have observed, women play a crucial role in this new diaspora as “this group of gendered outsiders inside are much in demand by the transnational agencies of globalization for employment and collaboration” (Spivak, “Diasporas” 251). Brah also observes that this is part of a phenomenon that she terms “feminisation of migration,” in the sense that “women comprise a growing segment of migrations in all regions and all types of migration” (179). Marx adds that, in fact, what we can observe nowadays is that there is a “feminization of globalization” as women have become the most valuable commodity in the global market

(1-3). According to Spivak, however, these gendered diasporic subjects should think of themselves “not as victims below but agents above, resisting the consequences of globalization as well as redressing the cultural vicissitudes of migrancy” (“Diasporas” 251). In her words, instead of accepting a victimized role in the process, diasporic women, as the subjects that are most alienated from a situation of agency in civil society, should resist being incorporated into this new system by adopting the role of actors in a process she terms “transnational literacy” (Spivak, *Critique* 4).

At this point, I would like to cite a quote from the novel *Brick Lane* (2003) by Monica Ali, a writer born in Bangladesh who has lived in England since she was three years old, and whose first work became an immediate best seller in view of the contemporary appeal of its subject matter. What interests me in this case is the introductory passage from the novel that addresses precisely the notion mentioned earlier by Spivak, regarding women’s role in the present transnational world. The third person narrative voice describes the transformation the major character, Nazneen, goes through as a consequence of the dislocation she is, at first, forced to undergo:

What could not be changed must be borne. And since nothing could be changed, everything had to be borne. This principle ruled her life. It was mantra, fettle, and challenge. So that, at the age of thirty-four, after she had been given three children and had one taken away, when she had a futile husband and been fated a young and demanding love, when for the first time she could not wait for the future to be revealed but had to make it for herself, she was as startled by her own agency as an infant who waves a clenched fist and strikes itself upon the eye. (5)

However, agency in this case, despite its “positive” outcome for the life of the major character, comes as a surprise and, contradictorily, is not less painful than her previous condition because it entails a major change and in a whole structure of thought and gender relations – it is, nevertheless, a given under these circumstances, in the sense that, for this character and many others, there is no way back.

Nevertheless, as Spivak, Kamboureli and Chow have pointed out, one has to be aware of the danger of generalizing women’s experience and using the actions of women who resist and reject being incorporated into their system as standing/speaking for all women. Each situation, despite

the similarities, is unique and has to be viewed as possibilities of analyzing and theorizing the many experiences of women under diasporic conditions. Ella Shohat observes that the traumatic event of 9/11 has produced an urgency regarding the direction taken by multicultural and transnational feminisms that had developed in the previous decade. She adds that a feminist relational and multicultural project must at this point rethink the concepts of identities, the role of intellectuals and interdisciplinarity (20). In this sense, Shohat privileges a relational analysis and a multi-perspective of feminist studies, instead of an analysis that focuses upon specific locations (20). For Shohat, it is not a matter only of thinking difference in gender perspectives that are often still attached to essentialist notions of gender relations and behavior, but rather to propose to engage in “dialogical encounters of difference” through different viewpoints and positions that can be contrasted and theorized (20).

I would like now to go back to the notion of feminization of diaspora, referred to by Brah, by citing a quote from a novel by Jhumpa Lahiri, an Indo-American writer that also discusses the global movements of contemporary societies. In her novel, *The Namesake* (2003), Lahiri depicts the experience of migration and diaspora precisely in terms of feminization. As the narrative voice states, regarding the feelings of one of her female characters:

For being a foreigner, Ashima is beginning to realize, is a sort of lifelong pregnancy—a perpetual wait, a constant burden, a continuous feeling out of sorts. It is an ongoing responsibility, a parenthesis in what had once been ordinary life, only to discover that that previous life has vanished, replaced by something more complicated and demanding. Like pregnancy, being a foreigner, Ashima believes, is something that elicits the same curiosity from strangers, the same combination of pity and respect. (49-50)

The diasporic experience is felt, in this case, through the female body, one that is, not only gendered but also pregnant. By comparing the experience of diaspora to pregnancy, the female character expresses, in a meaningful way, the intrinsic relation, mentioned above in theoretical terms, between this new diaspora and the experiences of women.

Likewise, in *In Another Place, Not Here* (1996), the Caribbean-Canadian writer, Dionne Brand, focuses specifically on the experiences of

women characters as the movement of spatial dislocation becomes often a means of questioning the construction of gender identities. Diaspora space for these characters is not only constitutive of a movement of people in transit but rather the possibility of challenging the notion of stable national and personal identities under diasporic conditions. In this novel, Brand tells the story of two female characters, Elizete and Verlia, as they move from their Caribbean island to Toronto in search for a better way of life to arrive there not only homeless, but also “countryless, landless, nameless” (48). They seem to be fully aware of the role women have been playing in this new diaspora, as the quote below shows: “These women, our mothers, a whole generation of them, left us. They went to England or America or Canada or some big city as fast as their wit would get them there because they were women and all they had to live on was wit since nobody considers them whole people. They scraped money together. . . . They put it away coin by coin” (230). Like the quote from *The Namesake*, this one also makes reference to the feminization of migration and of globalization by highlighting the fact that women form a growing segment in contemporary globalized diaspora. It also refers to an additional role that women have acquired in the present transnational world: as commodities and profitable goods whose labor is in great demand by cosmopolitan agents, as Spivak, Brah and Marx suggest.

