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ICE-SKATING IN A BLACK LEATHER SUIT BODY POLITICS: DIFFERENCE, DOMINATION AND SUBVERSION IN MONICA ALI'S *BRICK LANE* AND RANDAL KLEISER'S *GREASE*

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Abstract: *The common trait between Monica Ali's novel Brick Lane's main character, Nazneen, and motion picture Grease's female protagonist, Sandy Olsson is that both of them refuse to be culturally constructed by the patriarchal dominant discourse. Following Kathy Davis' distinction when defining the main approaches to body politics, in this essay there we will discuss 'difference, domination and subversion'. These main issues will be analysed at three levels: food, clothing and dancing, thus covering the inside of the body, the outside, and the use the protagonists make of it through movement, respectively.*

Key words: *body politics, food, clothing, dominant discourse, 'the other'.*

1. Introduction

Back in 1949, Simone de Beauvoir warned the world women are not born; we are made (Beauvoir 2005: 5). Such a classic assumption in the development of feminist theory became one of the pivotal concepts from which the first feminist academic writers on body politics ascertained that the body is a political issue. To understand the body as a site for gender inequality means to acknowledge how the dominant discourse in western culture (as understood in Michelle Foucault's terms) has often delimited the freedom of women by exerting power over their physical selves. This practice has been so extended and unnoticed in so many different geographies, social groups, cultures and media that it is possible to find instances of female body submission by the dominant discourse in two works of art as different and distant in time and intention as Monica Ali's 2003 novel *Brick Lane* and Paramount Picture's box office hit *Grease*, released in 1978. The common trait between Ali's main character, Nazneen, and *Grease*'s female protagonist, Sandy Olsson is precisely that, at a point in their stories, both of them refuse to be made by others, and, as an innovative feature, they stop accepting submission to a dominant discourse to start the fight. In both narratives there will be found two main processes through which the protagonists empower themselves so as to be able to start the fight against conventions: their female body and

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solidarity among women, which we will refer to as sorority from now on. The female body becomes important in these narratives to the extent that it will reflect or even anticipate the protagonists' inner processes towards the development of their identities, while their relationships with other women will foster their own body's exploration. The consequences to this, following Iris Marian Young's concept, make a negotiation with their own bodies possible, thus reversing the fact that it has been men, so far, who have been trading with the female bodies (in Davies, 9). We will see how these positive relationships among women will foster changes in the physicality of both female characters, Sandy and Nazneen, in similar ways. Following Kathy Davis' distinction when defining the main feminist approaches to body politics, in this essay there will be discussed the three main problems that arise, namely 'difference, domination and subversion' (1997: 7). These main issues will be analysed through three levels: food, clothing and dancing, thus covering the inside of the body, the outside, and the use the protagonists make of it through movement, respectively.

2. Communication and eating disorders

Starting from the inside out, we can affirm that the common implication that the problem of difference has in Sandy and Nazneen's bodies is closely related to food and eating disorders. Taking into account that 'the body is central to how dominant cultures designate certain groups […] as 'other' (Davies, 10) and how this 'other' is shaped by the differences that their bodies have as compared to that of the privileged groups, we could easily argue that, between the two female characters analysed, the Bengali Nazneen is placed rather lower in the 'otherness' scale than the white Anglo-Saxon Sandy in their respective contexts. As women in a situation of minority they 'believe that by controlling or containing their bodies and their appetites, they can escape the pernicious cycle of insufficiency, of never being good enough' (Davies, 11), that is, their bodies become their only site of power, where they can exert some authority and steer the wheel of their physicality to compensate their lack of power while being positioned in a context where they signify an apparently helpless minority.

