Negotiating Identity in Socio-Cultural Spaces of Britain: An Investigation of Fictional Works of British Women Writers of Indian Origin of the 1980s and After.

Introduction.

The objective of this thesis is to trace the processes of identity construction in the fictional writing of British women writers of Indian origin. The representation of these processes will be contextualised against the British cultural milieu of the 1980s, 1990s and after. This will entail an interdisciplinary reading of sociology, history, politics and social anthropology, as well as the new emerging areas in migration studies, which look at identity, nationhood and belonging, from a feminist, postcolonial and psychoanalytical standpoint.

The authors considered in this thesis are Ravinder Randhawa, Leena Dhingra, Atima Srivastava, Sunetra Gupta, Meera Syal, Preethi Nair, Nisha Minhas, and Saumya Balsari, as well as the writers of the Asian Women Writers’ Collective. Authors whose fiction has provided scope for sufficient comparative discussions are Rukshana Smith or Janna Eliot, of East-European origin who has written a story about an Ugandan Asian family in Britain in the 1960s and 70s, Farhana Sheikh of Pakistani origin, Shyama Perera who is of Sri Lankan origin, Monica Ali whose father is from Bangladesh.

This thesis also examines the portraiture of British Asian women emerging out of academic writing, social policy documents and popular culture. It attempts to contest theoretical readings of these depictions and points to the possibility of reconstructing a new analytical framework after reading the fiction written by women writers of Indian origin, and some others from the subcontinent. Some stereotypes of British Asians circulated by the mainstream academics, policy makers and popular media are the notions of “culture clash” and “generational conflict” related to British Asian youth; accounts of under-achievement and victimhood of young women; their sexual attractiveness as hybrids representing Asian kool; and on the other extreme, as low-paid exploited women in the labour sector, or victims of forced and arranged marriages. It is suggested that it might be possible to challenge these notions after a close textual analysis of the fictional works by women writers of Indian origin from the 1980s to the present.

The methodology adopted in this thesis is an investigative chronological
review of sociological documents and historiography to study the relevant background which sometimes leads to the formation of stereotypes. This is followed by close readings of the texts through concepts in gender studies and migration studies. In the analysis of these texts, the emphasis is on their value as sociopolitical documents. References to recurrent literary tropes, narrative techniques, linguistic and registral variation are made whenever appropriate.

While Chapter One contextualises the authors and their work against the socio-political history of Britain, and discusses basic theoretical assumptions, Chapters Two to Five correspond to the four temporal stages of life: childhood, adolescence, youth and maturity. The chapters investigate the inter-relationships of the British Asians with others in the community, and the mainstream, through the analysis of their performances across the time-space of home, school, street, venue of employment, marital and sexual relationships. The discussion will involve uncovering writers’ strategies in delineating their characters while keeping diverse factors in mind, and their serious engagement with sociopolitical realities which they themselves might have lived through. Each chapter begins with a brief account of the chapter-scheme as followed in the sections, and the findings and conclusions are enumerated at the end of each chapter. Allusions to texts are in full for the first time, after which abbreviated title-names are used, for example, *Transmission* will be referred to as (7).

It is important to outline how British Asian women’s fiction negotiates power hierarchies in its representation of the lived realities of the diaspora. Kim Butler’s conceptual framework of the diaspora informs the foundational background of this study, as is discussed in the opening section of Chapter One. The conceptual module of power relationships suggested by Pessar and Mahler (2001) provides scope for recognising ways in which the sociocultural spaces of BrAsian society are structured around power lines. Pessar and Mahler’s (2001) theorising of gender across transnational spaces includes a conceptual model called “gendered geographies of power” (5). Some of the constituent parts of this model are, geographies of multiple spatial and social scales on which gender operates, the “types and degrees of agency” by which people exert power in their social locations, also called “power geometry”, the role of individual initiative in agency formation, as well as the importance of cognitive processes in shaping social agency. In the words of Pessar and Mahler themselves: “To summarize, “gendered geographies of power” is a framework for
analysing people's social agency -- corporal and cognitive -- given their own initiaive as well as their positioning within multiple hierarchies of power operative within and across many terrains” (8). The theorists are quite open to the idea that this approach to power and agency be applied to related areas on transnational studies, especially on identity in the transnational migrant literature (23), the corpus of this thesis. This thesis examines how gendered geographies of power emerge in the social and spatial axes, for example, in the home, family, school, at work or in a relationship. The subsequent chapters will examine some of these, following the life-stages: childhood, adolescence; youth or adulthood and maturity.

The foundational academic research of the anthropologist Roger Ballard, the noted sociologist and theorist of the diaspora Avtar Brah, the work of Roger Bromley in redifining the diaspora narrative, comments of researchers of British Asian fiction like Susheila Nasta, Mark Stein and others have been referred to frequently while reading these fictional texts.

The celebratory approach of critics like Arjun Appaduari towards hybridity and globalisation are critiqued in the thesis, and the interventionary remarks of Stuart Hall, critics of the Indian diaspora like R.Radhakrishnan and Kanishka Chowdhury are adopted to offer new meanings of hybridity especially in its relation to the cultural logic of the diaspora. The approaches of native informants like P.A.S. Ghuman, K.Bhopal, Amrit Wilson and mainstream critics like Pnina Werbner have often been contested in this thesis, whilst approaches of Ali, Sayyid and Kalra or Puwar and Raghuram have helped shape much of the theoretical standpoint emerging out of this analysis.