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Separate Spheres?: Representing London Through Women in Some Recent Black British Fiction

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Abstract
The recent season of Windrush films and exhibitions in Britain celebrating the fiftieth anniversary of the arrival of the wave of Caribbean immigrants in the late 40s and 50s marks a public moment of stock-taking and an acknowledgement of the changing nature of British identity as a whole. Yet the series also suggests that migration - and the impact of migration - is intimately bound up with the geographical locations and destinies of cities like London, Manchester, Birmingham, Liverpool, Leicester, Bradford or Leeds. As Mike and Trevor Phillips remark, 'the story of how ... migrants came to this country and became British is a story about cities.'

It will be of no surprise that the experience of cities and living in cities, particularly London, has become the subject of much contemporary post-colonial and black British fiction, from Sam Selvon's The Lonely Londoners to the Black Audio Film Collective's Handsworth Songs and Salman Rushdie's The Satanic Verses. The aim of this essay is to address the ongoing reassessment of race, migration, identity and urban spaces by exploring the representation of the city through women.
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The recent season of *Windrush* films and exhibitions in Britain celebrating the fiftieth anniversary of the arrival of the wave of Caribbean immigrants in the late 40s and 50s marks a public moment of stock-taking and an acknowledgement of the changing nature of British identity as a whole. Yet the series also suggests that migration – and the impact of migration – is intimately bound up with the geographical locations and destinies of cities like London, Manchester, Birmingham, Liverpool, Leicester, Bradford or Leeds. As Mike and Trevor Phillips remark, ‘the story of how ... migrants came to this country and became British is a story about cities.’ It will be of no surprise that the experience of cities and living in cities, particularly London, has become the subject of much contemporary post-colonial and black British fiction, from Sam Selvon’s *The Lonely Londoners* to the Black Audio Film Collective’s *Handsworth Songs* and Salman Rushdie’s *The Satanic Verses*. The aim of this essay is to address the ongoing reassessment of race, migration, identity and urban spaces by exploring the representation of the city through women.

I want to begin by sketching how cities have been represented as essentially public spaces of work and leisure, particularly the way they have been discoursed upon as real or imaginary spatialized interfaces between the class, cultural, racial and sexual communities that bring about emancipatory change. The work of the cultural critic Paul Gilroy and the philosopher Iris Marion Young are two outstanding examples of this representation of the city and of urban social relations. Gilroy’s work has been characterized by an interrogation of a conception of culture in terms of ‘races’, families or essences. Such concept-metaphors, Gilroy argues, run the risk of turning ‘social processes into natural and instinctive ones’, creating a nationalist language of ‘ethnic absolutism’; the nation becomes ‘a neat symmetrical accumulation of family units’ culminating in the ‘experience of unified, and continuous national identity’. Read within the context of Britain, the black presence becomes a foreign presence which threatens the homogenous and unified white nation within its shores. In *The Black Atlantic*, Gilroy finds in the chronotope of the ship an
alternative vision of culture as cross-cultural fertilizations, hybridities and diasporas. But his earlier work, ‘There Ain’t No Black in the Union Jack’, locates in the contested space of the city another vision and model of cultural identity. In contradistinction to the predominant racist association of black criminality and the inner-city, Gilroy reclaims the city as the site of black expressive cultures and a metaphor for their emancipatory potential, hybrid origins, self-determination and syncretism. In his concluding chapter, ‘Urban Social Movements, “Race” and Community’, Gilroy argues that new black counter- and subcultures might provide productive ways of reconfiguring community and urban relations in the politics of ‘race’. He emphasizes their urban dimensions and, drawing on Manuel Castell’s work, explains that these social movements ‘consider themselves to be urban, citizen or related to the city in their self-denomination; they are locally based, territorially defined and ... tend to mobilize around three central goals: 1 collective consumption; 2 cultural identity; 3 political self-management’. Gilroy suggests that such a new language of community based on ‘local factors ... political traditions ... local economy and residential structure’ displaces an older and more essentialist conception of class and ‘race’, and may result in alliances across cultural groups. Despite their essentially ‘defensive’ and unstable nature, he finds in these alliances, agency and a ‘resistance to domination ... [rooted] in a radical sense of powerlessness’. (Gilroy offers the example of how ‘disruptive protest’ such as the battles over territory in the so-called ‘race’ riots in metropolitan cities can become an integral part of the symbolism of community in the city.)

