

## Widows in Margin: a postcolonial feminist reading of Frances Mary Hendry's *Chandra* and Gloria Whelan's *Homeless Bird*.

Omid Ghayedi

Department of English, Neyriz Branch, Islamic Azad University, Neyriz, Iran

Daryoosh Hayati, department of English, Lamerd Branch, Islamic Azad University, Lamerd, Iran.

**Abstract:** This essay discusses two young adult novels addressing the powerlessness of widows in India: Frances Mary Hendry's *Chandra* (1997); and Gloria Whelan's *Homeless Bird* (2000). These novels seek to introduce readers to the plight of young girls of a similar age in another culture. But do they, despite their laudable intentions, propagate the schism created by reinforcing colonial perceptions of otherness rather than stimulating thought? Do they close or open discussion? Do they celebrate difference or underpin an ideology of dominance? Are the female protagonists represented as strong subjects despite their location as 'Other'? These texts about young Indian widows show one view of the position of women from a postcolonial perspective, but is this representative of all narratives written about Oriental cultures? Ellis's representations of the female protagonists Parvana and Shauzia diverge significantly from depictions of young women in *Chandra* and *Homeless Bird*. The differences between these pairs of novels require an analysis of the language used to convey 'Otherness' as well.

**Keywords:** postcolonial literature, otherness, feminism, Ideology of dominance, subaltern and hegemony.

### 1. Introduction:

Reading postcolonial theory prompts the question posed by Leela Gandhi: 'How can the historian avoid the inevitable risk of presenting herself as an authoritative representative of subaltern consciousness?' (1998, p.3), which arises naturally out of Gayatri Spivak's challenging essay '*Can the subaltern speak?*' (1985). Keeping this in mind, it seems necessary to preface any writing about postcolonial literature designed for a young adult readership with a statement of position.

Moreover, McGillis defines it as 'neocolonialism' a style of writing that ...manifests itself as both a depiction of minority cultures as inveterately other and inferior in some way to the dominant European or Eurocentric culture, or as an appropriation of other cultures – that is, an assimilation of minority cultures into the mainstream way of thinking. (McGillis 2000, p.xxiv)

A more pointed observation by Leela Gandhi locates the resistance to change in the humanist tradition, claiming that 'the entire field of the humanities is vitiated by a compulsion to claim a spurious universality and also to disguise its political investment in the production of 'major' or dominant knowledges' (1998, p.44).

Edward Said defines the Orient as 'the place of Europe's greatest and richest and oldest colonies, the source of its civilizations and its languages, its cultural contestant, and one of recurring images of the 'Other'. In addition, the Orient has helped to define Europe as its contrasting image, ideal personality, and experience". (Said 1978, pp.1-2)

*Chandra* establishes a scenario of life in another country in the first few pages by describing an exotic setting. The narrative is focalized through Chandra's perspective. She passes through her local market on the way to school, and the reader sees her world seemingly from her viewpoint. Chandra herself is portrayed as a playful, intelligent, high-achieving scholar, with sparkling eyes and a tendency to rebel internally against the

---

<sup>1</sup> Omid Ghayedi. Tel:0098-0711-09173103629, dhayati1354@gmail.com , dhayati@iaulamerd.ac.ir; E-mail: sprants3@gmail.com  
601

model of womanhood with its 'duty to be obedient and good-tempered and respectful' extolled by her mother (p.3). The contradictions of a woman's life are highlighted by Chandra's mother's loss of an individual identity.

*Yet Homeless Bird* is 'caught up in a current of tradition that threatens to sweep her toward a terrifying state', according to the cover notes. As in *Chandra*, the narrative opens with discussions of the protagonist's readiness for marriage. The poverty of this family and Koly's destined role to relieve the pressure on the amount of food available emphasize her function as a commodity in the traditional process of preserving the family. Unlike *Chandra*, she is illiterate as her parents have chosen to use their limited resources to provide her with a dowry. According to their customs, a woman's role is to work in the home; learning will be of no use to her after marriage.

## 2. Discussion

These novels depict traditional Hindu culture as overriding parental affection by insisting that a daughter's function is to contribute to the family honor by obedience and servitude, denying her own wishes if they conflict with the family's interests. Both writers make it clear that the girls are silenced in this culture of arranged marriages. The writers are speaking for them, for the subalterns. Ania Loomba discusses the difficulties arising from this commendable desire on the part of postcolonial intellectuals to 'make visible the position of the marginalized' with reference to Spivak's essay 'Can the subaltern speak?', reiterating Spivak's warning against 'romanticizing and homogenizing the subaltern subject' (1985, p.109).