Indeed, one shared trait between these two main characters is actually their condition of ex-colony immigrants in a world power nation - the US, for the Australian Sandy and England, for the Bangladeshi Nazneen - in constant observation by the gaze of the dominant discourse and under the pressure of rising to its expectations. Despite their different origins and means of expression, they both present an initial dread for the new country and a longing for their homes. Thus, Nazneen '[e]very morning before she opened her eyes she thought, *if I were the wishing type I know what I would wish*' (Ali, 18) clearly implying that her wish would be to be back in Bangladesh, while Sandy expresses her yearning for being back in Australia when she affirms 'I loved my last School, I wish I were there' (Kleiser 1978). Neither of them has any real hope for their expectations to be fulfilled and, at this point in both narratives, neither has yet made a female friend in the new country, mainly because the traits that mark them as 'other' are still their presentation card. Their homesickness cannot be eased then by external advice, even though they are soon enough presented with an imperfect image of what a friendship would be; the tattoo lady who waves daily at Nazneen from the building in front of hers and Frenchie, Sandy's only acquaintance in Rydell

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School. In both cases the possibility for the protagonists of having a sympathetic shoulder to cry on and be eased of the grief of homesickness is shattered by the impossibility of communication. Then again, these women are silenced by the dominant discourse that defines them as the 'other'.

The communication problem in Naznnen's case is made obvious by the author; she barely '[can] say two things in English: sorry and thank you' (Ali 2004:19). Nazneen's silence builds up as she herself goes over all the possible complications that may occur were she ever to venture to find herself a friend, influenced by the opinion those around her have of her. Clearly Nazneen, as a subject, is defined by the external gaze of those around her through social interaction she is shaped following society's blueprints and becomes anxious for rising to expectations, therefore suffering a contradiction between her self and her social persona (in Miller, 83). This need to follow what is expected from her stops her from making decisions, throwing her into a whirl of paranoia designed for the sake of finding arguments not to break the patriarchal rules. She proves unable to break the pressure of this defining external gaze in order to communicate her self to those around her.

In the case of Sandy communication is also impossible due to her accent. Her Aussie tones are more than once defined as strange by the other –American- characters, calling attention negatively to this differentiating trait constantly. Even though this situation can be seen as rather dramatic, the tone in which it is narrated is of a humorous nature, based on absurdity, since we find it in the context of a musical comedy.

"Sandy: *I loved my last School, I wish I were there. Still, I'm no stranger to heartache.*

Frenchie: Why? You got Psoriasis?" (Kleiser 1978)

The consequences of this inability to communicate are proportional to the trauma they cause in each character. While Sandy's situation is only slightly impaired by a different accent and culture, Nazneen's problems come at all levels of her daily life, therefore her reaction to dislocation and lack of empathy with other human beings will be rather more violent than Sandy's. When words are either inexistent or not valid and regular verbal communication is not possible, both their bodies react to this situation of isolated difference by manipulating their eating habits to fit their state of mind.

In the case of Nazneen, the instances where she tampers with food are many and constant, reaching a climax that coincides with the novel's. As she is presented with conflicts she is not ready to meet, she takes hold of the only part of her life that she controls as a housewife; food. She goes through periods of starving herself when she 'clench[es] her stomach to stop it growling' (Ali, 109), responding to the impotence she feels towards her husband's social inability which undermines her only possibility of making new acquaintances. Nazneen also experiments compulsive eating throughout the novel, especially when her first son Raqib is deadly sick. Nazneen eats the Indian food her husband makes for her, to the point of asking him to '[n]ext time, bring more' (Ali, 118). Her 'eating like a zealot' (Ali, 128) is a response to her loss of control over her circumstances; she has lost Raqib, 'without [whom] life would not be possible [as] he was on the inside and all else looked in' (Ali, 117) while, simultaneously, her religious faith has started shattering, and her choice to fill in the vacuum left is to stuff it with food. In short, Nazneen's response to being 'judged against standards [she] can never hope to meet'

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(Davies, 10), to be different for not behaving as a perfect mother, wife, sister and lover should, is to subconsciously develop a set of eating disorders that culminate when 'she vomit[s] all over the clothes she had washed' (Ali, 323). This extreme reaction, to vomit, is narratively placed in the moment when she finds herself faced with a life-changing choice: the terror of leaving England against her obligation of obedience to her husband and her culture. Her body's final reaction of rejection –through the action of ejecting the nurturing food- purges symbolically her inner conflict by expulsing from it all the noxious elements, namely her non-chosen husband, economic extortion and a demanding lover. This climatic moment marks the starting point of Nazneen's process of rebellion that will enable her to appreciate positively her differences and eventually refuse to leave England and let her husband go back to Bangladesh alone.