Gilroy is not alone in privileging the city as a site for the emergence of more emancipatory forms of social relations. If his city is more the site than the model of such social relations, Iris Marion Young holds up the city as an exemplar of politics. While acknowledging that social injustices have been part of the history and formations of cities, Young argues for the city as a normative ideal, where ‘persons and groups interact within spaces and institutions they all experience themselves as belonging to, but without those interactions dissolving into unity or commonness’. Her ideal of city life is a vision of ‘social differentiation without exclusion’. Young’s privileging of the city is part of her critique not only of liberalism, universality and community, but also the exclusions that the liberal conception of the citizen-subject effects; the liberal conception of citizenship expresses a desire ‘for the fusion of subjects with one another’ into a unity of common values and experiences that denies and represses social difference. Young’s arguments echo Gilroy’s critique of filiative concept-metaphors such as ‘races’ and families in the language of national and cultural identity. Like Gilroy, the city allows Young to produce an alternative language of community that takes as its formative definition the experience of difference, hybridity and strangeness. In her attempt to harness difference to political activity and negotiation, Young’s city
privileges public spaces and public forums: ‘The group diversity of the city is most often apparent in public spaces. This helps to account for their vitality and excitement. Cites provide important public spaces – streets, parks, and plazas – where people stand and sit together, interact and mingle, or simply witness one another, without becoming unified in a community of “shared final ends”.’

In novels of 50s London, the impact of migration results in the new cultural interfaces that surface in urban spaces; such places are celebrated for their energy and fusion. Colin MacInnes’s novels, *City of Spades* (1957) and *Absolute Beginners* (1959), celebrate public urban spaces of leisure and youth culture that are influenced by the music of the sudden black influx. As Alan Sinfield puts it, MacInnes’s ‘enthusiasm’ in these novels was ‘partly a refreshing excitement at the new cultural opportunities offered by Blacks in a stodgy and boring English scene’. Here, London is a sum of its public scenes, with its ‘utopian fusion of subcultural [and youth] cultural forms’. Yet it is this dominant association of the city with its public face which prompts my disquiet and my question: does the city always have to be represented and discoursed upon in terms of its public faces? Can the city also be defined in terms of its private and domestic spaces? Of course, both public and private are two sides of the same coin and both are explored in Sam Selvon’s powerful novel of Caribbean experience of 50s London, *The Lonely Londoners* (1956). On the one hand, the encounter with London is seen as a romance of its public place names; much of the novel also conveys the excitement of ‘coasting’ the big city’s parks, dance halls and public meeting spaces, particularly for young men. On the other hand, there is also the loneliness of people in the city ‘who don’t know what happening in the room next to them’. This London is one of alienation, where even Moses and the boys’ weekly meetings of ‘kiff-kiff laughter, behind the ballad and the episode, the what-happening, the summer-is-hearts’ barely keep the bewilderment and hopelessness of their lives at bay. But much of MacInnes’s and Selvon’s books are about men’s experiences of the city, men’s celebrations of the possibilities (and dilemmas) that urban lives bring about. What about the women’s stories in Selvon’s book; what of their experiences of the city? While Selvon does give a brief account of what happens to the character of Tanty, *The Lonely Londoners* only registers the presence of women obliquely, in terms of their relationships to men. In my preliminary exploration of three contemporary black British novels, I want to look at the part gender plays in the representation of urban experience and ask, firstly, if the concentration on public spaces is in some way itself gendered; and secondly, if the conventional split between the public and the private is more fluid than rigid in women’s experiences of the city. In particular, I want to address London – and this may be a contradiction – not only in terms of the utopic/dystopic ‘public’ spaces of work and leisure, but also as the ‘private’ spaces of home, family
and cultural community. The novels I have selected highlight this problem: Caryl Phillips’s *The Final Passage* (1985), Joan Riley’s *The Unbelonging* (1985) and Farhana Sheikh’s *The Red Box* (1991). I will not dwell extensively on any individual novel, but say a little about the kinds of challenges each poses for the problem of the public/private dichotomy in the representation of the city.

