Gentle Anthropology

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ABSTRACT

This article explores the idea of approaching texts from an ethnographic perspective, that is to enter another culture, participate in it and contrast it with one's own. Some recent works by the Pakistani writer Rukhsana Ahmad are used to illustrate this post-colonial and cultural studies approach to reading. The diversity of Ahmad's women characters belies the western concept of the Asian woman, victim of her culture as ethnicity is only one aspect of identity. Class and gender constraints must also be taken into account.

KEY **WORDS:** *ethnography, Asian women, gender, ethnicity, class, Rukhsana Ahmad.*

RESUMEN

Este artículo sugiere la idea de enfocar la lectura de un texto desde una perspectiva etnográfica, es decir, que el/la lector/a entre dentro de otra cultura, participe en ella y la contraste con la suya propia. Se utilizan algunas obras recientes de la escritora paquistaní, Rukhsana Ahmad, para ilustrar este enfoque postcolonial y de estudios culturales a la lectura. La diversidad de los personajes femeninos de Ahmad desmiente el concepto occidental de la mujer asiática como víctima de su cultura, ya que la emicidad no es más que un aspecto de la identidadporque no se debe olvidar las limitaciones de clase y de género.

PALABRAS CLAVE: *etnografía, mujeres asiáticas, género, etnicidad, clase social. Rukhsana Ahmad.*

I. ETHNOGRAPHY AND LITERARY CRITICISM

In his landmark study *Culture and Society*, first published in 1958, Raymond Williams tells us that by the end of the nineteenth century culture had come to mean "a whole way of life, material, intellectual, and spiritual" (1985:16). Williams' work contributed to the creation of a whole new field of studies, in which the literary-moral debate made room for an anthropological definition of culture (Hall, 1980:19), the analysis of culture being for

anthropologists "an interpretative one in search of meaning" (Geertz, 1973:5). Thus an ethnographic approach to dealing with culture irnplies borrowing techniques and strategies from sociology and anthropology to allow researchers to enter another culture, participate in it and observe it in order to describe how it makes sense to those within it. Ethnographers define culture as "that complex whole which includes knowledge, belief, art, morals, law, custom, and any other capabilities and habits acquired by man as a member of society" (Asad, 1986:141). For Clifford Geertz the object of ethnography is "a stratified hierarchy of meaningful structures in terms of which [actions] ... are produced, perceived, and interpreted" (1973:7). The ethnographer's work is to observe rather than interpret and sort out the structures of signification of the observed cultural practice. Doing ethnography is therefore like trying to read an old, faded manuscript perhaps written in an archaic language and full of gaps and incoherencies. In recent years the growth of cultural studies as an academic discipline and postmodern currents in social anthropology have together brought about this notion of culture as a text, or rather, an inscribed discourse, which lends itself to modes of analysis akin to literary criticism. ***Discourse*** becomes privileged over ***text*** in the post-colonial world as it foregrounds dialogue between equals as opposed to a monologue by the (Western) observer about the (non-Western) observed (Tyler, 1986). Moreover, reading ethnography involves the juxtaposition of two or more cultural traditions, the one(s) being systematically studied and the reader's own. The ethnographerl reader is forced to seek in the Other clarification for those processes that take place in his/her own self. The juxtaposition of exotic customs to familiar ones, or the relativizing of taken-for-granted assumptions embody the cultural critique which is the rationale of both anthropology and post-colonial studies and which opens up a permanent interchange of values (Fischer, 1986). My aim in this article is to pursue this analogy one step further and explore a recent novel and two short stones by a British-based Muslim woman from an ethnographic standpoint, the writer herself being the ethnographer and we, the western readers, being the object of study as well as secondary ethnographers. If the reading of ethnography is this juxtaposition of different cultural traditions with comparison embedded in the rhetonc of the text, Rukhsana Ahmad does precisely that. She explores patriarchal structures and gender roles in Pakistani society yet at the same time juxtaposes these ethnographic sketches with class and gender structures in Britain. By invading, as it were, the discourse of different groups, Ahmad grants everyone access to a rejoinder.