The same process takes place at a much lesser degree in *Grease*. When Sandy meets the Pink Ladies she is suddenly being judged against a standard she is not familiar with and the embedded obedience to patriarchal dictates she has been so successful following suddenly stops being an advantage to become reason for despise; 'Miss Goody-two-shoes makes [Rizzo] barf' (Kleiser 1978), Rizzo being the female leader of the new gaze against which Sandy's identity must be tested. The Pink Ladies break with those female conventions which Sandy had integrated without questioning in her identity. The gang's name, invoking two traditionally feminine concepts, meets the irony of their being sexually active women who take control of their bodies and have a knack for breaking society's rules. Thus, Sandy finds herself torn between the need for sorority and the panic of not rising to the expectations of the patriarchal gaze on her; whatever she does, she will be tagged as 'different' from one group or another. Even though learning about the Pink Ladies' new way of understanding reality starts enabling Sandy to question the patriarchal rules she has been living under, the weight of this possibility is so heavy that her body has a violent reaction to it, which will be now analysed.

In the scene of the sleepover at Frenchie's, the Pink Ladies are enacting their liberation by engaging in four oral activities at the same time, namely eating, drinking, smoking and talking. Sandy has been teased for a while for not smoking or ever having had alcohol when Frenchie offers to pierce Sandy's ears. This action would mean disobedience to rules she has always abided by, such as doing something '[her] father won't like' (Kleiser 1978) and the stress this new possibility arises is so acute that her body reacts by being sick. In a symbolic reading, the fact that Sandy '[sees] the blood and blech!' (Kleiser 1978), represents Sandy's sexual repression and shock in front of the idea of teenage pre-marital loss of virginity that has been discussed openly by the Pink Ladies. Also symbolically, after being sick, Frenchie hands Sandy her toothbrush, so as to cleanse her virgin mouth from the influences of the drugged and sexed words of the Pink Ladies. Like Nazneen's in *Brick Lane*, Sandy's body reacts by vomiting when caught between her long known –and never questioned- patriarchal discourse and the new possibilities that the Pink Ladies offer.

In both cases the strain of realising about their being an 'other' different from the privileged groups that surround them provokes a bodily violent reaction in the protagonists related to food. The authors choose to soothe this traumatic experience, however, by their interaction with other female characters who have gone further in their understanding of their own situation and reactions and who will be ready to

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guide Nazneen and Sandy through the two remaining stages of identity empowering body politics: domination and subversion.

3. Domination and clothing

Domination in body politics happens when 'the female body is symbolically deployed in discourses of power […] which justify social inequality and power hierarchies based on gender and other forms of bodily difference' (Davies, 10). Having established that both Nazneen and Sandy are seen as different by their environment and that this distinction provokes a negative reaction from their bodies, we can then affirm that, as 'others', they will also be subject to domination. This domination is developed at two levels: physical space and, as mentioned above, clothing.