*The Final Passage*, set in the initial waves of Caribbean migration, is in many ways an attempt to tell the woman’s story of migration that is absent from Selvon’s *The Lonely Londoners*. Although Phillips’s novel uses various focalizers and deliberately eschews chronology in its attempts to embody the fragmentation of individual life and the difficulty of historical understanding, the novel is written primarily from Leila’s viewpoint. The novel deals with migration to and experiences of London from the standpoint of a woman; it does not make gender absent from its portrayal of the city. Leila’s gradual isolation, and the contraction of her London world to the sitting room of her derelict house, can be contrasted to her husband Michael’s relative freedom in roaming the city for work and for leisure. One could of course argue that Michael’s escape from the house is an escape from the imprisonment of his past (achieved through a wilful forgetting), and that Leila’s relative stasis in character development is due to her reliving crucial moments of her personal history, and represent a wider inability to move on. But to offer such a comparative judgement of these two characters as the sole explanation of their response to migration and urban living is perhaps to be blind to the ways that gender moulds our experiences of the city.

Phillips’s novel moves from Jamaica to London and, in so doing, we are reminded of the contrasts of colour, expansiveness and communal feeling that characterize the Caribbean, and the coldness of climate, greyness of surround, alienation and general hostility of the London environment. These juxtapositions are also made by Selvon; but in *The Final Passage*, the Caribbean is perhaps less nostalgically painted than in *The Lonely Londoners*. It is a place of fraught relationships, secrets and lies, cycles of poverty, macho attitudes, sexism and the legacy of slavery, a place in Leila’s mind ‘overburdened with vegetation and complacency’. London, in contrast, is imagined by both characters as a place of escape, a dream of new beginnings and achievements. But that such a positive image of London will turn out to be but a ‘cold and chilly dream’ is made real with Leila’s travels through the London landscape. What Leila sees on her journey is decay, poverty, pollution, waste, litter and the debris of people’s lives: the ‘hurried, private English faces’ and the open hostility of ‘If you want a nigger neighbour, vote labour’ and ‘No vacancies for coloureds’. Leila notes in the grey winter landscape, the sky ‘hung so low it covered the street like a dark coffin lid’, cars were just ‘blurry colours’, and the people who rushed homewards were ‘images of isolation, fighting umbrellas and winds that buffet their bodies’. The
loneliness of urban life will increasingly mirror Leila and Michael's own lives, as husband and wife are estranged from each other. London becomes a metaphor for their deteriorating relationship; Leila imagines her husband as a 'passenger on the same train, in the same carriage' and their home a 'cheap hotel room'.\textsuperscript{18} But while both characters experience alienation, Leila's predicament is exacerbated by the fact that she is a young pregnant woman who has to take care of an infant.

As a migrant woman who is left at home with her child by her husband who works all day and then goes to the pub to drink, there are very little resources she can draw upon in a strange and hostile country. At first, she finds a friend in the working-class Mary and they go shopping together. But as she runs out of her own money, and when Michael refuses to offer up part of his wages, she begins to avoid Mary. Ashamed of her poverty, she simply stays at home more and more. The migrant woman's experience of urban life is potentially more isolating than her male counterpart; she may be solely dependent on her husband and may have none of the communal support and network of friends and relations to help her. Leila's house is not located in a Caribbean enclave in London, and therefore when she is abandoned by her husband she has no one to turn to. Leila's day is literally reduced to feeding her son, waiting for 'the postman to bring nothing', thinking of her husband, attempting to read in the cold and sitting 'in the gloom waiting for it to get dark before going to bed. This was her life'.\textsuperscript{19} Her isolation is both mental and physical, and results in her feelings of disassociation from her surroundings and the people around her (Leila imagines leaving England behind). Leila's intense isolation is matched by a diminishing of passages of dialogue that characterize the earlier part of the novel; the silences alluded to in the earlier pages, which represent a lack of communication and understanding, are heightened with Leila's increasingly disturbed focalization and solipsism. The physical landscape of London is registered less and less with the progress of the novel and Leila's London becomes literally the four walls of her dilapidated sitting room. Phillips's novel of a migrant woman's vulnerability should not of course be read as representative of all women's experiences of urban living. Oddly enough we are not given her husband's story of London; his narrative is characterized by action - coming home drunk, going to work, going to the pub, meeting friends, perhaps even finding another woman. But his is another story. The Final Passage's focus on women poses the problem of whether the experience of the city, and hence its representation, are gendered. It also raises the supplementary issue of whether one could classify these intense private and domestic experiences as also in some senses 'representing' the city.

