

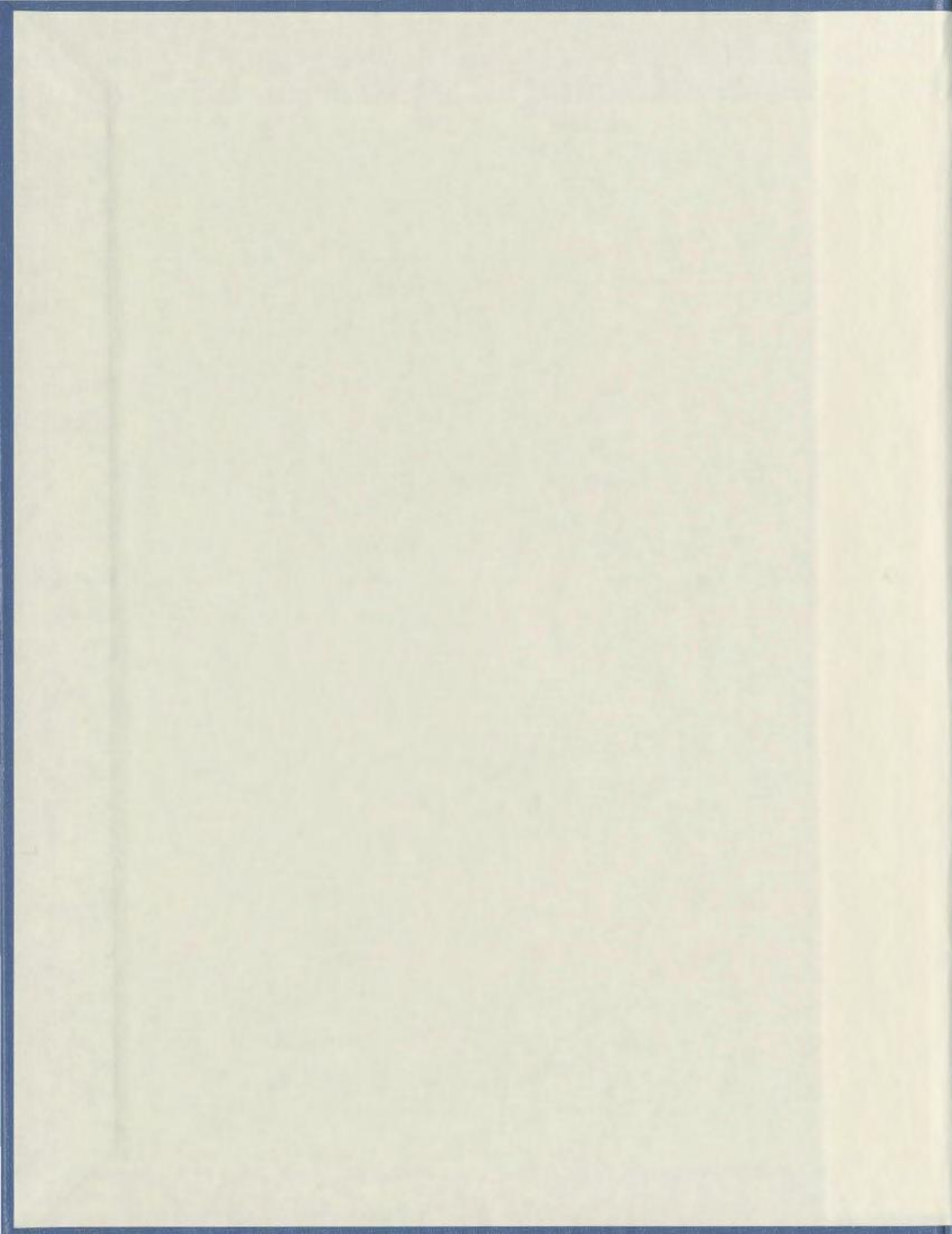
ON THE PERIPHERY: THE FEMALE MARGINALIZED  
IN FIVE POST-COLONIAL NOVELS

CENTRE FOR NEWFOUNDLAND STUDIES

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**ON THE PERIPHERY:  
THE FEMALE MARGINALIZED IN FIVE POST-COLONIAL NOVELS**

**BY**

**Katrina Manuel, B.A. (Hons)**

**A thesis submitted to the School of Graduate  
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**Department of English and Literature  
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## ABSTRACT

Women in colonized societies are often marginalized not only because of their race, but also because of their gender. Their experience of domination in a patriarchal system makes finding their own place in society and their own identity extraordinarily difficult. It is imperative to acknowledge that women across the globe and across cultures experience denial of personal development, denial of educational development, and also denial of voice. Although females' ethnic background may vary significantly, the experience of marginalization remains the same. A feminist perspective, then, is critical in exploring post-colonial literature so that we may be better able to understand the position of women as marginalized individuals. Females conveying female experiences in their own discourse allows us to perceive the impediments and burdens that colonizers and the patriarchy have imposed upon them in addition to recognizing the strengths that they have had to develop in order to cope with their marginalized position in society. Margaret Atwood's *Cat's Eye*, Anita Desai's *Fire on the Mountain* and *In Custody*, Paule Marshall's *Brown Girl, Brownstones*, and Jean Rhys' *Wide Sargasso Sea* show the plight of marginalized women in addition to providing rich texts which address a number of pertinent and pressing issues. These texts illustrate females' search for identity, demonstrating how their ethnic backgrounds and gender

have forced them into lifestyles which perhaps they would not have personally chosen, and they also show a desire for survival within male-dominated and colonized societies.

A culture or individual that has been affected by colonization must deal with a tremendous amount of tension and urgency even after the colonizers have withdrawn from the society, since the impact of colonization remains. One ongoing debate that exists within the parameters of post-colonial literature is whether one can return to a pure, pre-colonial state. The degree to which a person or society can restore its own culture after the imposition of the colonizer's is a critical issue that will be addressed in addition to the equally important issue of recovering (if this is indeed possible) the lost voice of the female colonized. Furthermore, tracing the self-perception of the female protagonists from the outset of each novel to the end sheds light upon the impact of the patriarchy and of the colonizers. Above all, analyzing the growth of the female characters also indicates the extent to which healing and recovering from the colonial imposition has occurred. *my program of studies*



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## **Chapter I**

### **Post-Colonialism, Feminism and Five Novels**

Post-colonial literatures reject the world view that lies at the heart of the canon. They subvert the Eurocentric perspective on colonized and decolonizing societies by insisting that life in such societies be examined “from the inside, as it is experienced by those who live there” (Harris 9). These literatures, according to Slemon and Tiffin, “are grounded in the cultural realities of those societies whose subjectivity has been constituted at least in part by the subordinating power of European colonialism” (ix). They tend to give voice, therefore, to many who have long been silenced. But post-colonial writing does not confine itself to the experience of the colonized and the decolonizing in classic colonial societies. One of its major concerns is the effect on the sense of self produced by dislocation – through migration, enslavement, or removal for indentureship, for example – or by cultural denigration, “the conscious and unconscious oppression of the indigenous personality and culture by a supposedly superior racial or cultural model” (Ashcroft, Griffiths and Tiffin 9). From this perspective, much of the literature of invader-settler societies such as Canada, Australia and New Zealand is of post-colonial relevance, as is the literature probing the social and psychological aftermath of the Indian and African diaspora.

The experiences of import in post-colonial literatures may be analysed within

the framework of a colonizer/colonized or centre/periphery model, one in which the “concept of dominance as the principal regulator of human societies” (Ashcroft, Griffiths and Tiffin 37) is subjected to diligent scrutiny. Viewed within such a framework, the literatures may be seen as underscoring the theme that in unequal relationships – whether between distinct societies or between groups within a society – the less powerful are frequently marginalized and denied effective voice. The literatures suggest, further, that the condemnation of the less powerful to the margins leads inexorably to their designation as the Other, a process which – as Hélène Cixous observes – bestows upon them a status of marked inferiority:

What is the ‘Other’? If it is truly the ‘other’, there is nothing to say; it cannot be theorized. The ‘other’ escapes me. It is elsewhere, outside: absolutely other. It doesn’t settle down. But in History, of course, what is called ‘other’ is an alterity that does settle down, that falls into the dialectical circle. It is the other in a hierarchally organized relationship in which the same is what rules, names, defines, and assigns ‘its’ other...the reduction of a ‘person’ to a ‘nobody’ to the position of ‘other’ – the inexorable plot of racism. (Qtd in Young 2-3)

Marginalization and designation as the Other are likely to lead to a crisis of identity, a phenomenon noted by Fanon in his examination of the Algerian experience. According to Fanon, the colonized Negro has been robbed of “all worth, all individuality” (98-99) and is therefore handicapped by an inability to reclaim the self (93).

The colonized/marginalized frequently seek to resolve this dilemma of the self through a reduction of their Otherness. A strategy commonly adopted to achieve such a goal is imitation of the colonizer. As Memmi notes in *The Colonizer and the Colonized*,

The first attempt of the colonized is to change his condition by changing his skin. There is a tempting model very close at hand – the colonizer. The latter suffers from none of his deficiencies, has all rights, enjoys every possession and benefits from every prestige....The first ambition of the colonized is to become equal to that splendid model and to resemble him to the point of disappearing in him. (120)

Such imitation is a course of action encouraged not a little by the colonizer's view that the subject peoples must bring themselves "as quickly as possible into step with the white world" (Fanon 98-99). Colonialism confronts the subject peoples with the "superior" culture of the master race and, since the dominant group defines the black man as "civilized" if he "renounces his blackness," the "colonized is elevated above his jungle status in proportion to his adoption of the mother country's cultural standards" (Fanon 18). As a result, the less powerful engage constantly in self-evaluation:

The Negro is in comparison. There is the first truth. He is in comparison: that is, he is constantly preoccupied with



self-evaluation and with the ego-ideal. Whenever he comes into contact with someone else, the question of value, merit, arises. The Antilleans have no inherent values of their own, they are always contingent on the presence of the Other. The question is always whether he is less intelligent than I, blacker than I, less respectful than I. Every position of one's own, every effort at security, is based on relations of dependence, with the diminution of the other. It is the wreckage of what surrounds me that provides the foundation for my virility. (Fanon 211).

The mimicry of the colonizer and the self-evaluation in terms of the norms and values of the powerful are likely to produce “a colonial subject who will be recognizably the same as the colonizer” (Young 147). The end result is generally a distorted self conforming with some rigidity to the colonizer's model. Unfortunately, the subject is “still different” (Young 147) and escape from the status of the Other is still difficult to achieve.

A post-colonial frame of reference such as that outlined above intersects with feminist analysis. This is quite consistent with the trend noted by Ashcroft, Griffiths and Tiffin in *The Empire Writes Back*, namely, that “Feminist perspectives are of increasing importance in post-colonial criticism and indeed the strategies of recent feminist and recent post-colonial theory overlap and inform each other” (31). While “multiple feminisms” undoubtedly exist (Commeyras and Alvermann 31-32), feminist study tends to be unified in the “critical analysis of male privilege and women's

subordination within any given society” (Offen 151). A “critical analysis” of this kind suggests that women may be subordinated in different senses. They may, for example, be a segment of the subject people in a classic colonial society, or they may be part of a migrant/immigrant group denied full status within a host society. At the same time, they are characteristically subordinates within a patriarchy. As women within a patriarchal system, they are again in some sense colonized; they “share with colonized races and peoples an intimate experience of the politics of oppression and repression” (Ashcroft, Griffiths and Tiffin 174-75). In most cases economically underprivileged – economically exploited, some feminists would argue (Walby 3-4) – they are relatively powerless. Like the colonized, they are marginalized and are deprived of voice. They are reduced to being the Other, becoming “socialized creature[s], trained to accept a man’s world” (Castro 155) in which a “patriarchal image” of women is transmitted to them (Castro 148). Again like the colonized, they seek acceptance in the mainstream of society through the strategy of submitting to a model – in this case, a model of femininity – to which the dominant group subscribes. In conforming narrowly to this model, they face monumental impediments to their personal growth, to the full realization of their potential, and to the achievement of a complete and independent sense of self.

The intersecting frames of reference of post-colonialism and feminist analysis

are very much a part of the contemporary literary scene. As Ashcroft, Griffiths and Tiffin observe, “the history and concerns of feminist theory have strong parallels with post-colonial theory. Feminist and post-colonial discourses both seek to reinstate the marginalized in the face of the dominant...” (175). Such an overlapping of perspective provides a useful approach for examining the five novels selected for discussion below. Margaret Atwood’s *Cat’s Eye*, Anita Desai’s *In Custody* and *Fire on the Mountain*, Paule Marshall’s *Brown Girl, Brownstones*, and Jean Rhys’ *Wide Sargasso Sea* all explore the plight of the marginalized female, one who is assigned the status of the Other and denied the opportunity for free growth. In all five novels, marginalized females face enormous pressure to conform to prescribed attributes and to a clearly defined role in society. While the women may vary in ethnic background, their lives are characterized by a rather similar degree of estrangement and psychological mutilation.