Being limited to remaining in her house, Nazneen explores spaces little by little, starting by Brick Lane and her neighbourhood until, having found herself capable of conquering the town, she concludes that '[a]nything is possible' (Ali, 62). One of Nazneen's most remarkable achievements in this category is precisely her realisation on the importance of clothing and appearance. Even from her early childhood 'she longed […] to cast off her childish baggy pants and long shirt and begin to wear […] the saris which enfolded Amma's troubled bones' (Ali, 103), proving an understanding of the importance of clothing in the passage from chid to woman she so looked forward to. However, when the moment arrives that she is a married woman and finds herself 'following her husband, head bowed, hair covered' (Ali, 254), even though she feels pleased for an instant, immediately 'her feet [become] heavy and her shoulders [ache]' (Ali, 254), receiving a negative response from her body to this physical submission. The conclusion Nazneen makes from this is that 'if she [changes] her clothes her entire life [will] change as well' (Ali, 277) and reflects that 'clothes, not fate, [make] her life' (Ali, 278). The importance of this statement is shown in a symbolic level in one of the most important scenes of sorority found in the novel. At a juncture in her life, when all her troubles are at its peak, it is when buying clothes with Razia that she decides to unravel her secrets to her friend. While rummaging through the clothes in a shop, Nazneen unfolds her most urging secrets to her friend as if undoing her sari, disclosing layer by layer her concealed inner self and letting Razia in. The result of this scene is Nazneen's economic freedom and independence, and, if Virginia Woolf considered that 'a woman must have money and a room of her own if she is to write fiction' (23), this statement may be expanded to understand writing fiction as the power to create her own spaces, her own fates. Naznnen achieves her freedom partly through sorority, partly through a growing consciousness of her own body and a learning of the strategies that empower it.

The previous statement works as well in the case of Sandy in *Grease*. Her change of attire marks the climax of the narrative, when the throbbing sense of sorority reaches its peak and triggers Sandy's radical empowering change. Sandy's body's domination by the discourse of power is made explicit by her non-verbal language: her clothing and her body expression. Throughout the movie she is dressed in mock turtlenecks, full skirts reaching down her knee and pale colours associated to femininity and purity: white, yellow and pink in light shades. This costume works as a camouflage that establishes the fallacy of making her 'feel empowered or liberated by the very bodily norms and practices which constrain or enslave [her]' (Davis, 11). This fallacy will

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be exposed by the effects of sorority starting when Sandy is presented with a question of body domination worse than hers: Rizzo's pregnancy.

When she is thought to be pregnant, Rizzo as a representative of women's liberation seems defeated and conquered by the male instinct of perpetuating the species, her own sexual activeness having become against her. However, sticking to her freedom of will, she refuses to tell the father of the child about it, claiming 'it was someone else's mistake', in the same way Nazneen decides to take strolls through the city without telling her husband. This decision diminishes the collateral damages this unwanted pregnancy brings with it, limiting the male's domination to her body, but protecting her space for decision-making as she affirms 'I can take care of myself and anybody else'.

Sandy's exposure to Rizzo's situation implies an inevitable comparison between them. Again, Sandy's dominated body is presented with a new set of standards, but for the first time this split of her subject finds a common pattern of behaviour that works both in the dominant discourse and in the new subversive discourse of the Pink Ladies: sorority. Her concern for Rizzo and her offer for help convey a strategy of solidarity used by the 'others', and for the first time, when Rizzo seems defeated and 'othered' by her own discourse of independence, she and Sandy find themselves in the same side of the dichotomy dominant/dominated. Rizzo's sour response to Sandy's approach shows her initial distrust in any communication act with the dominant discourse's structured subject Sandy represents. However, she seems to discern the meaning of her solidarity and thanks her, making a silent pact of friendship and breaking with it the traditional vision of women of opposed characters seen as rivals rather than friends.

Once Sandy establishes her alliances, there only remains to take off her dominant discourse uniform and come out as another Pink Lady. Through the power of sorority she is able to understand that 'there's got to be something more than what they see', what she is showing does not match how she feels inside, due to her contact with a different discourse her patriarchal image does not fit anymore with who she is. This situation makes her state verbally her unhappiness; still, after having had a taste of sorority with Rizzo, she dares to ask Frenchie for help. The solution to Sandy's body dominance is to curl and backcomb her strictly straight hair, pierce her ears, get rid of the clothes that have been hiding her female body and change them for an extremely tight leather suit, in black. From 'Sandra Dee / lousy with virginity' she moves to a woman able to request from the man she likes to 'prove that [her] faith is justified'.