Such a question arises with Joan Riley's exploration of domestic violence in The Unbelonging.\textsuperscript{20} I have chosen Riley's novel, set in Leicester not London, precisely because its portrayal of extreme vulnerability allows us
to think about the general question of whether the public/private split in discourses of the city is itself marked by gender. The novel’s exploration of the mental spaces of fear and vulnerability, to the exclusion of any wider sense of public context or surround, is perhaps an odd choice for this special issue on post-colonial London. Domestic interiors are vividly portrayed: Hyacinth Williams’s room, her sodden mattress, the sitting room of her father’s house, the various hostels she inhabits in Leicester and its suburbs, and her student accommodation in Birmingham. In the first half of the novel, public places other than Hyacinth’s school are only fleetingly described. In fact, it is not until after two thirds of the novel, when she returns to the place of her abuse, that the physical surround of her neighbourhood is described. Readers are informed of the novel’s setting in Leicester about three-quarters of the way through; such lack of geographical and spatial markers have lead some critics to assume that The Unbelonging, like other Riley novels, is set in London. Hyacinth Williams’s problem is similar to Leila’s – as women/child, both are made more vulnerable by the fact that they are newcomers to Britain. They suffer abuse in public and in the confines of their home. Hyacinth’s public encounters with others are described as severely traumatizing; she is often greeted with hostility from students and teachers at school, social workers and hostel wardens. Her reaction is to retreat into an increasingly imaginary Jamaica associated with comfort, family, friends, warmth and happiness. Riley’s narrative juxtapositions serve to reinforce the character’s isolation; the manner in which Hyacinth uses Jamaica to blot out present unhappiness has lead one critic to label this strategy as a form of ‘mental maroonage’. Yet there is no refuge in these interior or mental scapes, and her fear projects itself outwards. Hyacinth is betrayed by her body in her attempts to repress the past (bed-wetting even when she is 13), and in her desires to blend in with white folk. In her association of her ills and failings with her body (she is cruelly beaten, she hates the way she looks, her fear is expressed vividly as bodily reactions), her body becomes literally what is wrong with her. In addition to the internalization of racist discrimination, the shame of being ‘black’, she also internalizes the sexual and physical abuse by her father. She sees curiosity aroused by her scars and bruises as a shame that she does not want others to know about. It is no wonder that she uses physical and mental isolation as a strategy for survival. It is only with the gradual emergence of Hyacinth from her protective shell that we register more of her physical surrounds. The claustrophobic earlier sections of the novel focus primarily on her fear, the limited environs of her house and rooms, but she gradually relaxes into an awareness of public spaces with growing confidence. Hence in The Unbelonging, as in The Final Passage, the experiences of city life are very much written from the domain of the private and the domestic. These spaces are inextricably informed by gender.