II. REPRESENTING WHO FOR WHOM?

Reading texts written by and about people from other cuitures is an exercise in what I have described as "gentle anthropology"'. Novels are works of fiction and as fictions they are already interpretations by the author of an imaginative act. Thus the reader, by reading, reinterprets an already interpreted situation. Ethnographers also interpret situations so ethographic writings are in fact fictions given the proviso that cuitures exist in the real world and not in books. Reading (and in my present case, writing) about someone from another culture who has written about another culture may obscure or distort the culture that is the original object of study. Be that as it may, some kind of communication still invariably takes place as the ethnographer/ reader constructs a text of sorts. However, the discipline is a literal minefield of Catch-22 situations. A white European cannot, or at least, *should* not try to speak

for the very people s/he would like to be heard. I am aware of falling into this pitfall of political incorrectness by writing an article about a culture that is alien to me and that I will never be able to call my own. Appropriation of the discourse and the representation of others is an area fraught with difficulty and as such is the permanent dilemrna of the ethnographer, post-colonial theorist and cultural studies practitioner. Edward Said points out the theoretical paradoxes and aporias faced by western anthropologists who, desirous of celebrating the resistance to outside hegemonic pressures by certain Third World cornrnunities, proceed to write about them, by which these very strategies of resistance are revealed and consequently weakened (Said, 1989). Said's own groundbreaking work ***Orientalism*** (1978), while paving the way for colonial and post-colonial discourse studies by attacking imperial rhetoric which reinforced Western domination, failed to provide a model for the adequate representation of other voices or points of view or even if such a practice might be possible (Marcus & Fischer, 1986: 2). In a similar mode Chandra Talpade Mohanty has warned of the danger of constructing "third world women" as a singular monolithic subject disregarding politicai, economic, geographic and social diversities among non-white women around the world. She draws attention to the ease with which western feminists, or middle-class urban African and Asian scholars for that matter, lump together working-class women from rural backgrounds on the basis of their shared oppression. While certain women from certain social classes in certain parts of the world clearly ***are*** oppressed, Mohanty denounces the automatic pigeonholing of non-white women into the victim category without any consideration for sociocultural or historic specificies (Mohanty,1996).

The world written about in anthropological studies is a world created by people who take it upon themselves to represent authoritatively altemative social and cultural forms of life contrasting with those of the West. The focus on a cultural other refers implicitly to the presumed, mutually familiar world shared by the writers and his/her readers (Marcus & Fischer, 1986: 23). Is there, consequently, an urgent call for the end of anthropology, ethnography and ali such related colonising disciplines? Surely not, as anthropology not only serves to acknowledge the hetereogeneity of world cultures, but also can be used self-critically to reflect on our (i.e. Westem) vaiues, which we are all too ready to take as universal. We are all too prone to forget to view whiteness as another racial category and to establish a discourse that presumes whiteness to be the normative state of existence (Dyer, 1997). While passing from local truths to general visions remains a justified criticism of the methodology of anthropology, despite the fact that we can obtain what Clifford Geertz calis a large "culturescape" from a handful of etnographic miniatures, to my mind, the interpretation of texts, gentle anthropology, involves entering into a refined type of debate, a dialogic relationship with the "other". Post-colonial anthropology (perhaps a contradiction in terms?) cannot be a monologue in the same way that cultural analysis shouid not lose touch with the political and economic constraints that circumscribe the lives of the people being written about.

I have been talking about ethnographers in a generic sense but it shouid be pointed out that feminist ethnographers are faced with yet another dilemma. On the one hand they wish to analyze how power differences have been constructed on the basis of gender and how women can challenge these historically gendered structures and other forms of hierarchy, and perhaps even articulate alternatives to them. On the other hand, the conclusions of the feminist ethnographer, who invariably is nurtured in Westem concepts of feminism, may inadvertently clash with the values of the women she is out to enlighten[2]. However, when the feminist