In Rhys’ *Wide Sargasso Sea*, for example, the first section – which presents Antoinette’s perspective – establishes this character’s position as a marginalized and colonized individual in a post-Emancipation society. The second section of the novel, while giving prominence to Rochester’s voice, serves to underscore the notion of the silenced female; Antoinette, Christophine, Amélie, Hilda and Aunt Cora all have speech but are without voice, for no one heeds what they attempt to say. As O’Callaghan

suggests in *Woman Version*, the entire novel “deals with the attempt and failure of dialogue” (29), a feature which underlines the position of women on the periphery. Though the final section of the novel returns to Antoinette’s point of view, it also incorporates another voice, that of Grace Poole, who has been so colonized in Britain that she is incapable of sympathy for Antoinette. Grace Poole is an illustration of the marginalization of white women in their own privileged white culture. It is Antoinette, however, who is the primary instance of female marginalization and colonization. As woman colonized, Antoinette loses her financial independence and her voice and is restricted in terms of freedom to develop an independent sense of self.

This is not to say that Rhys is unaware of the marginalization often faced by the male. In *Wide Sargasso Sea*, Rochester has in a sense been colonized in his English environment, for he has been manipulated and exploited by his own family and must adhere to its traditional values. He feels impelled, for instance, to respect his father’s authority; he says to his father: “All is well and has gone according to your plans and wishes” (63). He has been rigidly moulded by his own upbringing and in reality has as little freedom as the typical female to grow into a fuller being. Furthermore, Rochester’s experience of Jamaica is rather like that of a displaced migrant striving to come to grips with a strange and overwhelming culture. He considers Jamaica “spiteful” and “malignant,” a “wild place” that is “menacing.” He admits to Antoinette

that he feels displaced and unsettled: "I feel very much a stranger here ... I feel this place is my enemy" (107). The very landscape offers him no comfort: "Everything is too much ... too much blue, too much purple, too much green. The flowers too red ..." (59). Rochester does not feel a part of the Jamaican setting. He is marginalized. Despite such acknowledgment of the possibility of the marginalization of the male, however, it is the colonization and marginalization of the female that are of central interest to Rhys.

Somewhat similar preoccupations tend to be in evidence in the works by Anita Desai, though they surface in either subtle ways, as in *In Custody*, or more overtly, as in *Fire on the Mountain*. Desai's *In Custody*, for instance, may be regarded as predominantly about men. Certainly, its main character is male. But Desai's primary concern is with the female experience and, as the writer herself explains in an interview, there are pragmatic reasons for creating a novel with a male protagonist:

I felt that as long as I wrote about women and just had my chief characters as women leading traditional women's lives in India, I was restricting myself to home and family. And if I wanted to walk out into the wider world and bring in history and experience and events and actions I simply had to write about male characters. (Libert 54)

While the focus on males enables Desai to broaden her canvas, *In Custody* is more than



a study of Deven's effort to preserve the Urdu tradition. Desai, in portraying an array of women of various ages, classes, and backgrounds, produces a "composite" woman in Indian society and captures diverse elements of female life in Hindu India. In this connection, she presents three of Nur's wives: the ambitious and creative Imtiaz Begum, as well as an older, uneducated but cunning wife and a neglected wife who subverts the conventional gender roles during one of Nur's drunken episodes. There are also Sarla, Deven's wife, who is younger and less experienced than Imtiaz, and Raj's aunt, who is portrayed as a woman not bound by tradition since she pursues an unconventional lifestyle in living with a tailor to whom she is not married. While the female characters are not placed in the foreground of the novel, as they are in *Fire on the Mountain*, *In Custody* makes some trenchant observations about the consequences of the marginalization of women in Indian society, and the theme of the concomitants of female Otherness is pervasive.

Marshall's *Brown Girl, Brownstones* also deals with the marginalized female. The novel focuses mainly on females and their experience in a foreign society. The women are members of a Barbadian community in New York, a community comprised – in Gunew's terms – of "migrants," since their initial socialization has taken place in a "language and culture other than the hegemonic one" (Gunew 144). The Barbadians must come to terms with the inferior status assigned them by the dominant white

culture. The female characters in particular display the alienation and the limited sense of self-worth that flow from rejection and blatant racism. They have not literally been colonized and, furthermore, their oppression by the dominant white society is by no means complete. The Barbadian women, for instance, speak in their own dialect. While the intrusion of the colonizer's language is difficult to avoid, the dialect is often the only reminder of the Other's home and is a possession the colonizer cannot physically seize. The attachment to the dialect becomes a way of preserving some vague sense of worth. This is a point made by Marshall herself when she recalls in her "Poets in the Kitchen" her listening as a young Barbadian girl to her mother and other women discussing in their dialect matters ranging from the latest gossip to politics, talk which was "therapy" to the women and which served to "[restore] them to a sense of themselves and reaffirm their self-worth" (Marshall, *Reena* 6). In *Brown Girl, Brownstones*, however, the strategy of sustaining the dialect is not sufficiently powerful to rescue the women totally from the denigration which typifies the lot of the colonized.

While the novels dwell on the colonization and marginalization of women by the colonizer and the male, they also indicate occasionally the complicity of women in the process. Atwood's *Cat's Eye* provides an illustration of women's involvement in that role. Elaine Risley is treated as an Other by her female friends because she is less conventional than they are in terms of background and attributes. In Desai's *Fire on*

*the Mountain*, too, women contribute to the marginalization of the female. It is clear in both novels, however, that the complicity of women occurs against the backdrop of a patriarchal system and that the women who are involved are simply perpetuating an idealized image of the female that has been constructed within that system. It is evident in Desai's *Fire on the Mountain*, for example, that the Indian women participating in the process of marginalization – especially Nanda Kaul and her daughters and granddaughters – have been dominated and moulded by the patriarchy. In both novels, then, the ascendant norms and values of the patriarchy are a powerful, albeit indirect, influence in instances of female marginalization of other women.

While post-colonial and feminist analyses of the kind sketched above are quite penetrating, questions arise as to what they actually accomplish. With respect to the post-colonial perspective, Ashcroft, Griffiths and Tiffin argue that at the very least post-colonial writing has manifested an “inevitable tendency towards subversion” in that they have exposed “the configurations of domination” and have questioned the “bases of European and British metaphysics,” in this way “challenging the world-view that can polarize centre and periphery in the first place”(33). They note by way of illustration:

Writers such as J.M. Coetzee, Wilson Harris, V.S. Naipaul,  
George Lamming, Patrick White, Chinua Achebe,

Margaret Atwood, and Jean Rhys have all rewritten particular works from the English 'canon' with a view to restructuring European 'realities' in post-colonial terms, not simply by reversing the hierarchical order, but by interrogating the philosophical assumptions on which that order was based. (33)

A significant achievement of post-colonial writing, then, is its success in probing and exposing the assumptions and mechanisms – and their attendant conditions – that work to sustain colonization.

Feminist writing, too, tends to be subversive in the sense that it has a “consciousness-raising” intent (Castro 159). In literature and literary criticism, for example, one of its critical objectives is “to awaken women to the fact that literature is a masculine institution, which, throughout history, has never ceased transmitting a patriarchal image to women” (Castro 148). As Castro argues, the feminist approach to literature and literary criticism is founded on a “double refusal:”

It is first a refusal of the alienating conformity that for centuries has condemned women to a sexually defined identity and to an existential impoverishment as a consequence of the arbitrary polarization of human traits into sexual stereotypes and roles. The second refusal is even more radical: it is a rebellion against women's status of “otherness,” in the sense that this “otherness” has been spread throughout every aspect of life, and is synonymous with inferiority in patriarchal terms, since to be other than man is to be less than human. (148)

A likely achievement of feminist writing, therefore, is the alerting of women to the realities of their status within a colonial and/or patriarchal system.

The “consciousness-raising” function of feminist writing is an important element in the present study. The five novels selected for examination are analyzed for what they have to say to inform women – and presumably men – about the Otherness, the conformity, and the “existential impoverishment” that are generally women’s fate in colonial and/or patriarchal societies. But there exists another vital aspect of post-colonial and feminist analysis, one that goes well beyond subversion in the form of interrogating and exposing and the consequent raising of consciousness. In this regard, as Ashcroft, Griffiths and Tiffin observe in *The Empire Writes Back*, post-colonial writing has struggled with the issue of how the “post-colonial world can be creatively stabilized” (36):

Post-colonial theory, then, has begun to deal with the problems of transmuting time into space, with the present struggling out of the past, and, like much recent post-colonial literature, it attempts to construct a future. (36)

The ideal shape this future should take, they assert, is still an unsettled issue, but the emergent reality appears to be “one in which destructive cultural encounter is changing

to an acceptance of difference on equal terms” (36).

Much feminist writing, too, ventures beyond mere consciousness raising:

Some works of criticism or literature are primarily works of denunciation. Their authors say no to the status quo, to the oppression of women and to sexism. In contrast, other works exist in which there appear new imaginative perceptions, facts and forms of consciousness, of a totally new order. (Castro 159)

Two tendencies are thus manifest in feminist writing, “one insisting on the right to refuse, the other on the ability to imagine,” with the literature of the imagination being “oriented toward the future and playing a prophetic role” (Castro 159-160). Both tendencies may coexist within a specific work but, while the first is grounded in refusal, the second reaches out for alternatives to the oppressed lives to which women are typically subjected. It is argued in the present study that the five novels chosen for examination go beyond mere refusal – though that is an important ingredient in them – to raise the possibility of female growth, of the fulfilment of potential and the achievement of a more complete sense of self.

## **Chapter II**

### **Coping with Marginalization**

The consciousness-raising dimension of feminist writing is certainly present in Atwood's *Cat's Eye*, Desai's *In Custody* and *Fire on the Mountain*, Marshall's *Brown Girl, Brownstones*, and Rhys' *Wide Sargasso Sea*. The novels delve in part into the experience of the marginalized female, disclosing that such marginalization may occur in a variety of social contexts and that women might respond to it in different ways. They may become quickly aware of their status as the Other, though they may initially lack the insights that might trigger independent growth. Alternatively, they may not immediately accept their marginalized status – and perhaps not do so until its real nature is indicated to them in some way – and they may attempt to reduce their Otherness through conformity to the models held out to them as desirable by the dominant group. Occasionally, women choose to resist such conformity. In a patriarchy, for instance, they may adopt attitudes which have the potential to undermine the role the society has defined for them. There is a danger, though, that neither conformity nor resistance will produce the desired effect; conformity does not necessarily bring acceptance as equals on the part of the dominant group, and resistance to the norms of the patriarchy might only provoke strategies of opposition from the powerful male element in the society.

Selina, the female protagonist in Marshall's *Brown Girl, Brownstones*, is a classic example of the female who senses early that she is on the periphery. She is an outsider at the level of the family, of the local Barbadian community, and of the society at large. It is apparent at the outset that she is not like other Barbadians in Brooklyn. She is certainly not like her sister, Ina, and she is not a replica of her dead brother. She is a unique individual, an attribute that Marshall hints at in her description of the monotonous architecture on Brooklyn Street: "Yet, looking close, you saw that under the thick ivy each house had something distinctly its own" (3). Implicit in this description is a parallel with Selina's dissimilarity to her community; though Selina might appear on the surface to be identical to other Barbadians, deep down she is not.

In large measure because of her uniqueness, however, Selina is not fully a part of her family. The family photograph is significant; when Selina looks at it she sees a family that excludes her:

It was her father, mother, Ina and the brother she had never known. The picture of a neat young family and she did not believe it. The small girl under the drooping bow did not resemble her sister. The young woman in the 1920's dress with a headband around her forehead could not be the mother...Then she had come, strong and well-made, to take his place. But they had taken *no photographs*...[italics mine](Marshall 7-8)



A family normally offers support and fosters a healthy development of self, but Selina struggles throughout her early years to deal with her “mother,” Silla, while seeking to define her identity. She vacillates between identifying with and defying Silla, in whom she sees reflected the values—especially the materialism—of the dominant white culture. Indeed, her relationship with her mother rather parallels that between herself and the Barbadian community in Brooklyn, for which she feels a certain amount of contempt. She is hostile toward it because of its materialism and its conformity to the norms and tastes of the white society. She rebels against the Barbadian Association which, to her, epitomises the Barbadian surrender to the culture of the “colonizer.” She does not have a strong sense of belonging within the Barbadian community.

Selina grasps, as well, that she is marginalized at yet another level. She is aware that she is different from the white children in New York and that she is consequently despised by them. She could not help but be aware of the suspicion with which the Barbadians tended to regard white New Yorkers; the Barbadian women, for example, were made to feel unwelcome in the city:

Sometimes the white children on their way to school laughed at their blackness and shouted “nigger,” but Barbadian women sucked their teeth, dismissing them. (Marshall 11)

In return, the Barbadian women’s “tongues lashed the world in unremitting distrust”

(11).