Both narratives focus on the powerlessness of the young brides. The preparation of the brides for the wedding ceremony, the process of painting their hands and faces by their mothers or other female relatives, and their adornment with precious jewels are similar in both narratives- but more elaborated in *Chandra* than *Homeless Bird*. The descriptions of the wedding feasts, in each case accentuating beautiful but strange and exotic customs, focus on the importance of maintaining tradition in terms of the status of the family, but also intertwine this with concern about the expense incurred. In *Chandra*, Hendry parodies modern cultural practices, holding up to ridicule aspects like the presence at the wedding feast of 'expensive, tasteless western-style bread' (p.22) set on the table amongst the traditional food.

The differences between Oriental and Western culture is foregrounded in the descriptions of weddings, but the feeling of being chosen and feted, acquiring status, being the central figure have resonances with a society that also inscribes weddings with customs which could be seen as equally exotic from an Indian perspective. *Chandra* and *Homeless Bird* show arranged marriages as a completely Othered cultural practice, with the traces of romantic desire expressed by the protagonists rendered tragic by the mercenary traits exposed in the narratives. Again, the texts set up ambivalent desires, playing off exotic practices of dress and decoration that resonate with Western desires for marriage against the notion of sacrificial rites that deny 'true love', the Western ideal.

The way language is used in these two narratives also situates the subjects on the margins. In *Chandra*, the dialogue is peppered with hyphenated double adjectives, probably an attempt to recreate the way English is used in idiomatic speech in India. Spivak calls this 'Indian English', a hybrid of standard English, not used in Indian writing since it is viewed as an artificial written language 'used only as the medium of protest, as mockery or teratology; and sometimes as no more than local color, necessarily from above' (Spivak 1996, p.19). In Hendry's hands, expressions like 'catty-ratty', 'skinny-thinny', 'pokey-hole', 'complaining-criticizing' have the quality of pidgin English, with undertones of nursery chatter, a babyish language, insinuating that the speakers are not quite mature enough to be able to speak proper English. This mixture of romantic and exotic imagery, undermined by the critical, undermining tone of irony in *Chandra*, and the attention to the families' preoccupation with monetary values in both narratives, combine to intimate to the Western reader that the brides should be pitied.

The deep seated emotional resistance to rebellion against patriarchal authority is explained by Loomba in 'Dead women tell no tales: Issues of female subjectivity, subaltern agency and tradition in colonial and post-colonial writings on widow immolation in India':

... the disenfranchisement of Indian men led to a situation whereby women became the grounds and signs for the colonial struggle. Indian nationalisms of different shades produced their own versions of the good Hindu wife, each of which became emblematic of Indian-ness and tradition, a sign of rebellion against colonial authority and a symbol of the vision of the future. (Loomba 2006, p.312)

Chandra's refusal of her father's authority, her refusal to acquiesce to the approved behavior of self-sacrifice and abjection of widows required by the customs of his family, has a parallel with Koly's route to freedom from patriarchal dominance. What is at issue in these stories for young Western eyes is that they are related in such a way that the indigenous culture is denigrated by a continuing colonial perspective. They offer no avenue for understanding how the individual stories fit within the current political situation. Perhaps it is too disheartening to reveal that there is an increase in parts of India in society of sanctioned honor killings rather than ongoing reform (Verma, 2004).

The novels discussed here treat the two young female protagonists as part of group of victims outside the social network, proposing individual resolutions which remove them from their own culture. Chandra is saved temporarily from the immediate threat of danger posed by her father and her relatives, but it is intimated that she may have to return in the future. Koly is subsumed into the nationalist notion of modern Indian women, enjoying a degree of independence due to the benevolence of her husband. It is a romantic conclusion, designed to satisfy Western desires but preserving the oriental ambience of 'otherness'. Neither narrative fulfils the ambitions for postcolonial children's literature called for by Xie as quoted at the beginning of this chapter: they do not 'expedite the progress towards a global postcoloniality'.

The subaltern doesn't 'speak' in *Chandra* and *Homeless Bird*, but is further muted by a representation that accepts Western desires and ways of seeing as the overarching point of view. The colonial presence pervades the texts to such a degree that the intention of provoking a political consciousness is subsumed by the desire to comfort the Western reader with the idea that fate, individual courage and an inner drive for change will triumph over adversity. The fictitious lives of these exotic Indian girls, as exemplified by these award-winning novels, are retold in a fairy tale manner that keeps them safely quarantined from the world of their middle-class Western readers, who are prevented by neo-colonial filters from understanding or celebrating otherness.

Practices which characterize women's status and roles vary according to class. Women are constituted as women through the complex interaction between class, culture, religion, and other ideological institutions and frameworks. They are not 'women' – a coherent group – solely on the basis of a particular economic system or policy. Such reductive cross-cultural comparisons result in the colonization of the specifics of daily existence and the complexities of political interests which women of different social classes and cultures represent and mobilize. (Mohanty 2003a, p.61)

### 3. Conclusion

To conclude as earlier discussed the texts engage with the idea that the texts are concerned with producing stereotypes of masculinity and femininity, or of exotic and familiar. This lack of stereotypes opens up the representation of difference. Bhabha contends that the stereotype works as a 'false representation of a given reality': 'It is a simplification because it is an arrested, fixated form of representation that ... [denies]... the play of difference' (Bhabha 1994, p.107).