ethnographer allows herself to merge with the culture she is studying, her responses become an authentic, moral communicative practice between herself and this culture. In true feminist anthropology, complete detachment is no longer viable. The ethnographer is "herself subjected to the practices and meanings of others, even as she affects and objectifies them in her writing" (Walter, 1995:282). Likewise, the reader of post-colonial literature must be shaped by what slhe reads as anthropologists are inevitably shaped by the people they study. If they are not, they can only be super human beings who have achieved the impossible, to step out of their own cultural conditioning and distance themselves from it. We all operate (teachers, doctors, bricklayers, bank clerks, anthropologists) within the sociocultural constraints of our own society. As readers we objectify other cultures and their communicative practices while at the same time, albeit unconsciously, we are being subjected to these very practices. This is what I mean by gentle anthropology, reading about others to find out about ourselves. The willingness to ailow this process to develop is a great step in the direction of authentic communication between ethnic groups. However, reading and criticizing post-colonial literatures is a confiictive project as there exists the very potent danger of solidifying these cultures. It is too easy to claim that a particular text shows Indian, African, Caribbean culture, (what single text really "represents" British culture?) but at the same time doing post-colonial studies is a politically committed and democratic process, letting oneself go and seeing oneself as the other, is both liberating and revealing. Reading novels such as ***R e Hope Chest*** will not overcome gendered, racial and social inequalites but slowly they must contribute to the dismantling of Westem notions of universal values.

III. ALIENATION FROM TRADITIONAL GENDER ROLES

Rukhsana Ahmad, a British-based Pakistani writer, writes about Pakistanis and Britons, as an insider who is outside and an outsider who is inside, so her work is a constant dialogue. As a reader we can enter into this dialogue as fellow ethnographers. Like many post-colonial writers in Britain, Ahmad observes the mainstream white British and reflects upon them in her work[3]. Her first novel ***R e Hope Chest*** (Virago, 1996) analyzes class and gender roles in traditional Asia. society and at the same time exposes these same roles in British society. The novel takes place in both Pakistan and Britain and evolves around the destinies of three women whose lives criss-cross. Rani and Reshma *are* both Pakistani, Reshma and Ruth never actually meet and have little in common, Reshma being a village girl and Ruth a Londoner. Their three lives *are* intertwined through Rani, the upper class, educated girl of fortune whose family employs Reshma's father as a gardener. During a routine appendectomy Rani's soul leaves her body and she witnesses the careless burning of her thigh by one of the medical team. The smell of burning flesh that Rani's soul had noticed remains with her and this surreal experience renders her totally apathetic and withdrawn. In desperation her parents, who have no economic problems, send her to a hospital in London for special treatment, where she coincides with Ruth. Ruth has her own problems. She has a conflictive relationship with her mother, who herself had lacked paternal affection, and is admitted into hospital because she seems to have lost touch with reaiity and daydreams her life away. When one of her daydreams is mistaken for an attempted suicide, everybody suddenly starts taking her senously. She leaves hospital and goes to iive with a boyfriend. When Ruth and Tony decide

to have a baby, her mother and step-father believe that the danger is passed but one fine morning Ruth has an identity crisis and leaves home with the child. Reshma, the third woman in the story, is the eldest daughter of an extremely poor family. Her parents sell her in marriage to a man twice her age in desperation for their highly precarious economic situation. Reshma's childhood comes to an abmpt halt at the age of thirteen when she becomes the wife of a widower with two small children and servant to her mother-in-law.

Part two of the novel resumes the narrative five years later. Rani has become an art student and her mother arranges a marriage for her with a suitable young man. The young woman, however, cannot muster up any enthusiasm for this new phase of her life. On the night her marriage is consummated she feels once again that her soul has left her body and is watching at a distance. Her out-of-body experiences occur when she feels that she is only a pawn in other people's hands. Her husband, Kamal, who only marries her for her social and econornic position, soon tires of her passivity and seeks his pleasure elsewhere. Rani's failure to conceive a child, which in her mother's view would secure her power over Kamal, induces the former to return to the London hospital for help, at which point Rani's path crosses one again with Ruth, who by this time has returned after two years of living in a squat. Rani is thus moved about by others, and the more apathetic she becomes the more other people make decisions for her, which allows her to escape into constant detachment. Finally Rani fmds her vocation in painting and severs her relationship with Kamal. Her secure social position was no guarantee of a sucessful life. Reshma has given birth to three children and is expecting a fourth when she persuades Shehzadi, Rani's younger sister and a medical student, to help her to have an abortion and get herself sterilized. In a weak moment, Reshma tells her husband what she has done and the reward for her initiative is banishment from his home and family. She is sent back to her parents' home without her children in total disgrace. The novel ends with Reshma being accepted for training as a midwife.