I do not want to give the erroneous impression of an all too easy divide
between the public as the masculine domain, and the private as the domain of women. I want to argue that the divide between public and private is perhaps more fluid than we perhaps give credit for, especially in the experiences of women. This has a corresponding effect on the way in which the city is discoursed upon. In relation to the public/private divide, domestic violence is of course the arena where such a boundary works to the disadvantage of victims of abuse. As Anannya Bhattacharjee argues, the privacy and isolation of domestic violence contributes to the silencing of the woman:

Isolation is one of the most severe forms of abuse in the home by a man against a woman, contributing to a battered woman’s perception that her condition is uncommon and shameful. It is one of the primary ways in which a man makes sure that the woman’s voice is never heard and that she remains [hidden, private] and dependent on him in every way. 22

In her focus on the South Asian immigrant community in the US, Bhattacharjee calls such a divide a mirage; the specific situation of the domestic worker and the use and abuse of loyalty to home and tradition in Asian communities render the dichotomy present in some feminist thinking distinctly unhelpful. Bhattacharjee’s interventions offer a useful way into Farhana Sheikh’s exploration of diasporic British Asian women’s identities, The Red Box. 23 Elsewhere, I have written of how the novel deconstructs Asian identity not as a primordial ethnicity but as a product of history, location and the politics of culture, contesting the right to live and work in Britain. In choosing to centre the novel on a female Asian sociologist (Raisa) and her two young respondents (Nasreen and Tahira), Sheikh also offers insights into the relationships between the feminist intellectual and her constituents. 24 But The Red Box is also instructive in the present context for its undoing of the public and the private.

The domestic or home worker’s place of residence is both private and public. The red box of the title alludes to the silence and mystery surrounding Raisa’s mother’s life and functions as the catalyst for her journey of discovering how cultural and sexed identities are formed. The largely silent and undocumented lives of women as homeworkers or in lowly-paid textile factory jobs, articulate the connections between the mothers of three otherwise different kinds of Asian women. Nasreen’s mother does piece work and sews for Mr Khan from her home, while Tahira’s mother works in a small factory which actively exploits women who work part-time and as ‘temps’. These women, like Raisa’s mother, do not have a national insurance number, are not registered as employed, and are hence invisible with regard to state and employment legislation. In Nasreen’s residence, the home is also the place of hard work as all the female children are roped into finishing the sewing tasks. Tahira is co-opted into the factory to help finish the unfinished tasks at the factory. For these women their private and public experiences of London at work and
home coincide. The public and private also coincide in other ways, notably in the fluid definitions of home as not only the private sphere of the domestic residence, but in the way the concept of home extends to the larger Asian community. This is particularly true as it impinges on a woman's reputation – the honour or dishonour her behaviour has on her kinsfolk – and in the manner with which women's behaviour is policed by models of propriety defined by the leaders of the community. In the novel, Tahira is aware of the double standards when it comes to judging her transgression as opposed to judging her male relations' transgressive behaviour. Bhattacharjee argues that the concept of home means different things within the South Asian immigrant community: as the private 'domestic sphere of the heterosexual and patriarchal family ... as an extended ethnic community separate and distinct from other ethnic communities' and as their nations of origin. In all these spheres, the public and private divide is more fluid than conventionally ascribed. The novel never neglects how even such 'public' worlds are marked by the experiences of gender, and exist in tension with received public and private conceptions of home.

Yet it is also true that the character of Tahira's movement across the urban spaces of leisure (bhangra discos, shopping arcades and cafes), and her participation in the anti-racial protest at her school, show a more assured approach to London and living in London. In this, Tahira comes much closer to Gilroy's formulation of resistance through popular forms and urban social movements. While being sensitive to the kinds of structures that might restrict women's choices, other contemporary novels such as Andrea Levy's *Never Far From Nowhere* (1996) also register a new confidence by which young British black women negotiate different aspects of their identity and their rights as citizens of Britain. But even here, young women's entry into the public spaces of leisure are not identical with their male counterparts. Exploring the representation of the city through women is instructive for it mitigates against the all too easy manner in which gender is rendered transparent.

NOTES

5. Paul Gilroy, 'There Ain't No Black in the Union Jack', p. 231.
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13. For an interesting discussion of history as fragment and pattern and its relation to an absence of communication, see C.L. Innes, ‘Wintering: Making a Home in Britain’, in *Other Britain, Other British: Contemporary Multicultural Fiction* (London: Pluto, 1995), pp. 21-34. Innes’s discussion is also useful for its exploration of migration from the point of view of women.