Consequently as it was discussed, the act of speaking for the subaltern, as Deborah Ellis has done in her books about life for young girls and their families in Afghanistan and Pakistan, derives from a belief that the West needs to be educated and enlightened about the circumstances of repression of women's rights in these countries. Ellis's writing is also prompted by her belief that Westerners are ignorant of the lives of subaltern girls and women due to the way they are portrayed by the overwhelming majority of the mainstream Western media. The objectification and co-modification of the female body that is described in Ellis's writings has the authoritative status of a passionately concerned and informed desire to give the subaltern a voice in the West, in conjunction with the few voices able to speak in the countries from which these stories originate. They

fulfill Mohanty's hope for 'expansive and inclusive visions of feminism [and the] need to be attentive to borders while learning to transcend them' (2003b, p.2).

#### 4. References

- [1] Bhabha, Homi. (1994) *The Location of Culture*. Ellis, Deborah. (2002b) *Parvana's Journey*. London and New York, Routledge. Crows Nest, Allen and Unwin.
- [2] Chow, Rey. (1996) 'Where Have All the Ellis, Deborah. (2003) *Shauzia*. Crows Nest, *Natives Gone?*', in Padmini Mongia (ed) Allen and Unwin.
- [3] *Contemporary Postcolonial Theory: Gandhi*, Leela. (1998) *Postcolonial Theory: A Reader*. London and New York, Arnold.
- [4] Ellis, Deborah. (2002a) *Parvana*. Crows Nest, Hendry, Frances Mary. (1997) *Chandra*. Allen and Unwin. Oxford, Oxford University Press.
- [5] Loomba, Ania. (2006) 'Dead women tell no tales: Issues of female subjectivity, subaltern agency and tradition in colonial and postcolonial writings on widow immolation in India', in Sue Morgan (ed), *The Feminist History Reader*. London and New York, Routledge, pp.309-22.
- [6] McGillis, Roderick (ed) (2000) *Voices of the Other: Children's Literature and the Postcolonial Context*. New York and London, Routledge.
- [7] Mohanty, Chandra Talpade (2003a) 'Under western eyes: Feminist scholarship and colonial discourses', in Reina Lewis and Sara Mills (eds) *Feminist Postcolonial Theory: A Reader*. Edinburgh, Edinburgh University Press, pp. 49-74.
- [8] Mohanty, Chandra Talpade. (2003b) *Feminism Without Borders: Decolonizing Theory, Practicing Solidarity*. Durham and London, Duke University Press.
- [9] Said, Edward. (1978) *Orientalism: Western Conceptions of the Orient*. Harmondsworth, Penguin.
- [10] Spivak, Gayatri Chakravorty. (1985) 'Can the Subaltern Speak?', in P. Williams and L.
- [11] Chrisman (eds) *Colonial Discourse and Postcolonial Theory: A Reader*. Hemel Hempstead, UK, Harvester Wheatsheaf, pp.66-111.
- [12] Spivak, Gayatri Chakravorty. (1996) 'Subaltern Talk: Interview with the Editors (29 October 1993)', in Donna Landry and Gerald MacLean (eds). *The Spivak Reader: Selected works of Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak*. New York and London, Routledge, pp. 287-308.
- [13] Stephens, John. (1992) *Language and Ideology in Children's Fiction*. London and New York, Longman.
- [14] Sweeney, Meghan. (2007) 'Better a Bridesmaid than a Bride: Nuptial Sisterhood in Maud Heart Lovelace's Betsy's Wedding' *The Lion and the Unicorn* 31,1, 1-20.
- [15] Verma, Rahul. (2004) 'Honor killings on the rise in India', [p://www.onlinewomeninpolitics.org/archives/04\\_0112\\_in\\_wrights.htm](http://www.onlinewomeninpolitics.org/archives/04_0112_in_wrights.htm) (accessed 4 September 2007).
- [16] Whelan, Gloria. (2001) *Homeless Bird*. New York, Harper Trophy.
- [17] Xie, Shaobo. (2000) 'Rethinking the Identity of Cultural Otherness: The Discourse of Difference as an Unfinished Project', in Roderick McGillis (ed) *Voices of the Other: Children's Literature and the Postcolonial Context*. New York and London, Routledge, pp.1-16.
- [18] Yegenoglu, Meyda. (1998) *Colonial fantasies: Towards a feminist reading of Orientalism*. Cambridge, Cambridge University Press.