The story moves back and forth from Pakistan to England stressing, on one level, the similarities between the women's personal struggles rather than their ethnic and class differences, with the strong common demominator of alienation. The three women all seem to reject the gender role society has mapped out for them, the first stage being their distancing from the figure of the mother who has herself contributed to establishing this role. The novel is optimistic despite the tragedy of Reshma's life, because the women overcome the obstacles in their lives and realize their ambitions, even if this ambition is merely the nght to decide for oneself. The price Reshma has to pay is much larger than either Ruth or Rani, the loss of her children, but Ahmad does not pretend to say that women are ail equal. The difference between Rani's and Reshma's marriages lies in the socio-economic class of the two women as marriage is seen as the only viable option for Asian women of all classes. For Rani's mother, "girls must marry and work out their lives and destinies in an enironment very different from that of their paternal homes" (153) and Reshma's father reminds his wife that beggars cannot be choosers, "You have here a house full of girls. The sooner they end up in their own homes the better" (42-3). Reshma's marriage will rescue her parents temporarily from starvation, but the money they receive from Afsar Khan does not last long. Reshma has no say in the matter and at the age of thirteen she becomes a wife and step-mother. In patriarchal societies such as in mral Pakistan most people are expected to marry and thus girls are under some authority ail their lives. Only when they themselves become mothers-in-law, do they see their own authority increased. Thus Afsar Khan's mother welcomes another daughter-in-law,

especially if she is young and pliable.

Reshrna's beauty and fairness of skin were almost a liability to her as had she been plain her father would not have received the generous offer from Afsar Khan and sold her off at such a tender age. Instead, Rani's "future" has been seriously threatened by her anorexia which has left her even less physically attractive than ever. Moreover her dark skin is another factor working against her marriageability, in Pakistan and India a fair complexion being valued higher than dark skin, proof of which *can* still be seen in the matrimonial section of *The Times* of *India* and similar newspapers. Shahana, painfully aware that time is slipping by for her daughter, sets to work on a suitable match for Rani[4]. Arranging a marriage is all about "making young people aware of the probabilities of the future" (Ahmad, 1996:162) and a far cry from the tyrannical system it is often made out to be in the West. The spadework is done by an intermediary once the initial go-ahead is given by the young couple themselves. Rani allows her mother to take charge of the proceedings and finds herself taken over by Kamal, "persuaded ihat he was the obvious person to replace the firm guidance her mother had always provided for her" (Ahmad, 1996:167). For her husband, the marriage was purely an investment, he bringing the security, she the cash.

The male characters in Ahmad's novel are peripheral in the sense that we do not get to view matters from their perspective, but the periphery turns out to be what prevents the three women from finding their own selves. Men are the obstacles, the brake on these women's self identification. As Rani discovers when she has thrown Kamal out of her house, "It struck her that it was the first time she had begun to grow beyond her own narrow world" (Ahmad, 1996: 306). The male British characters are very thinly sketched, they appear to be shadowy figures who do not hinder Ruth, unlike the two Pakistani men, Kamal and Afsar Khan. Ahmad seems to explore female sexuality only in the two Pakistani women, as though for Ruth, and by extension British women, sexuality is already a clear-cut business. Ruth is under no pressure either to marry or to have a baby. In fact, Sophie, Ruth's own mother, cast serious doubts on her daughter's capacity to bring up a child properly. Ruth's choice of sexual partners, Tony and later John, is hers completely. Ahmad does not dwell on Ruth's sexuality, instead of which her freedom, and implicitly her enjoyment of sex, are used to contrast with the unwelcome intercourse forced on both Rani and Reshma. Ruth drifts into a sexual relationship with John at the squat, "it seemed the most natural thing to do" (Ahmad, 1996:204). Rukhsana Ahmad is unable to portray the conflicts of Westem womanhood with as much conviction as she does Asian women and in fact her analysis of Ruth's alienation and her troublesome relationship with her mother is shallow and tangential. Or is she trying to say that Ruth's almost pathological obsession with her young daughter, Faith, only proves that even in the advanced westem world, the institution of motherhood is still intact and is still preserving the social order, despite feminism? (Martínez Reventós, 1996)