While Selina is aware that she is marginalized, however, she initially takes no steps to promote her own growth. Though “strong and well-made” (8), she is still relatively naive. She does not consider that the Barbadian Association, which she condemns, was formed as a protective response to the marginalization of Barbadians by the white society. Further, she does not yet recognize the strength her mother has displayed in sustaining the family through difficult times and she therefore does not perceive the fundamental similarity between her mother and herself. Again, she is at first blind to the importance of her own tastes and talents for the definition of herself as an individual and for her full self-realization. Instead, she expends much of her energy in hostility toward the materialism and conformity of the Barbadian Association, rather than in pursuing her own growth.

Unlike Selina, Elaine Risley, the protagonist in Atwood’s *Cat’s Eye*, does not arrive promptly at a definition of herself as the Other. Elaine is representative of the female who comes to acknowledge her marginalized status after it has been indicated to her and who, at least in the beginning, adopts the strategy of mimicry – of conformity to dominant norms and values – in an effort to gain acceptance within a patriarchal society. To begin with, Elaine – though white and of middle-class background – has not been brought up in accordance with the norms of femininity

typical of a white, middle-class community. Her parents have not differentiated between her and her brother in terms of capacity to lead a rugged lifestyle. Her pastimes are similar to her brother's in that they include such activities as camping and living a rough life in the bush. Further, her clothing does not specifically define her as a girl, and she does not engage in such typical pursuits of girls as playing with dolls and making dolls' clothing. It is not until she moves with her family to Toronto that she is faced with the customs and rituals of conventional middle-class girls.

Elaine's response is to seek acceptance from the other girls by adopting their customs and language. She complies, for example, with the command to colour paper dolls in the shades Grace Smeath chooses, and she joins in the cutting and pasting of figures from old catalogues and scrapbooks. Accustomed at home to honest discourse, she cannot comprehend the other girls' affected speech and actions, but she imitates them in the hope of gaining their acceptance:

Their voices are wheedling and false: I can tell they don't mean it, each one thinks her own lady on her own page is good. But's it's the thing you have to say, so I begin to say it too. (Atwood 57)

Elaine conforms as well in beginning to desire the type of clothing and accessories that distinguish girls from boys: "I begin to want things I've never wanted before: braids,

a dressing gown, a purse of my own" (57). She suppresses her "natural" tastes and values in a quest for assimilation into the dominant group, not realizing at this stage that it is her uniqueness that is her real strength.

But Elaine cannot long escape a sense of marginalization, since her status in the community of girls is quickly indicated to her. Carol, an early friend, for example, shortly confirms to her that she is unlike everyone else. Carol believes that the Risleys sleep on the floor not because they have just moved into a new house but because they are "from outside the city" (52). And when Carol alludes to the Risleys' lifestyle, "it's as if she's reporting on the antics of some primitive tribe" (52). It becomes obvious to Elaine that she is on the periphery because she is not like other middle-class whites and is certainly not a typical girl.

While she recognizes her marginalization, however, Elaine does not completely escape the influence of her childhood companions. During her interview with Charna some years later, for example, Elaine seems confident about her art:

I'm a painter. Painters paint women. Rubens painted women, Renoir painted women, Picasso painted women. Everyone paints women. Is there something wrong with painting women? (95)

But despite this apparent self-assurance, Elaine hears her inner voice saying to her: "Your clothes are stupid. Your art is crap. Sit up straight and don't answer back" (95).

What Elaine hears in reality is merely an echo of Cordelia's voice from her childhood and, as Ahern intimates, "This voice that echoes in her head is the voice of patriarchal ideology, which while constituting Elaine as an 'independent' subject, also requires her to play the role of the weak, subordinate woman in society" (Ahern 10). A consciousness that she has been marginalized will not guarantee that she will feel absolutely free to pursue an independent identity in a patriarchal society.

Antoinette Cosway, in Rhys' *Wide Sargasso Sea*, also tends at first to minimize her Otherness. From the beginning she has difficulty formulating a firm sense of self because she is constantly reminded of her Otherness. A white Creole living in a colonial society in the post-Emancipation period, she is rejected by the English whites, and she is well aware of her social deficiencies:

Real white people, they got gold money. They didn't look at us. Old time white people nothing better than white nigger now, and black nigger better than white nigger. (Rhys 21)

Apart from being rejected by both English whites and the black masses because she is a hybrid, Antoinette is hated by the blacks because of her mother's marriage to the wealthy Mr. Mason:

The black people did not hate us quite so much when we were poor. We were white but we had not escaped and soon we would be dead for we had no money left. What was there to hate? (Rhys 29)

The disparaging refrain, “white cockroach,” is repeated several times in the course of the novel, underscoring Antoinette’s marginal status in the society.

But Antoinette does not protest against the racial injustices and differentiations in her society, and she does not resist the racial slurs cast her way:

They called us white cockroaches. Let sleeping dogs lie. One day a little girl followed me singing, ‘Go away white cockroach, go away, go away.’ I walked fast, but she walked faster. ‘White cockroach, go away, go away. Nobody want you. Go away.’ (Rhys 20)

Like that of other white Creoles, her solution to the problem of racially based antagonisms is to “let sleeping dogs lie” (20). She minimises her marginalization through quiescence.

Ultimately, though, it is driven home to her that she is truly an Other, perhaps most strongly in the incident in which Tia fails her in a time of need. In spite of their differences in skin colour, Antoinette has long regarded Tia as very much like herself: “We had eaten the same food, slept side by side, bathed in the same river” (38). That

“We had eaten the same food, slept side by side, bathed in the same river” (38). That

Antoinette perceives herself to be the same as Tia is clear from the text:

When I was close I saw the jagged stone in her hand but I did not see her throw it. I did not feel it either, only something wet, running down my face. I looked at her and I saw her face crumple up as she began to cry. We stared at each other, blood on my face, tears on hers. It was as if I saw myself. *Like in a looking glass* [italics mine]. (Rhys 38)

Confident of her standing in the eyes of Tia, Antoinette goes to her “friend” in a desperate attempt to cling to the life she knew before the fire, but Tia betrays their friendship. Antoinette comes to realize that Tia now sees her as the Other. For a long time, Antoinette has tried to nurture an identity on the basis of an inaccurate perception of the image Tia has held of her, but she must now accept the truth about her true status in a colonial society.

The five novels being examined tend to deal with other limitations – and the female response to them – imposed on women in a patriarchal system. In this connection, the female experience of control by the male is an important theme in the novels. Control – and the accompanying conformity – is certainly evident in Desai’s work. In an interview, Desai observed:

I think women, perhaps mostly Indian women, have a life presented to them and they have to make the best of it. Women tend to accept the life that is given to them and to exercise whatever control they can within those parameters. (Bliss 525)

Survival within the “life presented” to the Indian female is a major concern of Nanda Kaul in Desai’s *Fire on the Mountain*. Nanda has been conditioned to accept her life as a gracious hostess, as wife of the Vice-Chancellor, and as a responsible mother. She complies with her husband’s demands without question:

...Mr. Kaul had wanted her always in silk, at the head of the long rosewood table in the dining-room, entertaining his guests.

Mentally she stalked through the rooms of that house—his house, never hers...(18)

Bearing these lifelong roles with dignity, Nanda has never lashed out in disagreement; she has been an appendage to her husband and has accepted the values of a patriarchal society. In Desai’s *In Custody*, too, Sarla has been forced into an unfulfilling marriage and must tolerate the situation as best she can. She has her own yearnings — for such luxuries as a fan, a telephone and a refrigerator, for instance — but her husband, Deven, cannot provide what she desires. She remains subservient and markedly compliant — at least on the surface — in the traditional Hindu patriarchal society. At times, male



that

[Tara] simply doesn't understand him, doesn't understand *men*,  
and she really is the wrong type of wife for a man like him so I  
can't blame him *entirely* although it is true that he does drink...  
(15)

Asha seemingly accepts the inevitability of male abuse of women in a patriarchal society. There is certainly no questioning of male privilege.

Whatever its form, male dominance is likely to coexist with other aspects of the female experience in the patriarchy. One of these – the silencing of the female – occurs with some frequency in the novels. Gayatri Spivak's notion of the "subaltern" – one who cannot speak but must yet function to "consolidate the self of the colonizer" (Qtd. in Young 165) – is relevant here. The subaltern is denied voice not necessarily because he/she does not have the ability to speak but essentially because "there is no space from where the subaltern (sexed) subject can speak" (Qtd in Young 164). Desai's *In Custody* presents examples of characters who fulfil the roles of the subaltern. Sarla must defer to Deven, and Imtiaz must tolerate Nur's taking precedence as a "guru" of Urdu poetry because she is not expected to subvert convention. Nanda Kaul, in Desai's *Fire on the Mountain*, may also be regarded as a subaltern. She has had to maintain the role of the conventional Hindu woman and, though regarded as a matriarch

in Desai's *Fire on the Mountain*, may also be regarded as a subaltern. She has had to maintain the role of the conventional Hindu woman and, though regarded as a matriarch by the women who visit her, she has had no space from which to voice resentment for patriarchal domination.

It might be noted that in some instances silencing may be achieved through naming, because implicit in the naming may be a label that reduces the status and credibility of the labelled. Through labels, individuals may be defined, classified, marked, and typecast in ways that limit the potential range of responses open to them. Rhys' *Wide Sargasso Sea* offers an illustration of such a phenomenon. In the later sections of the novel, Antoinette is called "Bertha" by Rochester, but "Bertha" is another name for her "mad" mother, Annette. This naming by Rochester, therefore, implies that Antoinette, too, is mad and enables him to justify the inhumane treatment he metes out to her. It works as well to silence her both literally and figuratively. Disapproving of Rochester's persistent reference to her as "Bertha," Antoinette informs her husband: "My name is not Bertha..." (111). Rochester is unmoved, though, and when Antoinette shortly refuses to reply to him he asks, "Bertha, why don't you answer me?" (112). Antoinette is so taken aback by his distortion of her identity that she is rendered speechless. At the same time, the naming – associated as it is with madness – serves to define her in a way that denies her voice. In Marshall's *Brown Girl*,

*Brownstones*, too, naming reinforces the silencing of the female.'Gatha Steed's daughter, who is forced to marry a Barbadian instead of the American for whom she cares, remains nameless throughout the novel. Known only as "'Gatha Steed's daughter," she gains an identity only through her mother and therefore exemplifies the silencing and the lack of individuality that result from strict conformity to custom.

For many women, then, life in a colonial and/or patriarchal society is crippling. When the female believes herself rejected by a powerful group, she often has difficulty in verbalizing her feelings. As Irigaray suggests in *Speculum of the Other Woman*, "'she' comes to be unable to say what her body is suffering" (140). Elaine, in *Cat's Eye*, appears to find herself in this position. Constantly criticized by the other girls, she suppresses her feelings and, because she is not compelled to speak, she is comfortable with not speaking at all. She is, in Irigaray's words, "stripped even of the words that are expected of her upon the stage invented to listen to her" (140). But females are also crippled in other significant ways. They are frequently reduced to near absolute dependency on the male, financially as well as psychologically. As Tiffin asserts in a discussion of Rhys' heroines, for example, "their whole sense of identity or conviction of self-worth is entirely dependent, as is their fate, on these [European] men" (*Mirror* 329).

But female compliance and passivity may be only superficial. Atwood's Elaine

Sarla never lifted her voice in his presence—countless generations of Hindu womanhood behind her stood in her way, preventing her from displaying open rebellion. Deven knew she would scream and abuse only when she was safely out of the way, preferably in the kitchen, her own domain. (*In Custody* 145-146)

At the very least, Desai's protagonists "have been driven into some extremity of despair" and because of this they "have turned against, or are made to stand against, the general current" (Jena 26). This standing against the dominant pattern is evidenced by Imtiaz Begum when she raises in a letter to Deven the issue of male privilege in a patriarchal society:

Are you not guilty of assuming that because you are a male, you have a right to brains, talent, reputation and achievement, while I, because I was born female, am condemned to find what satisfaction I can in being maligned, mocked, ignored and neglected? (*In Custody* 196)

Indeed, Imtiaz raises the fundamental question posed by feminists: "In this unfair world that you have created what else could I have been but what I am?" (*In Custody* 196). The comment by Krishnaswamy in his *The Woman in Indian Fiction in English (1950-1980)* is an apt description for Imtiaz:

The passive feminine has ceased to exist. In her place we have the highly intelligent, sensitive woman who questions ceaselessly. She looks around and refuses to accept anymore the myths

The passive feminine has ceased to exist. In her place we have the highly intelligent, sensitive woman who questions ceaselessly. She looks around and refuses to accept anymore the myths created and nourished by a male ordained society. (238)

Imtiaz Begum, then, is an incipient feminist. So, too, is Ila Das in *Fire on the Mountain*. Ila takes a stand against a patriarchal system that habitually enslaves women, since she supports the rights of women and actively opposes their being bartered. In the same novel, Raka also shows qualities that are aberrations from the conventional. Inquisitive and curious, she dares to explore the crevices and ravines near Carignano, and she is challenged – rather than cowed – by danger. She has the makings of a female who is unlikely to accept passively the dictates of the patriarchy.