The diasporic experience for these women and their consequent feeling of not belonging emerge symbolically from their spatial dislocation as migrant women—a displacement that mirrors their inability to fit in or to become part of a world from which they are alienated. For Verlia and Elizete, Toronto is a city divided by racial, gender and socio-economic differences and becomes emblematic of the experience of so many diasporic subjects that move along its streets.

By the same token, in *What We All Long For* (2005), Dionne Brand’s latest novel, Toronto appears as a central reference, as a cosmopolitan space which is the recipient of large waves of migrant movements and through which subjects in transit and also those who “stay put” converge. This time, however, Brand focuses on the post-diaspora generation, that is, that generation whose parents were part of this transnational movement, and which is Canadian born, despite their multiple affiliations – “They were born in the city of people born elsewhere” (20). Furthermore, although

the novel still tends to privilege a feminine perspective, here, unlike the other novels, Brand introduces a male character (Oku) that also has to deal with the consequences and outcomes of their parents' choice of living in transit, as well as with the new paradigm of gender relations. The four major characters in the novel (Tuyen, Carla, Oku, Jackie) are, from the start, presented as a post-diaspora generation that is always caught in the middle, trying to negotiate two versions of a world in continuous change:

They all, Tuyen, Carla, Oku, and Jackie, felt as if they inhabited two countries—their parents' and their own. . . . Each left home in the morning as if making a long journey, untangling themselves from the seaweed of other shores wrapped around their parents. Breaking their doorways, they left the sleepwalk of their mothers and fathers and ran across the unobserved borders of the city, sliding across ice to arrive at their own birthplace—the city. (20)

Torn between two cultures, two perceptions of the world, these characters feel that they had “never been able to join in what their parents called ‘regular Canadian life’. The crucial piece, of course, was that they weren’t the required race” (47). It is clear from Brand’s portrayal of these characters that not only gender, but also race plays a major role in their experience in the city. In some ways, as their lives are tangled with the city that becomes part of their own experience of (not) belonging, they become “defined by the city” (66). Above all, they feel they are linked to “the city’s heterogeneity” (142), to its “polyphonic murmuring” (149). Nevertheless, they face it with some “heterogeneous baggage” (5) of their own – some baggage or luggage that is quite different from that of their parents’, especially in the way gender relations are reconfigured in their experiences. The reference to the “heterogeneous baggage” they carry over reminds us of Rosemary George’s association of living in transit with what each diasporic subject or migrant takes along in this process of mobility: the metaphor of luggage carries a meaning both material and spiritual” (8).

As the quotes above show, the Toronto portrayed in this novel, unlike the segregated one from *In Another Place Not Here*, reminds us of a cosmopolitan space and may be said to embody McLuhan’s concept of the “global village,” a kind of vast global information space that is interconnected in such a way that the local and global eventually meet. It lacks, however,



McLuhan's original laudatory tone. In this case, Toronto is the place in which a plethora of transnational workers live, in which "a stream of identities flowed": "there are Bulgarian mechanics, there are Eritrean accountants, Colombian café owners, Latvian book publishers, Welsh roofers ... Haitian and Bengali taxi drivers with Irish dispatchers" (5). They all seem to be "[t]rying to step across the borders of who they were ... They were, in fact, borderless" (213). Toronto is also the place in which the unexpected happens and where gender relations become more flexible and women have more, and different, choices regarding their lives than their mothers did before them, as the portrayal of the artist Tuyen, born to Vietnamese parents, show. She is described as "the most daring of the friends. By eighteen Tuyen had already moved out.... Tuyen was androgynous, a beautiful, perfect mix of the feminine and the masculine" (22). It is up to this androgynous and transgressive female character to collect the "many longings" of this cosmopolitan and transnational city and insert it into an installation that becomes representative of wishes and desires of its transcultural citizens.

Brand seems to give us in the two novels mentioned above two different models through which the experiences of subjects in transit are portrayed in gender terms—both highly relevant for the context of contemporary literature. On the one hand, in *Another Place, Not Here*, the focus lies on the diasporic movement of subjects in transit, especially through the depiction of the political undermining of women in these conditions. On the other hand, in *What We All Long For*, Brand explores a broader concept of mobility which can be understood as a form of cosmopolitanism, one, however, that still subsumes gender as a major category for analysis, albeit of a quite different nature.

In this sense, Brand's most recent novel takes the reader through the consequences of diaspora, in a cosmopolitanism (in the terms discussed by Robbins' and Appadurai's notions) that affects all the characters, including in gender terms. Here, we do not see the "urgency" that predominates in the previous novel, but rather the difficulty and the contradictions and ambiguities imbricated in the intricacies of gender relations in an individual level. In the end, Tuyen's installation about the "longings of the city" (160), besides giving the novel its title, reflects precisely the tone of the novel in the sense that it portrays Toronto as a city

“full of longings” (151) that comes from different peoples and divergent experiences. They are, nevertheless, individual longings, not collective and political ones as we see in *In Another Place Not Here*.

As we could observe from the references above, the contemporary women writers discussed here, as well as several others, that address the issue of the new diasporas, have often opted to foreground the way present-day transnational movements have influenced and affected the relations among individuals and the situation of women in society. Likewise, contemporary feminist literary criticism, gender studies and women’s writings have not only addressed the most complex and controversial issues in our transnational scenario, but have also become the instruments that have fostered a review of literary studies in line with what Stuart Hall once mentioned regarding cultural studies (268). Feminist literary criticism has forced a major change of direction in the discipline of literature by challenging some of the most solidified concepts about gender relations in our presently globalized world. This can also be observed in the way theoreticians and writers alike have faced one of the major challenges in the field by discussing the persistent gendered trait of contemporary diasporas.

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