Reshma is thrown out of her house by her husband when she rather rashly confides in him that she has had an abortion and has had her tubes tied. In Afsar Khan's world view a woman who deliberately prevents pregnancy can only be a whore. There is no space for a woman who takes her own decisions and exercises choices, especially when these choices affect her body, his property to "possess, command and enjoy" (Ahmad, 1996:78). His own masculinity is threatened by this woman who acts on her own initiative and he reacts in the only way he can by denying her this possibility and constructing his own explanation. She must have committed adultery, she must have been aided by a man, the baby she was

expecting must have been another man's. The qualities that encouraged him to marry such a young girl, the soft green wood that you could bend into the shape you like, have turned against Reshma, she has become an easy prey to corruption. His authority, which defines his masculinity, has been defied by his wife who for the first time in her life had made two important decisions all by herself. Although Ahmad sympathizes to a certain extent with Afsar Khan, who is a victim of patriarchal contructs of masculinity as much as his wife is, and cannot cope with this challenge to his marital authority, we identify with the distraught Reshma who could never have anticipated the cruelty and unfairness of her husband's reaction. "Whatever she had sought had involved only her own body. She had innocently asumed that that, at least, was her own" (Ahmad, 1996:274). Her own mother refuses to hear Reshma's own version of the story and shuns her as an outcast and a blight upon the marriage prospects of her younger sisters. *Izzat*, that is pride or family honour, is deeply embedded in both Islamic and non-Islamic Asian societies and lies in the hands of the women, who are taught from a very early age never to jeopardise it. Her sister's prospective in-laws see Reshma, a married woman, alone, without her children and act accordingly, they leave "without accepting a cup of tea, or even a morsel of the food laid out before them" (274). The hypocrisy and unjustice of the situation stings Reshma into action and, conscious that the past cannot be undone, makes another crucial decision: to leave her parents' home, where she is a stigma, and find work. The role given tor husband's scheto be the upholders and preservers of the honour (read "culture") of the community as a whole and a denial of this role represents a complete breakdown of accepted patterns. Reshma can do nothing to argue her case, marital survival strategies come too late for her so now she embarks on her own future, making her own choices, outside the frarnework of the family. The three different types of women in ***The Hope Chest*** are the product of three crucial variables which give shape and meaning to their experience at this particular historical moment, narnely gender, class and ethnicity. Reshrna's destiny is mapped out by being a "luckless girl, to be bom beautiful in a poor man's house!" (Ahmad, 1996:52). Rani's wealthy family background allows her the luxury of an adolescence free from the toils of childbearing, but her art career is viewed as a temporary distraction before her real objective in life: wife and mother. Ruth's options are more open, marriage and motherhood only appear to figure as sidelines, although the irony of the story is that of the three women, Ruth, the supposedly most "emancipated" one, will be the only one to devote herself wholeheartedly to the traditional role of women, the choice to do so being, of course, solely hers. The ethnic component in the three women's make-up seems almost irrelevant compared to their class and gender positions, but it is clearly inseparable from the other aspects of their identity. Ahmad explores the issue of ethnicity more closely in two of her short stories, "The Nightmare" and "The Gate-Keeper's Wife", with characters involved in overlapping worlds of experience.

IV. THINKING THROUGH ETHNICITY

One of those awkward words that people use very freely but which they would be hard-pressed to define satisfactorily is ethnicity. The borders of other cultures could be said to materialize in every communicative practice carried out without another person (Brah, 1996:246-7). Ethnicity is only deemed important when we are talking about non-white,

whiteness is viewed as the normative state of existence. The danger inherent in this kind of discourse is precisely that of forgetting our own subject position as raced people, after all whiteness is another racial category, despite the fact that white people have created the dorninant images of the world (Dyer, 1997:9).

> Ethnicity emerges out of shared socio-economic, cultural and political conditions and is played out in the construction of *cultural narratives* about these conditions which invoke notions of distinctive genealogies and particularities of historical experience. (Brah, 1996:238).