In this case Nazneen's reflection that by changing her clothes her entire life can change as well, applies. The action of changing their clothes only implies that something inside of them has changed that makes their appearance unfit to their new perspective: it is necessary to overcome the breach between their liberated minds and their still submitted body. Thus, these two characters make of their bodies the site of their development, challenging the Cartesian separation between body and soul; both elements become one changing entity reacting to external stimuli in complementary ways, which eventually lead to the empowerment of the subject. Once both characters get rid of the domination that was being exerted over their bodies because of their difference, they reach the last stage of bodily empowerment, subversion.

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3. Subversion and dancing

Understanding subversion as an experience where 'the body emerges as a site of mundane acts of resistance and rebellion as well as compliance' (Davies, 12), it is arguable that, after conquering their bodies as their space, both Nazneen and Sandy start experimenting consciously with them to rebel against what had been forbidden as well as yielding to those biddings from the dominant discourse they are not ready or wanting to renounce to. Thus, Nazneen does not relinquish her sari in her final and symbolic act of freedom, just as Sandy keeps on searching for a man to share her life with, despite the many steps towards independence she has taken. What can be affirmed for sure is that, when Naznnen and Sandy recover the power over their bodies, their next move is to use it to subvert cultural gender norms. Both of them end their story by physically moving their bodies in an act of subversion and space conquering that supposes the last step to empowerment; they dance.

None of them has danced before in their narratives, they have been moving rather awkwardly through spaces that did not belong to them, to the point that Nazneen prefers not to watch ice skating on TV even though she loves it, because it reminds her of what she cannot do. Now that they have conquered their bodies they start by subverting their roles. Nazneen dances to 'Shout', from the Isley Brothers, in the radio and her body has been so solidly conquered by herself that 'the music breaks in waves over her entire body' (Ali, 489). She subverts the dignified pose and paused behaviour expected from an Indian housewife to '[let] it all go loose' (Ali, 489), just as Sandy subverts her image of a perfectly suitable future wife to slip on a black leather suit and move her body both sexually and aggressively in a mating dance where she gets the leading role. In both cases, once they acknowledge that their differences make them 'others' and they notice and rebel against the domination of their bodies, Nazneen and Sandy are ready to cross the boundaries set by the dominant discourse and experiment with their bodies in an act of subversion that transforms them into empowered individuals.

4. Conclusion

Read from a perspective of body politics, both *Brick Lane* and *Grease* become narrations of the rites of passage of two women strictly marked by cultural dominant discourses whose exposure to a new code of conduct will trigger their realisation of their difference and the possibilities of empowerment that this fact implies. To compare such different narrations –not only from the point of view of plot, but also their cultural background and target audiences- serves the purpose of unifying broad theories of body politics under differing examples to enlighten them. Sandy's final boost and the consequent reversal of dominant roles that proves so satisfactory is announced by a harbinger set of pivotal moments of female solidarity encrusted in secondary plot lines that intently catch the attention, just as Nazneen's constant contact with her sister and her determination to stick to her best friend Razia, even though she is frowned upon by her husband, announces Nazneen's successful resolution. Even though their stories, motivations and purposes are more than differing, their bodies react rather similarly to the main problematics that body politics point out. The fact that sorority is present in the three stages both protagonists go through implies an empathy among the women in both narrations which includes them into a web of 'otherness' that infects both texts with images of solidarity among minorities.

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These images, together with the subversion of the expected uses of the body that both protagonists make, prove to be a priceless jewel in the cultural production of the western culture. True, both narratives present a resolution of the female identity's conundrum presented that has been positively read here from the perspective of feminist body politics. However, these literary practices, although more common every year, are still exceptional and usually confined to women's reading habits. It would be worth reflecting on the possibility of providing these new subversions of the dominant discourse throughout cultural products to younger generations. Since the conclusion which both narrations reach from the perspective of body politics is that through realisation of the body-related constraints imposed on them, women can overcome those qualms and scruples that undermine their freedom, then maybe it is our responsibility as educators, guardians or simply neighbours, to pass on the message, as Razia does in the closing lines of *Brick Lane*, that 'you can do whatever you like' (Ali, 492).

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