But a display of strength by the female in a typical colonial and/or patriarchal society may not be welcomed by the dominant group. One response of the male may be to devalue any female who is seen to be undermining the power and status of men. An instance of the use of this tactic is Deven's dismissal of Imtiaz as a "so-called poetess" and his relegation of her to a lower class of women. He describes her as a "conviviality of steamy femininity" and believes she is not worthy of being in an elite circle: "Dressed as she was, she would of course be barred from their society – they would have thought her no better than a prostitute or dancing girl" (Desai, *In Custody* 83). Alternatively, the male might respond to the strong female by implying she is mad.

For example, Deven refers to the poetry recitation by Imtiaz as an “insane whim” (*In Custody* 83). Again, when Imtiaz writes a letter questioning the role of women in Hindu society Deven destroys the letter and defines Imtiaz as belonging to a world of madness, a world of “hysterics, termagants, viragos, the demented and the outcast” (*In Custody* 197). With regard to such an attitude toward Imtiaz, Krishnaswamy notes that Imtiaz, who “refuses to accept anymore the myths created and nourished by a male ordained society...is sensitive enough to react violently and her reaction which is abrupt and unexpected earns her the sobriquet of being insane at best, of being abnormal” (238). Raka, too, exhibits a strength not thought normal in a female, for she possesses “all the jealous, guarded instincts of an explorer, a discoverer” (Desai, *Fire* 61). For this, she is labelled insane by a villager who, when he sees her scrambling up the hillside, remarks: “The crazy one...The crazy one from Carignano” (*Fire* 91). At times, the strong female may be firmly silenced. The fate of Ila Das is a good illustration of such a male strategy in action. Ila is subversive in that she opposes the exploitation of the female. After attempting to prevent the union of an elderly man with a seven-year-old girl, Ila is raped and murdered and is therefore permanently silenced. The ruthless suppression of the female voice serves the function of eliminating female subversion and preserve male privilege.

What the male might find disconcerting – in addition to signs of abnormal

strength in women – is any indication of the growing proximity of the female. Often, such reduction of Otherness on the part of the female becomes threatening to the “colonizer,” for it is “at once resemblance and menace” (Young 147). It consequently generates further resistance. Elaine, in *Cat’s Eye*, for instance, tries to improve in accordance with the standards of her childhood companions but, as she does so, Grace, Carol and Cordelia band together and find additional imperfections in her to hold her at bay. In *In Custody*, Imtiaz studies Nur’s poetry recitations and seeks to integrate herself into a community of “Selves.” She is a lucid and eloquent writer and she is technically equipped to become the next guru of Urdu poetry. Because she is becoming too much like the male gurus and chelas – that is, because her Otherness is being reduced – she is undoubtedly a “menace” or threat, at least in Deven’s eyes, and she is consequently further marginalized as Deven denies her credibility on the ground that she is not worthy of any exalted position in the community.

The effort by some women to effect change in women’s role in society is often hindered as well by women themselves. First, females may be unwitting agents in the preservation of the patriarchy. This is evident in *Cat’s Eye*, in which Elaine’s childhood friends are an embodiment of the female attributes valued within a white, middle-class society and consequently exert pressure on Elaine to adopt conventional female traits and interests. Women may also contribute to the maintenance of the higher valuation

of the male. Thus, in *Fire on the Mountain*, Asha encourages her daughter, Tara, to remain married to a man who physically abuses her; the man is valued as a good mate since he is a “successful diplomat” (14). A difference between males and females in their relationship with their mothers may also indicate unequal worth. Though Sarla might aspire to a life of material comfort, she places her son’s luxuries ahead of her desires:

[Deven] recalled the time he had refused to buy the child toffees when they were out shopping and she had said, through pinched lips, ‘for your own son you have no money; only for going to Delhi to enjoy yourself there is money.’ (Desai, *In Custody* 130)

While Sarla enjoys a close relationship with her son, Nanda Kaul sees that her lack of empathy and “her failure to comfort children” (Desai, *Fire* 89) ultimately affects generations of females. Because of the strained relationship between mother and daughter, Asha, in turn, becomes “heartless” (14), and her self-serving attitude impels her to support the marriage of her daughter, Tara, to an important and wealthy man who does not love or respect her. Tara is led instead into an unhappy marriage, which in turn produces a child, Raka, who comes under severe psychological stress:



Somewhere behind them, behind it all, was [Raka's] father, home from a party, stumbling and crashing through the curtains of night, his mouth opening to let out a flood of rotten stench, beating at her mother with hammers and fists of abuse—harsh, filthy abuse that made Raka cower under her bedclothes and wet the mattress in fright, feeling the stream of urine warm and weakening between her legs like a stream of blood, and her mother lay down on the floor and shut her eyes and wept. (71-72)

The indulging of the male contrasts with the cold and distorting treatment of the female, which serves to underscore the notion of the greater worth of the former.

Again, women sometimes hinder change in the female role in society simply by refusing to support those who challenge custom. Nanda Kaul, for instance, does not assist her friend Ila Das even though she is aware that Ila is without food and is in want of safety. Instead of offering her a meal and shelter, she allows Ila to leave Carignano with no one to turn to, and she is thus as guilty of Ila's death as Preet Singh is. Her action stands in marked contrast to that of the Das's maid, who takes in and cares for Ila's sister when the latter is in need, and of the grain seller, who displays some generosity and concern for her safety. At times, indeed, women may actually devalue the female who steps outside conventional boundaries. A fine illustration of this comes from *Brown Girl, Brownstones*. Selina comes to be accepted and admired by Rachel and the other dancers but, when Margaret Benton introduces her to her mother, Mrs.

Benton puts her through a hostile interrogation: "It was all like an inquisition somehow, where she was the accused, imprisoned in the wing chair under the glaring lamp" (287). Mrs. Benton places her in a certain category of "blackness," distinguishing her West Indian origin from one in the American South. Mrs. Benton's denigration of blacks generally is seen in her reference to a former West Indian cleaning "girl" who could be trusted not to steal. It is also apparent -- along with her condescension -- when she says to Selina: "...you don't even act colored. I mean you speak so well and have such poise...Your race needs more smart people like you" (288). Despite the condescending remarks, such denigration of her race is hardly likely to convince Selina that Mrs. Benton is truly supportive.

The five novels around which the discussion has revolved in this chapter all probe the experience of the marginalized female in colonial and/or patriarchal societies. They generate an awareness of the pressures for conformity to the role of the Other that tend to be exerted on women, a key aspect of this role being that woman "is burdened by myths of femininity that construct her as the alien, idealized and/or defiled 'Other' against which 'man' has felt compelled to define himself" (de Beauvoir, *The Second Sex* 69). The novels, as a group, reveal some of the ways in which women frequently respond to the rigidities and limitations of their traditional status. Occasionally, this response may take the form of resisting the restrictions on their growth and on their

becoming conscious of their own opposition and voicing their opposition to male power. (26)

The five novels do provide examples of individual women who have become “conscious of their own oppression.” The novels also suggest, though, that in any attempt to realize their full potential and attain an individual sense of self such women are likely to encounter daunting obstacles.

### **Chapter III**

#### **Bonding and Its Significance for Growth**

While the five novels examined in the present study possess a consciousness-raising dimension in that they illuminate the experience of the female in a colonial and/or patriarchal society, they also proceed beyond that level of discussion to the more imaginative one of suggesting at least the possibility of female growth. A critical phenomenon in the achievement of such growth is a bonding on the part of the female with other appropriate individuals. When an individual is designated the “Other” and experiences the attendant rejection, alienation or displacement, he/she almost inevitably seeks friendship and solace among those likely to offer acceptance and comfort. Black immigrants, for instance, often respond to the bitter taste of rejection in their new land with a heightened feeling of kinship with all the oppressed of their race (Bonhomme 35). In general, since they are invariably rejected by the “Selves” of a society, marginalized individuals tend to bond with other ostracized members of the community, frequently forming stable friendships which may foster their development and fortify their sense of identity.

The natural tendency, it appears, would be for females to bond with their mothers, but such bonding often fails in large measure because the mothers tend to favour the norms and practices of the patriarchy. What Antoinette Cosway, Elaine

Risley and Selina Boyce see in their mothers is a fondness for the sons, who retain preferred status even after their death. In *Wide Sargasso Sea*, the high evaluation of the male is evident in Annette's relationship with her son, Pierre. It is implied that Annette's mental deterioration is linked to Pierre's state of health: on realizing that Pierre's physical condition would not improve, Annette underwent a sudden change, as she "grew thin and silent" (16). Antoinette is aware that her brother is the favoured one and that it is his illness that causes her mother's anguish:

A frown came between her black eyebrows, deep--it might have been cut with a knife. I hated this frown and once I touched her forehead trying to smooth it. But she pushed me away, not roughly but calmly, coldly, without a word, as if she had decided once and for all that I was useless to her. She wanted to sit with Pierre or walk where she pleased without being pestered, she wanted peace and quiet, I was old enough to look after myself.  
(17)

To Antoinette, her wiping away her mother's frown means erasing Annette's concern for Pierre and consequently creating a space for herself. As this is impossible, Antoinette becomes as lost within the boundaries of her family as she is within the larger society.

Marshall's Selina Boyce, too, encounters a favouring of the son by her mother. She must constantly remind her mother that she is not a likeness of her dead baby brother: "I keep telling you I'm not him. I'm me. Selina" (*Brown Girl, Brownstones*

47). She finds it difficult to manage the development of her identity when she is repeatedly compared with her brother. The elevation of the male offspring occurs also in Clive's case. The close parental attention Clive receives from his mother is the result of her marginalization as a black woman in a patriarchal society. Her privileging of Clive becomes an obsession, and her smothering of Clive is masked by lame excuses and telephone calls that elicit feelings of guilt and concern in her son. Indeed, the effect she has on her son is always very strong and, because it is so obvious, Selina is usually aware of her presence at the other end of the telephone line:

[Selina] heard a querulous rasp, felt him stiffen and knew that it was his mother. His only answer was a listless "yes," yet Selina detected a faint and puzzling Barbadian intonation in his voice...[Selina] was still unnerved by his mother's call; and his slight accent, his abrupt departure sketched another dimension of him, a new facet which troubled her...she felt as abandoned as the unfinished painting on the easel. (Marshall 255-256)

Selina's experience of Clive's neglect parallels the abandonment she has long felt within her own family. The patriarchal custom of privileging sons, it appears, does not create for females conditions supportive of growth or of the development of a strong sense of self.

Like Marshall's Selina Boyce, Atwood's Elaine Risley feels the effects of marginalization from as early as her childhood, but her mother's exaltation of the male

does not become apparent until Elaine becomes an adult and her brother, Stephen, is killed. When Mrs. Risley and Elaine are sorting out old family belongings, Elaine discovers that her mother has kept much of her brother's memorabilia but virtually nothing of hers. She observes that "a lot of what [my mother] says is about Stephen" (*Cat's Eye* 416) and that the memories she has preserved about Stephen are more vivid and, given the effect of medication, surprisingly more accurate than those she has of Elaine herself. The weakness of Mrs. Risley's memory where Elaine is concerned is underscored by her failure to recollect accurately the real sources of the abuse her daughter has suffered in childhood. The privileging of the male implicit in the distorted nature of Mrs. Risley's memory is a blow to Elaine's psyche.

In *Fire on the Mountain*, too, Ila Das does not escape the privileging of the male by the older generation; after the death of her parents, the family inheritance was "divided amongst three drunken, dissolute sons as in a story, and not a penny of it to either of the two clever, thrifty, hard-working daughters" (Desai, *Fire* 123). Ila's brothers are so privileged that they are sent to be educated at foreign universities and they receive full financial support, to some extent at the expense of the daughters who are forced to sell their jewelry to help pay for the expenditures of their wastrel brothers. Again, such a devaluation of the female is not supportive of her full growth.

The existence of a gap between mother and daughter arising out of the mother's

privileging of the male and bowing to the norms of the patriarchy may well lead the daughter to form bonds with others. On the surface, the young female may seem to have little in common with those with whom they form close links. For instance, she might not be of the same age, gender, or ethnic background. Atwood's Elaine Risley, as a child, shares a bond with a male Indian professor and a female Jewish neighbour and not with the three Anglo-Saxon females with whom she plays. Desai's Imtiaz Begum chooses Nur, an aging "guru" of Urdu poetry, with whom to bond, while Marshall's Selina Boyce initially selects her father, the sexual Suggie Skeete, the aging Miss Thompson, and her Jewish dance partner Rachel Fine for a similar purpose. Again, Rhys' Antoinette forms an alliance with no other than Christophine, a black servant who supposedly practises witchcraft. Despite these evident disparities, closer examination might reveal, however, that the female alienated from her mother may have much in common with those with whom she forms close connections.

In Marshall's *Brown Girl, Brownstones*, Selina discovers striking similarities between Rachel Fine and herself. She is quite aware of her marginalization in the dance class:

The funny feeling you get is that they don't really see you. It's very eerie and infuriating. For a moment there until everybody suddenly got very friendly I felt like I didn't exist but was only the projection of someone or something else in their mind's eye.