Cultural narratives do not necessarily have to be about cultural differences. "Asian" people may assert a common ethnicity, at least in the diaspora, but they may inhabit quite different religious and linguistic areas, for example Muslim, Punjabi speaking Pakistanis and Hindu, Gujerati speaking Indians. Ethnicity is not about communicating a pre-given, already existing cultural difference. Instead it is the process whereby one group establishes its distinctiveness from another (Brah, 1996: 237 & Barth, 1969). In *The Hope Chest*, there is a reminder of the complex nature of ethnicity among the Pakistani characters with Reshma and her family singled out by reason of their Pathan identity. "They were the aliens in Dera, as well as in the urban world of Lahore, where she [Reshma] had grown up, surrounded by Punjabis" (Ahmad, 1996:82). The cash paid for Reshma, the bridegroom's tribute to the girl is, according to Pathan custom, compensation for the parents' loss of their daughter but for the family's Punjabi neighbours it all boils down to a straightforward business transaction. Reshma had never understood why she and her family always had to be the outsiders, regardless of where they lived, in the village or in the city of Lahore, because "people don't understand our customs, appreciate our ways, speak our language or love and want us?" (84). This feeling of being unwanted and misunderstood by the mainstream culture is accentuated in diasporic conditions. Asian women in diasporic contexts often find themselves alone and without the support system they were brought up to believe in. When previously they could count on the socially acknowledged power of women in the family, they now find themselves confined to being isolated wives and mothers (Ganguly, 1992:42). This is the case of Ahmad's tragically misunderstood character Fariha in her short story "The Nightmare". Identity, together with alienation, features in much diasporic writing. No longer an issue with British-bom Asians, it was a problem with the first generation that arrived in the sixties and seventies and although their initial difficulties *are* now part of recent history, the anguish of the early years in hostile surroundings searching for a place in the new society should not be forgotten. "The Nightmare" reminds the reader how it was the Asian women who were often blamed for failing to integrate fully into mainstream British society during the post-war immigration period while the cultural constraints that had shaped them were not taken into account. Fariha's husband had emigrated to England in the sixties and she and the children had joined him ten years later. On arrival, Fariha already fails to live up to her husband's expectations and after several years in England she has become "an old bag* in his eyes, "depressed and apathetic .. dull ... and clumsy" (1988:22). The more Salim expects of her, the less understanding he becomes of the cultural shock she has had to overcome. He can mix freely with white people at work, the children attend school and pick up indigenous habits all too quickly, but Fariha, like many Pakistani women in her situation, needs time and understanding

to come to terms with the highly individualized lifestyle of the west. The gap between husband and wife widens until she falls seriously ill and loses her grip on reality completely. Her husband and children move to a better life in America while she is "retumed" to her parents in Pakistan, a failed migrant.

The behaviour of white diasporic women, better known as "memsahibs" shows that displacement not only affects black or brown women. Ahmad's story "The Gate-Keeper's Wife" is told from the point of view of Annette, a British woman married to a wealthy Pakistani, Saleem. Annette has no children and lives the carefree life of the memsahib, waited on hand and foot by servants. To occupy her time she pays a daily visit to the zoo in order to make sure the animals are properly fed. Seen as an "interfering busybody" by the zoo gate-keeper and an enigma to the superintendent, Annette regards the animals as her family. The zoo has become her haven from the loneliness of her life in the outside world. She has no support from farnily or other white women, even the bind of shared ethnicity is not sufficient to obviate the "gaps in convictions and assumptions that always yawned in the space between them intensifying her aloneness in this teeming, tomd city" (1993:176). The crisis point in her life is triggered off by her witnessing the theft of the cheetah Heera's food by the gate-keeper's wife, Tara. The woman's poverty and justification of her act, "her children often have to go hungry, so he [Heera] can't eat ... if she doesn't take it the meat will lie around and rot" (1993: 178), force Annette to face up to the reality of her marriage, "plain as daylight that it was all over... Tara had shaken all her certainties" (178-9). This story can be read as a dialectic reponse to "The Nightmare". Both women fail to live up to the expectations of living abroad. Fariha's hesitant English is not far away from Annette's heavily accented Urdu. Fariha cannot be a mother in the diaspora and is obliged to give up her children so they can go to America with their father and move even further away from her. She no longer fits into her husband's scheme. Annette mothers the cheetah as a substitute for a real baby, so when he "shifts" his allegiance from her, his benefactor, to a starving, poverty-stricken woman, she sees how empty and meaningless her marriage is. It is revealing to note, however, that it is the white wornan who chooses to end the farce her marriage had become, whereas the choice is made for the Asian woman. Fariha's seclusion in the private and domestic and her unwillingness to participate in the public, social world of her husband and children is in part due to her acceptance of the traditionally assigned gender role of Pakistani women. On the other hand, Annette's reluctance to keep to the script of the memsahib, spoilt by luxury and isolated from the squaior of the real world outside her privileged address, is also part of her ethnic make-up.

