

## 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** **identidad** porque no se debe olvidar **las** limitaciones de **clase** y de **género**.*

**PALABRAS CLAVE :** *etnografía, mujeres asiáticas, género, emicidad, 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 implies 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 ethnographer/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 stories 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 rhetoric 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 cultures 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 **ethnographic writings** are in fact fictions given the **proviso** that cultures 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 dilemma 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 communities, 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 political, 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 specificities** (Mohanty, 1996).

The world written about in anthropological studies is a world created by people who take it upon **themselves** to represent authoritatively alternative 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 **all** such **related** colonising disciplines? Surely not, as anthropology not **only** **serves** to acknowledge the heterogeneity of world **cultures**, but **also** can be used self-critically to reflect on our (*i.e.* Western) values, 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 calls a large "culturescape" from a **handful** of ethnographic **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** should 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 should 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** Western concepts of **feminism**, may **inadvertently** clash with the values of the women she is out to enlighten<sup>2</sup>. 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 she **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 allow 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 conflictive 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 inequalities but slowly they must contribute to the dismantling of Western 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<sup>3</sup>. 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 reality and **daydreams** her life away. When one of her daydreams is **mistaken** for an attempted suicide, everybody **suddenly** **starts** **taking** her seriously. **She** **leaves** hospital and **goes** to live 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 abrupt 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 economic 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 finds her vocation in painting and severs her relationship with Kamal. Her secure social position was no guarantee of a successful 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 denominator 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 right 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 all 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 environment 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 rural Pakistan most people are expected to marry and thus girls are under some authority all 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<sup>4</sup>. **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 that 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 Western 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 western 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 **constructs** 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** assumed 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 injustice 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** for 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 framework 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, namely gender, class and ethnicity. Reshma's destiny is mapped out by being a "luckless girl, to be born 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 dominant 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 "returned" 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 family 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 woman 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 squalor 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 western **notions** of sexual equality 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 literary 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, authority 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 controversy over clitoridectomy, better known as female genital mutilation to the politically incorrect. Some African intellectuals complain that western 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 and the 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); and 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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