(253)

However, she does not perceive Rachel in the same light as she does the others. To begin with, Rachel looks beneath the colour of Selina's skin, discovering her real self and acknowledging her superior talent: "Besides...why be nervous in front of a bunch of giddy girls? What'd those lumpen know about the dance?...you're the greatest" (277). What brings the two even closer, though, is the commonality in their lives and tastes. Like Selina, Rachel is somewhat alienated in her own community. Refusing an exorbitantly priced wedding ring from her fiance's family, she is ostracized and, like Selina and Rhys' Antoinette, becomes an Other within her own family. Selina learns, also, that Rachel has been distanced and estranged from her mother, just as she herself has been from hers, and Selina suddenly feels a "sudden kinship and bond" with Rachel (278). The separation from her mother has apparently worked to Rachel's advantage, in that she can express and develop her own identity freed from the restrictiveness of her mother. In terms of a desirable image, therefore, Rachel is a healthy alternative to Beryl, who has chosen a life of conformity and thus loses what has made her similar to Selina. But the relationship between Selina and Rachel is founded on more than a similarity of background, for Rachel shares Selina's thirst for individual expression and

personal choice. Selina comes to recognize, then, that she and Rachel are kindred spirits; she remembers that at the dance rehearsal “she and Rachel had danced...as if guided by a single will, as if, indeed, they were simply reflections of each other” (281). Suggie Skeete and Miss Thompson, too, are strong influences on Selina, and she shares with them the status of the marginalized. As a lower-class black in American society, Suggie is confined to the periphery, and Silla marginalizes her further by evicting her from the brownstone because she is not considered a respectable tenant. Suggie has few options and, although her new place of residence is never revealed, we know it is not in desirable surroundings, for Suggie tells Selina: “...where I am going ain gon be much. No place for you to come...So don ask me” (212). Suggie, therefore, has to take her place on the fringes of the society. Miss Thompson, also, is a marginalized black American woman who has some influence on Selina. She has in fact been a victim of racism. She tells Selina of the time when, as a young girl, she had returned to the South with a new confidence and style and when white men – obviously threatened by her rise in society – had attempted to destroy her confidence by “whooping and hollering,” one of them actually striking her in the leg with a shovel when their initial behaviour had elicited no visible response from her. As Miss Thompson informs Selina, “He didn’t get to do nothing with me wrassling and hollering, but he did take a piece clean outta my foot with that rusty shovel” (216). Selina is aware, then, of the

marginalization she has in common with Suggie and Miss Thompson.

Again, in Atwood's *Cat's Eye*, Elaine Risley feels connected to Mrs. Finestein, a Jewish neighbour. She recognizes some similarity between herself and Mrs. Finestein, for the latter is no less marginalized than she is. Grace, Cordelia and Carol, for example, make derogatory remarks about the Finesteins which reflect fundamentally racist attitudes:

"Finestein is a Jewish name," says Grace.  
 I don't know what Jewish is. I've seen the word *Jew*, the Bible is full of that word, but I didn't know there were any live, real ones, especially next door to me.  
 "Jews are kikes," says Carol, glancing at Cordelia for approval.  
 "Don't be vulgar," says Cordelia, in her adult voice. "Kike is not a word we use." (Atwood 143)

Elaine comes to admire Mrs. Finestein, declaring that the latter is "not like any other mother I've ever seen" (142). Mrs. Finestein is different, then, from the upper-class Mrs. Campbell, from Cordelia's mother, and from the self-righteous Mrs. Smeath. She is an Other with whom Elaine can identify.

Bonding might also occur with males when they are perceived as sharing the experience of marginalization or displacement. In Atwood's *Cat's Eye*, Elaine senses Mr. Banerji's "hidden misery" (37), since she is herself miserable. She describes him,

sense of kinship with him that prompts her attempts to catch glimpses of him when he visits the Risley household: “My wish to see him is anxiety, and fellow feeling” (169). Years later, Mr. Banerji has obtained his Ph.D. and his social standing has in some ways improved, but he remains marginalized in the society and Elaine feels connected to him: “He brings me [microscope] slides he thinks I would like to see and offers them to me shyly and eagerly, with a conspiratorial giggle, as if we were sharing a delicious, esoteric secret...” (266). Elaine also senses a connection with Josef Hrbik, her art teacher, since he, too, is marginalized. He is mocked by other students, primarily because of his unfortunate experience in Eastern Europe:

They call him a D.P., which means *displaced person*, an old insult I remember from high school. It was what you called refugees from Europe, and those who were stupid and uncouth and did not fit in. (299)

The contempt with which Hrbik is received by the students parallels that once shown Elaine by Grace, Cordelia and Carol, a commonality of experience that enables Elaine to empathize with the teacher. On the whole, Elaine has less difficulty bonding with the males than with the females in her life. She has had a healthy relationship with males since she was a child. Boys have never hurt or offended her and she therefore has no need to defend herself against them: “I don’t have occasion to use my mean mouth

no need to defend herself against them: “I don’t have occasion to use my mean mouth on boys, since they don’t say provoking things to me” (252). Her most loyal friend is her brother, Stephen, because they have had a healthy relationship with each other both as siblings and as more mature beings. This has contributed in no small measure to Elaine’s capacity to relate well to males, an attribute evident when she says: “My relationships with boys are effortless, which means that I put very little effort into them...” (254).

The bonding Elaine experiences with such individuals affects her growth in subtle ways. In the case of the Finesteins, the influence is quite indirect. Though Elaine initially perceives the Finesteins as “ultrasophisticated,” they become “Jewish” and disempowered once they have been so designated by Cordelia, Grace and Carol. Ultimately, the girls prevent Elaine from consolidating her friendship with the Finesteins as she is pushed to relinquish her baby-sitting job out of fear for little Brian Finestein, an incident somewhat reminiscent of the one in Rhys’ *Wide Sargasso Sea* in which Tia has to turn against Antoinette because of her race and abandon their friendship. The bonding between Elaine and Mrs. Finestein, two Others, is terminated before the development of an alliance that might strongly nourish Elaine’s growth. Yet, the relationship is not without effect on Elaine. Atwood’s protagonist realizes that Mrs. Finestein reveals nothing but her true self to her. Mrs. Finestein is therefore a source

of inspiration to her to be true to her real nature, and her inclusion of Mrs. Finestein in her painting "The Three Muses" many years later attests to the neighbour's influence on her development. Mr. Banerji, as well, is nurturing because -- in addition to supporting her unusual interests -- he shows her his essential nature and in consequence serves as another source of inspiration for her. He, too, is depicted in her painting, "The Three Muses," indicating the importance she attaches to his contribution to her development. Indeed, so high is the esteem in which Elaine holds the two that she dreams that "Mrs. Finestein from next door and Mr. Banerji are my real parents" (178). Mr. Banerji and Hrbik are also models of survivors, of people who surmount great obstacles to gain a social niche for themselves, and they are both inspiring to Elaine on that account. A different type of contribution to Elaine's growth comes from the males in her early life. She is accepted as who she is by these males, by her brother Stephen especially. Her real self emerges in the presence of the males and it does not have to be concealed out of a fear of rejection.

In Desai's *In Custody*, also, a close alliance develops between a female and a male who are both Others. Nur may be deemed an Other in the sense that he is unlike any other contemporary Urdu poet. He grasps, indeed, that it is his very Otherness that makes him distinct and special and, though flattered by the constant attention and accolades from the Urdu "Selves," he resists assimilation into that group. Imtiaz

It is obvious that she is better suited than Deven to be Nur's "chela." Deven is portrayed in the novel as a failure as father, husband and teacher. He botches the tape-recording of Nur's poetry recitation which was supposedly to be the means of preserving the Urdu tradition:

It was a fiasco. There was no other word for it...When the tapes could be induced to produced sound, there seemed to be nothing to listen to—long intervals of crackling and sputtering interspersed with a sudden blare of horns from the street, the shrieking of nest-building birds, loud explosions of laughter and incoherent joviality, drunken voices bawling, singing, stopping short. Where was Nur?...(173)

In addition to his ineptitude with recording equipment, Deven is guilty of accepting unsolicited criticism from and of being easily manipulated by his "friend," Murad. His incompetence is evident as well in his desperation to rid himself of the responsibility of maintaining the Urdu tradition:

[Deven] hoped his former life of non-events, non-happenings, would be resumed, empty and hopeless, safe and endurable. That was the only life he was made for, although life was not perhaps the right term. He needed one that was more grey, more neutral, more shadowy. (184)

Intiaz in contrast is an intelligent and capable person who demonstrates her competence at reading and writing Urdu poetry. Since she is a female, however, she is quickly marginalized. Yet she forms a firm bond with Nur, who helps her cultivate her skill as an Urdu poetess. In turn, she influences his way of thinking, since he admits: “My dear wife has inspired me to write on the subject of the suffering of women” (129). Intiaz and Nur are Others who have revealed their true selves to each other, have learned from each other, and have formed a close friendship with each other despite the presence of the Selves.

Bonding with other women, however, is the primary means through which female protagonists generally receive the nurturance they need in order to grow. In Rhys’ *Wide Sargasso Sea*, Annette’s absence leads Antoinette to seek solace in Christophine, who in effect becomes her surrogate mother. Though Christophine’s practices might appear suspicious to some, the bond between Antoinette and her becomes a strong one, for Christophine truly loves Antoinette. Even when she goes to see the ailing Annette, Antoinette takes Christophine along for support: “I had insisted that Christophine must be with me, no one else...” (40). When Annette subsequently rejects Antoinette, it is Christophine on whom Antoinette relies and it is Christophine who returns her to her aunt’s house. Though Christophine later leaves Antoinette to be with her son, this occurs when Antoinette is older and is at an age when she ought



be with her son, this occurs when Antoinette is older and is at an age when she ought to be developing her independence. As Christophine says to her, “Women must have spunks to live in this wicked world” (84). Other complications arise in that Christophine does not wish to undermine the relationship between Antoinette and Rochester, who feels threatened by her. And there is the danger posed by Rochester, who has dug up information about her past which he claims he would use against her through legal channels if she does not leave Antoinette solely in his hands. Yet, the bond between Antoinette and Christophine does not weaken, and Christophine remains the most influential mother figure in Antoinette’s life.

Incisive and perceptive, Christophine proves that in spite of her lack of formal education she is inherently wise. As she herself admits, “read and write I don’t know. Other things I know” (133). Her very name is significant; it points to her role as guide and mentor for Antoinette. One who loves, counsels and advises without being judgmental is indeed a Christlike figure. And Christophine’s other name, “Josephine,” has similar connotations, for Joseph – the earthly father of Christ – is associated with goodness and sound guidance. In the Old Testament, Joseph saves and preserves his family during the great famine in Egypt, a deed comparable to Christophine’s protecting her own family from hunger through hard work. Again like Joseph, who married a pregnant woman and accepted her instead of exposing her “sin,” she is quite

unorthodox in her ways and her thinking. And the counselling she offers Antoinette stresses the importance of female independence.

Christophine's initial advice to Antoinette is that she should leave Rochester: "A man don't treat you good, pick up your skirt and walk out" (91). When Antoinette says in reply that she cannot do so because she has given away all her money and has no resources of her own, the wise Christophine comments:

All women, all colours, nothing but fools. Three children I have. One living in this world, each one a different father, but no husband, I thank my God. I keep my money. I don't give it to no worthless man. (91)

Rhys is suggesting here that women would not gain autonomy without financial independence, a belief echoed more recently by the feminist, Camille Paglia, who alleges that the essence of feminism lies in personal responsibility, that "freedom means rejecting dependency" (xii). Though she herself might not recognize it, Christophine is in this sense an early feminist. In this connection, Legallez notes:

Christophine's position of independence is a challenge to culturally inherited values. Set against Antoinette's dependence upon her husband, the black woman's attitude to her own money presents a twentieth century image of financial liberation from a male domination. (LeGallez 142)

For Christophine, freeing oneself from the clutches of the patriarchy is the only route to liberation and happiness. Antoinette asks, “You think I must leave him?” and Christophine’s advice is firm: “Go from that house, I tell you” (91). Ironically, Christophine is an example of the marginalization of strong women by the patriarchy, in this case through Rochester’s threats to use the law against her. Christophine is a danger to male society; she is too strong, too feisty, and too wise. She is the type of person who challenges the dominant norms and practices of a patriarchal system and, because the patriarchy views her as a threat, it must somehow suppress her. In Antoinette’s life, nevertheless, she is vital to the protagonist’s growth because she urges her to free herself from the tyranny of the patriarchy.

In a less obvious way, Aunt Cora also reinforces the idea that financial independence is vital for a woman’s freedom from male domination. She is an important person in Antoinette’s life, and her attempt to secure the protagonist’s well-being cannot be ignored, for she embraces her surrogate daughter in the hope of protecting her and enabling her to feel safe, a protectiveness which she recognizes when she states: “Aunt Cora put her arms round me. She said, ‘Don’t be afraid, you are quite safe’” (33). It is Cora who takes care of Antoinette during the latter’s illness and who reassures her in a motherly way: “‘You’ve been very ill, my darling,’ said Aunt Cora.