V. CONCLUSION

Anthropologists may be "a strange breed of literary critic" (Marcus & Fischer, 1986: 26) and so too are cultural studies practitioners and unassuming readers. The workings of patriarchal societies often clash with westem notions of sexual equaiity and "what we cannot understand is respectfully assigned to the mysterious residual category of culture" (Marcus & Fischer, 1986: 39). Rukhsana Ahmad paints a grim picture of certain aspects of Pakistani culture to her "gentle anthropologists", and by refusing to gloss over the class differences that prevent any sort of romantic sisterhood from existing in the real world, undermines the

traditional solidarity of Asian women. Reshma herself is only too aware of the socio-economic boundaries that separate her from Shehzadi, Rani's medical student sister. "They would be miles apart even in the rare event of their coming together for work. ... The boundaries between them had been hidden but had always been there, subtle and insurmountable" (Ahmad, 1996:291). Ethnography should surprise or at least generate alternative accounts of reality, or question, compromise, negate or force revision in our existing accounts.

While we should not forget the danger of treating post-colonial literature as social phenomena that we are seeking to understand and explain, or as indicators of cultural perspectives held by the people (of that culture) producing them, Rukhsana Ahmad's stories do much to dismantle the monolithic Third World woman that Chandra Mohanty (1996) accuses many western academics of constructing. Her female, rather than her male characters who are somewhat one-dimensional, show the diversity of Pakistani women. Well-to-do, educated women, while still encumbered by traditional social strictures, are struggling to establish new norms in society for women and striving for a more fulfilling life. Village and lower-class women are often merely concerned with survival in a hostile, male-centred environment. Ahmad's iiterary work has to be seen as more than just an example of the social function of literature, that is of making the reading public aware of the presence of Asian men and women in British society. Ahmad goes beyond the representation of other cultures, crossing boundaries between British and Asian contexts to focus on more abstract concepts of difference and tolerance, inequality and power (Ticktin, 1996:75), proving herself to be a post-modern ethnographer. She is skeptically inquisitive about assumptions, authonty and so-called stable categories such as ethnicity and gender. Reading post-colonial texts through the sole lens of ethnicity is reductive to say the least but reading as an ethnographer is to peep over the shoulders of people to catch a glimpse of another bundle of realities, each one of which contains a vast ensemble of diverse texts. In short, literary criticism is another form of ethnography which creates its own objects in its unfolding and whose readers, unassuming anthropologists, supply the rest.

NOTES

1. I have taken this expression from Sunetra Gupta's novel *Memories of the Rain* (London: Phoenix, 1992, p. 38): "He was an alien, and suddenly he was no longer content to be a detached observer, the gentle anthropologist..."

2. An obvious example of well meaning but often misinterpreted feminist anthropology is the wntroversy over clitoridectomy, better known as female genital mutilation to the politically incorrect. Some African intellectuals complain that westem feminists are too quick to cast them into the role of persecuted victims of masculine power. For detailed discussions of this topic see Alica Walker and Pratibha Parmar, *Warrior Marks: Female Mutilation andthe Sexual Blinding of Women* (New York: Harcourt Brace, 1993); Efua Dorkenoo, *Cutting the Rose: Female Genital Mutilation. The Practice and Its Prevention* (London: Minority Rights Group, 1994); aand Felicity Hand, "Institutionalised Humiliation? Female Circumcision in Neo-Colonial Africa", *Culture and Power: Institutions* (Barcelona: PPU, 1996)

3. There are many examples of British writers with colonial backgrounds who engage in this project. Just to mention two, David Dabydeen in his first novel *The Intended* (Minerva, 1992) and Salman Rushdie in *The Satanic Verses* (Viking, 1988) both expose the myth of Englishness through their characters Saladin Chamcha and Dabydeen's nameless narrator.

4. The politics of finding a marriage partner features as the theme of much contemporary Indian writing both by male and female authors. A recent example is Vikram Seth's novel titled appropriately A *Suitable Boy* (Phoenix, 1993).

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