‘But you are safe with me now. We are all safe as I told you we would be’” (38). And when Antoinette is taken to the convent the protagonist says: “I clung to Aunt Cora as you would cling to life if you loved it” (41). Because of her intense concern for her niece’s well-being, Cora voices her objection to Antoinette’s marriage to Rochester. Apparently conscious of the fact that a life of financial independence will be better for Antoinette than marriage to Rochester, Cora complains to Antoinette’s stepbrother, Richard: “You are handing over everything the child owns to a perfect stranger” (95). When Richard does not heed her protest, she turns her face to the wall, perhaps a silent gesture indicating her awareness of her powerlessness in the patriarchy. But Cora does not surrender completely to the male prerogative, for she gives Antoinette her very valuable rings, instructing her: “Don’t show it to him. Hide it away. Promise me” (95). She seems to sense the fate to which Antoinette is destined as a result of marriage to Rochester and she is attempting to equip her with independent resources, however meagre they are. The message to Antoinette, subtle though it might be, is clear: financial independence is essential for female self-preservation and freedom.

In Marshall’s *Brown Girl, Brownstones*, also, the protagonist’s bonding with other marginalized females contributes to her growth. Unlike the Barbados Association, which in Selina’s mind stands for conformity to the values of white American society, Rachel Fine encourages the protagonist’s individuality, persuading

her to be herself and to express herself naturally through her dance. Other females are pertinent influences in a variety of ways. Miss Thompson is a classic example of the ability of the victimized in a “colonial” and patriarchal society to overcome restrictions and carve a niche for themselves. She has been physically injured by white men in the South because of her attempt to better herself, but such efforts have not impeded her escape from dependency. As Paglia suggests, “...men strike women...because physical superiority is their only weapon against a being far more powerful than they. The blow does not subordinate: it equalizes” (43). Miss Thompson rises above the physical abuse to achieve self-sufficiency. She works on evenings as a cleaning woman in an office; she is babysitter or “Big Momma” to three small children, and she is employed in a beauty parlour during the day. As a result, she is able to support herself without assistance from a man. She manifests an independence of spirit that Selina might well seek to develop. As it happens, Miss Thompson treats Selina as if the latter were her own child, which is illustrated by her drawing Selina to her and asking, “What scairt my baby?” (93). And it is Miss Thompson rather than her own mother whom Selina asks for advice. Miss Thompson’s influence on Selina – both direct and indirect – cannot be minimised.

Suggie Skeete’s contribution to Selina’s development is to some degree similar to Miss Thompson’s, for Suggie exemplifies the female who manages to maintain her

independence and not become entrapped by males. Possibly, though, her influence goes beyond this, for she demonstrates as well the capacity to be spontaneous and true to her own nature. She revels in her own sexuality, taking lovers each weekend, drinking rum, and revelling in memories of Barbados. Selina is not unaffected, for she delights in hearing the creaking created by Suggie and her lover in bed and allows herself to imagine the passion that is occurring between them. Suggie also makes Selina realize that she must enjoy life, that she must renounce her guilt and “take off the blasted black clothes” she has been wearing since Deighton’s death (209). Furthermore, listening to Suggie talk about her sexuality enables Selina to define her own sexuality and to see sexual life as healthy, with the result that she can express herself fully with Clive. Selina also learns that there is an inherent female strength in sexual expression: when she is intimate with Clive, she sees that “in some way she was stronger than he, she possessed a hard center he would never have” (246). In terms of spontaneity and faithfulness to one’s true self – and therefore the capacity to defy conventional obstacles to self-development – Suggie serves as a model for Selina.

Other women in *Brown Girl, Brownstones* also have a contribution to make in the development of Selina’s identity or sense of self. In this respect, there is a parallel between Selina and Marshall herself. In an interview In 1992, the author concedes that one of her primary reasons for writing is to show veneration for some of her mentors.

Her goal here is

...to celebrate women, especially a group of West Indian women, my mother included, who were my mentors and teachers early on. To put them on the page. That was important work for me. (Graulich and Sisco 286)

The Barbadian women who gather in Silla's kitchen are very much like those who visited Marshall's own mother, and in her essay, "Poets in the Kitchen," Marshall describes the vibrant presence of the women in her childhood home:

I grew up among poets. Now they didn't look like poets—whatever that breed is supposed to look like...They were just a group of ordinary housewives and mothers, my mother included...While my sister and I sat at a smaller table over in a corner doing our homework, they talked—endlessly, passionately, poetically, and with impressive range. No subject was beyond them. (*Reena* 4-5)

In Silla's home, too, the conversation sweeps across a vast range of topics. During an afternoon of talk, Silla and Iris Hurley enter into a debate about international politics. Iris is convinced that Hitler, who in her view is "the devil incarnate" (71), is fully responsible for the war, but Silla casts her net further afield:

In truth...it's these politicians. They's the ones always starting up all this lot of war. And what they care? It's the poor people got to suffer and mothers with their sons. (69)

Florrie Trotman, for her part, defends herself as a believer in superstition: "Oh, wunna laughing cause I got sense enough to protect muhself against all the evil people does try to do yuh. But I know what I doing..." (71). Whatever the topic, and no matter how intense the debate, the women show a strong solidarity; no one acts as if uncomfortable or as if feeling insulted. One of the lessons Selina learns from these gatherings is the value of bonding among strong but marginalized women in an unyielding society. More than that, she absorbs something of their indomitable spirit, one that saves them from surrender to a hostile environment. At the same time, she comes to perceive in female speech a power she has not thought likely, for "the words were living things to her. She sensed them bestriding the air and charging the room with strong colors. She wondered at the mother's power with words" (71). Her presence at the gatherings in her home, then, would indicate to her the possibility of voice.

As a group, the five novels being examined in this study highlight the significance of close alliances among the marginalized in society for the potential growth of the Other. It is clear that females on the periphery may form such alliances with either males or other females. What is critical is that such males or females understand the plight of the marginalized and perceive keenly the limitations on their



understand the plight of the marginalized and perceive keenly the limitations on their growth. They must also be individuals who are capable of nurturing strength and individuality in the Other so that she might develop a strong sense of self. What adds to the force with which the novels make such points is the occurrence of instances in which mutually supportive bonding fails to occur. Antoinette Cosway and Grace Poole, in *Wide Sargasso Sea*, are individuals who should have found common ground and developed a mutually supportive friendship. Sarla and Deven, in *In Custody*, should have done the same, for Deven — like Sarla — “had been defeated, too; like her, he was a victim” (68). Yet, though “each understood the secret truth about the other, it did not bring about any closeness of spirit, any comradeship” (68). Bonding among the marginalized, the novels suggest, may be a potent source of influence on the growth of the marginalized female.

## Chapter IV

### Growth

Emerging from the periphery with a stronger sense of self and the capacity to achieve self-realization is a task that seems virtually impossible for the colonized female. With the aid of sound friendships and appropriate models, however, the protagonists in Atwood's *Cat's Eye*, Rhys' *Wide Sargasso Sea*, Desai's *In Custody* and *Fire on the Mountain*, and Marshall's *Brown Girl, Brownstones* cultivate an inner strength which allows them to defy colonization and the resultant relegation to the margins. As the present chapter will show, however, the protagonists tend to achieve more than mere resistance to the patriarchy and – though much less so in Desai's *In Custody* – actually transcend the limitations imposed by a male-oriented system. They recognize the reality of the position of the female in an androcentric world and of the effects of that world on their lives. Yet, they advance beyond such awareness to achieve further psychological growth, an independent sense of self and, in some cases, a fuller realization of their potential.

In *Cat's Eye*, it is possible to trace Elaine's development from her childhood to her fifties, the age at which the protagonist produces her artistic retrospective. Atwood's inclusion of the child's perspective along with the adult's, the frequent references to childhood events, and the use of the present tense to relate past and

present events all serve to underscore a long process of growth. And growth is undeniable. Initially, Elaine is resigned to the life she leads. From age eight, she is preoccupied with images of stasis, the cat's eye being the most obvious of these. She centres on such images particularly in times of dislocation. She gravitates toward inert things, dead flies seen "as if through cloudy jelly" (148) and rocks rather than girl friends (153). Her experience in her earlier life is irrevocably inert, and she accepts it without questioning. Until middle age, as Stephen Ahern suggests, something immutable had been necessary "to protect her from the disjuncting effect [childhood] brainwashing has had on her psyche" (Ahern 14-15). Later in life, though, she can look into the cat's eye, "see [her] life entire" (420) and reinterpret her early experience. She comprehends that, while she might once have thought herself a victim, she can no longer see herself as such, that she is an independent being who must take responsibility for the course of her own life.

Elaine's journey from relative passivity to a new strength and a consciousness of agency in her own life lasts for much of a lifetime. In her early years, certainly, she surrenders to the role of victim, attempting to reduce her sense of "otherness" and gain acceptance among her peers by adopting their customs and patterns of speech. At this time, she lacks the strength and the insights that would equip her to resist the conventions of girls of her own age and to fight successfully against their attempts to

make her a clone of themselves. Yet, even in this period of her life, there are intimations of her potential for growth. As a child, for example, she displays a capacity for self-determination; she collects silver papers, which others throw away, because in her view they are valuable (28-29). As she enters high school, she is aware that she is not like typical adolescents; she is not “caught up in a whirlwind of teenage emotions, laughing one minute, crying the next, zooming around on a roller-coaster” (222). Rather, she displays an independent detachment, viewing the “antics” of her “fellow students, who act like the textbook, with a combination of scientific curiosity and almost matronly indulgence” (222). She perceives, too, that while an exposure only to males -- such as she has had in her childhood -- is not particularly healthy, an immersion in female companionship would also have a deleterious effect on her personal growth:

But in fact I wouldn't be caught dead in a girls' school. The idea fills me with claustrophobic panic: a school with nothing in it but girls would be like a trap. (230)

Elaine grasps unconsciously, it seems, that the conformity to traditional roles characteristic of a girls' school would limit the development of her independence. She seems to suspect that it is a potential obstacle to her self-empowerment.

Elaine sees, too, that there is a side of her self that is not yet clear to her, an aspect of her self to which she must give firmer shape. The possibility of multiple selves has been revealed to her through her parents. She perceives, for instance, that her father has multiple selves, for she wants only one of these: "I want my father to be just my father, the way he has always been, not a separate person with an earlier, mythological life of his own" (232-233). In her mother, too, multiple selves have all been allowed expression; her mother shows herself "indifferent to fashion" (228-229), takes up ice-dancing, "tangoes and waltzes in time to tinny music, holding hands with other women," but "doesn't give a hoot" about what other people might think (229).

Elaine hints at her own multiplicity of selves:

I dream that I am trying on a fur collar, in front of the mirror on my bureau. There's someone standing behind me. If I move so that I can see into the mirror, I'll be able to look over my own shoulder without turning around. I'll be able to see who it is. (268)

Elaine's admiration for her mother because of her assertion of independence and her "not giving a hoot" (229) is perhaps a hint regarding the nature of Elaine's other self, the self represented in the mirror, the self that is not yet fully formed.

In time, Elaine begins to liberate herself from the role of victim. After the fall

In time, Elaine begins to liberate herself from the role of victim. After the fall through the ice in the river, she begins to undergo a process of rebirth. She meets with equanimity Cordelia's threats to punish her for telling on the girls, and she defies Cordelia's attempt to direct her behaviour:

But I turn and walk away from her. It's like stepping off a cliff, believing the air will hold you up. And it does. I see that I don't have to do what she says, and, worse and better, I've never had to do what she says. I can do what I like. (207)

She discovers that she does not need her former companions, that she "is indifferent to them" (208). More than this, she senses some virtue in being her true self, becoming annoyed with herself for submitting all along to the girls' "game":

There was never anything about me that needed to be improved. It was always a game, and I have been fooled. I have been stupid. My anger is as much at myself as at them. (207)

She begins, then, to accept her uniqueness, to regard her "otherness" as a quality to be sustained. Indeed, she delights in her own nonconformity:

My father says, "Your sharp tongue will get you in trouble some

day, young lady.” *Young lady* is a sign that I’ve gone too daringly close to some edge or other, but although it silences me for the moment it doesn’t tone me down. I’ve come to enjoy the risk, the sensation of vertigo when I realize that I’ve shot right over the border of the socially acceptable, that I’m walking on thin ice, on empty air. (252)

Soon, there is a shift of power; Cordelia becomes the victim and Elaine the victimiser. Cordelia becomes the person on whom Elaine uses her “mean mouth” the most, the person she uses “as target practice” (235). And Elaine grasps that she can actually have power over Cordelia. In the graveyard, for example, she scares Cordelia by claiming to be a vampire, and she is surprised at how much pleasure it gives her to know that Cordelia is so “uneasy” and that she has “this much power” over Cordelia (249).

But Elaine is not comfortable in the role of oppressor. She wonders how she could be “so mean to [her] best friend” (264). Her discomfort in the role of victimiser is increased by her realization that Cordelia’s aggressive and sometimes outlandish behaviour might well be a response to the kind of relationship she has with her father. Cordelia’s father symbolises male power; he “sits at the head of the table” and he “can make you feel that what he thinks of you matters, because it will be accurate, but that what you think of him is of no importance” (267). Cordelia wishes to please him but

she engages in “dithering, fumble-footed efforts to appease him” (268), and “nothing she can do or say will ever be enough” (268). The situation leads Elaine to an early questioning of the passive female acceptance of male control. While she understands the sources of Cordelia’s behaviour, she is angry at her friend for her timid compliance. She wonders with a trace of contempt how Cordelia can be so “abject” and she questions whether her friend will “ever learn” (268).

Subsequently, Elaine again rejects Cordelia and all that the latter represents. When Cordelia fails her year and faces the possibility of having to live “like a woman from old-fashioned times” (276), she seeks moral support from Elaine, who – though somewhat ashamed of herself for acting in this way – refuses to give succour to her former companion. Elaine confesses:

I know she has expected something from me, some connection to her old life, or to herself. I know I have failed to provide it. I am dismayed by myself, by my cruelty and indifference, my lack of kindness. (278)

But Elaine also feels “relief” (278). She is happy she has not allowed herself to be caught up again in Cordelia’s world; she wants to “protect herself from any further, darker memories” of Cordelia’s. She chooses instead to “harden” toward her (277), thinking Cordelia would be well advised to seize control of her own life:



thinking Cordelia would be well advised to seize control of her own life:

I harden toward her. She's acting like a jerk. She doesn't have to stay locked into place, into this mournful, drawn-out, low-grade misery. She has all kinds of choices and possibilities, and the only thing that's keeping her away from them is lack of willpower. *Smarten up*, I want to tell her. *Pull up your socks*. (277)

Clearly, Elaine does not admire Cordelia's passivity, and she has no desire to be as weak and entrapped as Cordelia. The self she has begun to admire is an active self, one that reaches out for control of its own destiny and pursues its own, full development.

In her own case, Elaine increasingly determines the course her life will take. While writing the final high school examinations in biology, a subject in which she expects to do very well, she decides "with absolute certainty" that she is going to be a painter (274). Regardless of the expectations others might have of her, she is empowering herself and finding her own way of achieving fulfilment. At the same time, incidentally, she chooses a path that will later permit her – through her paintings – some insight into the course of her own personal development.

In the years that follow, Elaine displays more than once an independent selfhood. She no longer gives answers that are dishonest in order to please someone

stubborn truthfulness” (325). She thinks herself a contrast to Susie, Hrbik’s mistress, whom she perceives to be a weak, disempowered person trapped within a patriarchal system:

I prefer to think of Susie as a woman shut inside a tower, up there in the Monte Carlo on Avenue Road, gazing out the window over the top of her painted sheet metal balcony, weeping feebly, waiting for Josef to appear. I can’t imagine her having any other life apart from that. (325)

She realizes that she might easily have been like Susie, that as part of a “twin set” (343) what she sees in the latter is potentially an aspect of herself, but she is determined not to be trapped like Susie. Indeed, she summons the strength to walk away from a relationship with Hrbik. After Susie’s abortion, Hrbik wallows in guilt and self-pity and expects Elaine to console him. But she sees him in a new light; he is not simply a displaced and marginalized individual but is also one who uses that image of himself to exploit women. At the same time, he can be weak, and Elaine feels contempt for him for being “clinging, gutted like a fish” (342) and for allowing himself “to be reduced to such rubble by women” (342). She does not wish the male to use her as a tool for his psychological self-restoration. Shortly, therefore, she finds it “enormously pleasing” to be able to walk away from him, especially since the act of walking away

to such rubble by women" (342). She does not wish the male to use her as a tool for his psychological self-restoration. Shortly, therefore, she finds it "enormously pleasing" to be able to walk away from him, especially since the act of walking away is "like being able to make people appear and vanish, at will" (343). She exults, it seems, at the power she has gained over her own life.

The pursuit of individual growth, of a sense of being an independent spirit in an essentially patriarchal world, manifests itself on other occasions. When – as she suspects – Jon thinks her paintings "irrelevant" (366), she still insists on following her personal bent. As she notes, "... because it doesn't matter what I do, I can do what I like" (366). At the same time, she resists the traditional devaluation of the female implicit in Jon's remark about her to one of the painters: "She's mad because she's a woman" (366). She will be neither passive nor conformist. Nor will she bow to the influence of women who have "a certain way" they want her to be (401). She is strong enough to be herself, and she knows it. She learns, too, that she is right to believe in the possibility of female growth, even in a relationship with a male. In her second marriage, she does not try to change her husband or he to change her. They give each other space to grow (404), the lesson being that it is possible to have a society in which both the male and the female can achieve strength and self-fulfilment.

Ultimately, Elaine dissociates herself from Cordelia and all that the latter

signifies. When she visits Cordelia at the rest home, she does not accede to Cordelia's request to help her escape. She fears entanglement with Cordelia and with the weakness, dependency, and lack of fulfilment that she sees as parts of Cordelia's existence. She understands, though, that some women simply lack the strength to overcome the forces shaping them and their lives, a realization that enables her to forgive her former friend for victimising her in her early life. At the same time, she grasps clearly that Cordelia is what she herself might have become if she had not been rather strong:

There is the same shame, the sick feeling in my body the same knowledge of my own wrongness, awkwardness, weakness; the same wish to be loved; the same loneliness; the same fear. But these are not my own emotions any more. They are Cordelia's; as they always were....I am the older one now, I'm the stronger. (443)

She and Cordelia, she acknowledges, "are like the twins in old fables, each of whom has been given half a key" (434). Cordelia is just another side of her, a side she has been able to subdue.

In Rhys' *Wide Sargasso Sea*, too, a female struggles to break free from the confines of a patriarchal system, in this case one buttressed by the racial structure of a colonial society. It is certainly evident from the changing content of her dream that

Antoinette grows in terms of awareness of the forces that control her. In the first version of her dream, which foreshadows the coming male control of her life and person, she senses danger to herself, though she cannot determine the sex of the person who threatens her: "Someone who hated me was with me, out of sight" (23). The second time she has her dream, though, she knows it is a man who threatens her, one who uproots her from her native home and attempts to imprison her within stone walls in an unfamiliar land. Yet, despite its connotations of imprisonment, being taken to the top also suggests the possibility of a wider perspective; Antoinette will now be able to view aspects of her experience in the larger scheme of things, which will lead ultimately to her liberation. In her ascent to the top, she does not actually fall. Rather, she clings to the tree, a tree symbolic of the tree of life. She will save herself. To do so, though, she must -- as she realizes -- confront the challenge of her imprisonment:

I follow him, sick with fear but I make no effort to save myself;  
if anyone were to try to save me, I would refuse. This must  
happen. (50)

The third version of Antoinette's dream gives her a fuller understanding both of the nature of the androcentric world and of who she is. The androcentric world, she sees, is motivated by the quest for money: "Gold is the idol they worship" (154). By

implication, people, perhaps especially women, are valued less than “gold.” More importantly, Antoinette grasps who she is, since she accepts all her selves as symbolised by her mother, Aunt Cora, Christophine, the Miller’s Daughter, and Tia (154-55). Her dream helps her understand why she has come to Thornfield: “Now at last I know why I was brought here ...” (155). Her journey has been necessary for her self-affirmation, and action will result in self-affirmation.

Antoinette’s journey toward reestablishment of a more complete sense of self begins fairly early in her life. It is true that as a young girl rejected by both the English and the blacks she faces a problem of identity. In this connection she later confesses to Rochester: “I often wonder who I am and where is my country and where do I belong and why I was ever born at all” (85). Intuitively, though, it dawns upon her that, caught between two cultures, she is unique. “None of you understand about us,” she says to Rochester. In reality, the Miller’s Daughter and Tia reflect two cultural polarities in Antoinette, whose self becomes fragmented because of pressure exerted on her by the white patriarchy to conform to the English image of femininity. Her formal education in the convent, for instance, impedes the full development of her self, for that institution is immersed in an English patriarchal culture in terms of its prescriptions regarding feminine behaviour. Thus, Mother St. Justine “drones” on about cleanliness, good manners and kindness to God’s poor (45). Then

...she slides on to order and chastity, that flawless crystal that, once broken, can never be mended. Also deportment. Like everyone else, she had fallen under the spell of the de Plana sisters and holds them up as an example to the class...They sit so poised and imperturbable...(45)

Convent life, sheltered and artificial, contributes to the marginalization of the female. It is also a dead end for Antoinette, who has little chance to nurture an autonomous identity.

The attempt by the white patriarchy to crush particular aspects of Antoinette's selfhood is often conveyed symbolically in *Wide Sargasso Sea*. The burning of Tia's dress, after it has been worn by Antoinette, is ordered by a mother who "defines herself wholly within the patriarchal frame of reference" (Johnson 22). Since Tia represents a West Indian self, this burning of her dress may be interpreted as symbolic of the quest by the white patriarchy to destroy that self in Antoinette. The burning of Coulibri, too, has much the same significance. Coulibri represents the local, the West Indian, in her. Here she feels safe and intact, with her sense of identity protected from the ravages of distant cultures:

I lay thinking, 'I am safe. There is the corner of the bedroom door and the friendly furniture. There is the tree of life in the garden and the wall green with moss. The barrier of the cliffs and

the high mountains. And the barrier of the sea. I am safe. I am safe from strangers.' (23)

But Coulibri is destroyed. Antoinette's self is not as protected, not as safe, as she has hoped it would be.

Granbois, too, is a part of Antoinette's natural environment. She informs Rochester: "This is my place and this is where I belong and this is where I wish to stay" (90). She loves it, indeed, "more than anywhere in the world. As if it were a person. More than a person" (74). And she is fully herself there, for she bursts with life, so much so that Rochester could hardly believe she was the "pale silent creature" he had married (73). But Rochester does not care for that aspect of her life and what it represents:

I hated the mountains and the hills, the rivers and the rain. I hated the sunsets of whatever colour, I hated its beauty and its magic and the cruelty which was part of its loveliness. Above all I hated her. For she belonged to the magic and the loveliness. (141)

Antoinette soon perceives what Rochester's feelings about Granbois are (90). In fact, he lacks understanding of the place, and he has little control over it. He therefore has to destroy what it means to her and consequently to disempower her, thus diminishing



her sense of self. When, in dismissing all that she prizes and seeing her world as a threat, he also betrays her, she finds it difficult to take comfort in Granbois and, implicitly, in the elements of her self that it signifies:

But I loved this place and you have made it into a place I hate. I used to think that if everything else went out of my life I would still have this, and now you have spoilt it.  
(121)

But Rochester has only “spoiled” the place for her; he has not quite destroyed it. Antoinette still has the potential to restore herself, to make herself whole again.

This notion, that Antoinette will not allow the white patriarchy to destroy her self utterly, is hinted at repeatedly in *Wide Sargasso Sea*. There is no doubt that, at one point, she seems willing to submit to Rochester’s will. She says to her husband: “Say die and I will die” (77), in this way surrendering her identity to the will of an agent of the patriarchy. But she quickly comprehends the vulnerability that such submission is likely to bring, for, as she contemplates her chances of escape from an unpleasant marriage, she says of Rochester:

He would never give me any money to go away and he would be furious if I asked him. There would be a scandal if I left him and he hates scandal. Even if I got away (and how?) he would force me back. (94)

This discernment of, and often resistance to, the control exercised over female selfhood within a patriarchal system is not an entirely new element in Antoinette's psyche. As Le Gallez observes, Antoinette, "far from being as passive as she looks, is passive only in a culturally determined way...[This] quality is actually part of the feminine condition in the society in which she lives" (Le Gallez 4). Antoinette, then, does not conform fully to the docility expected of her. As a young girl, explains Christophine, she once "run away to be with the fishermen and the sailors on the bayside" (Rhys 128). In this instance, she seeks nurturance for her West Indian self despite the insistence of the colonial patriarchy – of which her mother is an agent – on the values and ideals of English culture. She notices how her mother wilts, growing "thin and silent" (16), when the strength and status of the male, on which the female in a patriarchal society depends for psychological well-being, are suddenly withdrawn. In other words, she seems intuitively aware of the dangers to the female self posed by a patriarchy. Though she herself later gives in to pressure to marry Rochester, it is not before she has had the courage to refuse him, as if suspecting that the union would somehow lead to a violation of her self.

Antoinette understands, furthermore, that reality may be a human construction: when she sees the dead horse, she observes: "I ran away and did not speak of it for I thought if I told no one it might not be true" (16). Armed with such an insight, she

resists Rochester, who tries to redefine and destroy her by calling her by a name associated in the novel with madness. She tells him: “Bertha is not my name. You are trying to make me into someone else, calling me by another name” (121).

Antoinette’s refusal to bow totally before the will of the colonial patriarchy is at times made manifest symbolically. Though *Coulibri* is set ablaze, its core remains:

When they had finished, there would be nothing left but blackened walls and the mounting stone. That was always left. That could not be stolen or burned. (38)

Though her self might be assaulted by an androcentric world, Antoinette will not be completely destroyed. Enough of her essence will remain to make possible a reconstitution of her self. Again, while under pressure at the convent to conform to English patriarchal norms, she preserves elements of her other selves. “My needle is swearing,” she declares irreverently when, during sewing, her “needle creaks as it goes in and out of the canvas” (44). She proclaims her individuality when she colours her roses green, blue, or purple (44). More than that, she decides to write her name in “fire red,” which is a foreshadowing of the fire at *Thornfield* and of her attainment of a more complete self.

Antoinette’s “madness” is itself a deliberate response to an untenable situation.

be unfaithful to her. Her withdrawal into “blank indifference” (137), into a state in which she is “silence itself” (138), is a response to a patriarchal system that has materially disempowered her and psychologically mutilated her. It is a reaction to the attempt by the patriarchy to exercise total control over her life, a quest for dominance captured in Rochester’s statement: “She’s mad but *mine, mine*” (136). While Antoinette is viewed by the world as mad, her “madness” is in reality of considerable service to her, for it enables her to preserve her autonomy in the face of the male threat and in this way to pursue further the process of self-discovery. Eventually, she recognizes herself as a victim of the patriarchal system and, as indicated by her final dream, apprehends the true nature of her self. Her “madness” is one of “transcendent sanity” (Treichler 67).

The destruction of Thornfield is an event of great symbolic significance, for Thornfield is meant to be a prison created by Rochester and the patriarchal system to annihilate Antoinette spiritually and psychologically. In destroying Thornfield, Antoinette is breaking the yoke of the patriarchal system. She has understood that she must act against the enemy in his own stronghold if she is to fulfil her destiny:

I must know more than I know already. For I know that house where I will be cold and not belonging, the bed I shall lie in has red curtains and I have slept there many times before, long ago. How long ago? In that bed I will dream the end of my dream. (92)

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Equipped with knowledge of how she has ended up a prisoner at Thornfield, she now knows what she must do to achieve self-affirmation and a completeness of self: “Now at last I know why I was brought here and what I have to do” (155-56). She remembers the red dress which had “the color of fire and sunset” (151). It brings back to her an awareness of an other self and she perceives that if she is to bring together all her selves she must destroy the tyranny of the patriarchal system. She sees what she must do: “I let the dress fall on the floor, and looked from the fire to the dress and from the dress to the fire” (152). The destruction of Thornfield is a prerequisite for her self-realization.

The significance of Antoinette’s death at Thornfield is a matter of debate. For some critics, the fire brings about the final destruction of Antoinette; “when the narrative stops, Antoinette dies” (Menzei 197). As Howells observes in her book, *Jean Rhys*, the closure of the novel marks the “mystery of a female colonial sensibility offering its own critique of patriarchy and of imperialism by...burning up traditional structures of containment, even at the cost of its own annihilation” (123). Yet, a more

positive interpretation is possible, one with connotations of growth. It is suggested, for instance, that “although we know that Antoinette will leap to her death, Rhys draws us to see her active choice of death...as a liberating force of self-assertion” (Abel 174).

This positive interpretation is the more defensible. Antoinette deliberately and rationally takes a stand against the patriarchal system, relying on herself rather than on others for her self-validation and self-realization. She awakens from her dream calling Tia’s name. Before she jumps, therefore, she is reunited with her alter-ego. A psychologically resurrected Antoinette lights herself along a dark passage. No longer in a dream-like state, she has destroyed to build, avenging both herself and Tia, fellow victims of marginalization by the colonial patriarchy. The fire destroys her physically but not before she achieves the unification of the disparate elements of her self. In destroying the tyranny of the patriarchy, she has regained her full, true self.

The subject of the possibility of female growth is also broached in Desai’s *Fire on the Mountain* and *In Custody*. These two novels counter the view – expressed by Spivak – that the “subaltern cannot speak” and that “everyone else speaks for her, so that she is rewritten continuously as the object of patriarchy or of imperialism” (Qtd. In Young, *White Mythologies* 164). In the novels, some women do speak, acting to create their own speech and to break out of the silence imposed on them in a patriarchal society. This is a forward thrust indicative of the birth of a new self-awareness, one

that creates the condition for future growth of the self.

In *Fire on the Mountain*, there is a dramatic moment as Nanda Kaul faces for the first time the reality of her life in an androcentric society. Looking back on her life, Nanda declares: "It was all a lie, all" (145). She sees now that her identity has been shaped by her position as a woman in Indian society, that she has been in fact no more than an appendage to her husband and a slave to him, her children and the society, serving them all "with that still, ironic bow to duty that no one had noticed or defined" (19). She understands that her years as a wife and a mother, no less than as a child, were all a nightmare in which she has been disempowered by the patriarchal system. In effect, she comprehends that she has played the role prescribed by the Indian mythic mode which, as Afzal Khan suggests,

does not really provide women with a strategy for liberation from male (and colonialist) hegemonies. In fact, the Indian mythic image of women was that of the Patrivatha tradition: the Sita, Sati, Savitri image of the silently suffering, sacrificial wife, mother, and daughter. (Qtd. in Said, *Culture and Imperialism* 62)

That she now recognizes herself as having taken the role of the silent, suffering victim is underscored by her admission that, though she has served her children well, she feels no kinship with them, for they "were all alien to her nature" and she "neither

understood nor loved them” (145). She has simply done what she has regarded as her duty. Her children had, in fact, quickly abandoned her at Carignano, since “none could stay with her” (145), and it is clear to her now that she has had little control over her own destiny, that she does not live at Carignano alone by choice – she lived here alone because that was what she was forced to do, reduced to doing” (145).

Nanda Kaul’s growth is psychological, her house on the hill being symbolic of an enlargement of perspective on her own life. This is not to suggest that her illumination comes with complete suddenness. On her very first day alone at Carignano, she comes to the conclusion that her dedicated caring for others, which she has long believed to be “a religious calling” (30), was actually a “fake” (30), that it “had been a vocation that one day went dull and drought-struck as though its life-spring had dried up” (30). There is a dawning awareness that her life has not been the self-fulfilling experience she has long thought it to be. She begins to glimpse that isolating herself at Carignano has been an attempt to divorce herself from the reality of the present and from her responsibility not only to herself but also to her daughters, grand-daughters, great grand-daughters, and Ila Das. But, as Fanon notes in discussing the relationship between colonizer and colonized, “Before it can adopt a positive voice, freedom requires an effort at disalienation” (*Black Skin, White Masks*, 231). From this perspective, Nanda’s life has taken the wrong direction for it has drifted into isolation



and alienation. Her existence alone at Carignano, therefore, would not normally have been conducive to the full development of her self.

All is not lost, however, for visits by Nanda's great grand-daughter, Raka, and her old friend Ila Das penetrate her isolation in ways that contribute to her growth. In reflecting on Raka's impending visit, for example, Nanda achieves an unconscious awareness of the extent to which she has failed herself and other women, since she has not only been passive in the face of her husband's infidelity but has compounded her error by bringing up daughters who perpetuate the male domination of the female and who tolerate male violence even at the expense of their children and grandchildren (14). Her daughter Asha, for instance, has fostered male domination and marginalization of women by persuading Tara to "try again" (14) in her loveless marriage to the violent Rakesh. Nanda's daughters and grand-daughters have all been enslaved, have all been appendages of men, because they have been taught by her example to be silent and not question the social injustice inherent in the society's valorising of the male and disempowering of the female.

Yet, Nanda still fails to take action to protect the female from being colonized. She does not even reply to Asha's letter, which mirrors to some extent the passive nature of her existence just as it does that of the white women who had lived at Carignano and who had meekly accepted the life of domination and colonization

imposed on them within a patriarchal system. To her credit, though, Nanda does feel disgust at the “heartless blitheness” with which Asha has encouraged Tara “to give [Rakesh] another chance” (14). Such a response seems to suggest that Nanda has at least caught a glimpse of what has been wrong about women’s position in the society.

During Raka’s stay at Carignano, Nanda recognizes that—like herself—the young girl has been a victim of the patriarchal system. Because of her life of hardship and isolation in an abusive household, however, Raka has always faced the reality of the female experience in an androcentric society. Unlike Nanda, however, she has empowered herself by confronting the ugliness and brutality of the patriarchy. She is the “finished, perfected model” of what Nanda Kaul is, the latter being “merely a brave, flawed experiment” (47). Raka has done what Nanda has failed to do. Perhaps because Nanda grasps this, she attempts to bond with Raka, for example by trying to captivate her with false stories about her father and her husband. Increasingly, she views Raka as an alter ego. For instance, she says to the girl: “You are *exactly* like me, Raka” (64).

Again, she reflects on whether she should bequeath Carignano to Raka:

Ought she to leave [Carignano] to Raka? Certainly it belonged to no one else, had no meaning for anyone else. Raka alone understood Carignano, knew what Carignano stood for -- she alone valued that, Nanda Kaul knew. (80)

Nanda perceives intuitively some commonality between her experience and Raka's.

But Raka goes further than Nanda. In facing the truth, she is able to act. Her setting fire to the mountain is symbolic of an attempt to bring about change. The two houses on the hill, "one destroyed house and one unbuilt one" (90), underscore the destruction of the old system and the possible building of a new one. The "devastation and failure" associated with the patriarchy have "inspired" Raka to act (90). She does not allow the system to hobble her as Nanda has done. Nanda understands this. Indeed, Carignano, formerly owned by the British and inhabited by a series of disempowered Englishwomen, is a metaphor for Nanda's self or identity; it represents the prison the patriarchy has created for women. Nanda has accepted the security of the house but this has also meant curtailment of freedom and of the ability to grow. Raka will not simply reinhabit the house: she will change the landscape; she will eradicate the remains of all forms of colonization in her society. In the end, Nanda sees that her lies to herself and to others have been only "tranquillizers, pills" enabling her to sleep at night (145). At the very least, she confronts the truth about the male subjugation of women and the male moulding of the female identity in a patriarchal society.

Ila Das' visit, too, helps Nanda Kaul to grow. When Ila talks about the times when Mr. Kaul and his mistress – Miss David – played mixed doubles against others, Nanda is reminded of a marriage in which she had been used by husband and children.

And she sees clearly that Ila has herself been a victim of the patriarchy, since her three brothers had inherited the entire family fortune and had subsequently stripped her and her sister of much of their personal jewellery (123-4). Ila has been a victim of the patriarchy, also, in that recently she has surrendered her job in response to a new male Vice-Chancellor who is “out to show his strength” by denying her a promotion to the Principalship (124). Ila’s presence, therefore, sets in motion within Nanda reflections that would lead the latter to recognize the power of the patriarchy over women.

But Ila’s presence is of value to Nanda in another way. Nanda comes to acknowledge the strength Ila has exhibited. Nanda recalls how she had watched as Ila and her sister Rima had shown “the worth of *their* upbringing, *their* character...as they shingled their hair, queued up for buses and went to work” (124). They had not allowed themselves to be destroyed by the patriarchal system. Nanda is aware, too, that – unlike her – Ila has confronted and dealt with reality, since she chose to take a course that would qualify her for a government job (125). More recently, Ila has demonstrated her independent spirit by giving up her job at the college rather than submitting to her devaluation by the new Vice-Chancellor. It is evident that Nanda approves of the strength shown by Ila. When the latter suggests in relation to her job at the college that “in [her] position, a little humility would have been much, much better” (124), Nanda informs her that there was “no call for humility” since she was the obvious choice for

the Principalship (124).

At first, Nanda attempts to shut her eyes to the truth about her experience as a colonized female. She decides that she has allowed Ila's reminiscing "to get out of hand" and that it is "time to silence it, to smooth it away" (122). Shortly, she goes so far as to refuse Ila her help. She does not wish to have her existence at Carignano violated by the presence of someone else, particularly someone who has resisted the power of the patriarchy even in a small way. She is still unwilling, therefore, to emerge from her world of lies: she finds herself unable to invite Ila to stay with her since she cannot do "what would ruin her existence here at Carignano" (127). For the time being, her betrayal of Ila confirms the power of the patriarchy over her life and identity and reinforces the impact of a system that -- as the rape of Ila shows -- attempts to silence women who question.

Shortly, though, Nanda sees the truth about her life. The shock of the brutal silencing of Ila leads her to see that her own life has been a "lie" (145). She realizes more fully now that her experience and identity have been shaped by the patriarchy. She is poised for growth. As Schmitt observes in *Alienation and Class*, "to have a self...is to be someone in a world that one has taken some degree of responsibility for by learning to master, if not create it" (26). Ila Das has attempted to master her world by working within the system that constrains her, and she has failed to change it.

Metaphorically, Raka seeks to take responsibility for her world by destroying the patriarchal system to create one suited to her needs. She has taken firm steps, then, toward constructing her own self and her own experience. With her new and intense self-awareness, Nanda, if she survives the fire on the mountain, also has similar possibilities. Even if she dies, the quest continues in Raka, her kindred spirit.

In Desai's *In Custody*, however, the development of the female self is much less in evidence. Whereas in her other novels Desai foregrounds the female to depict the position of the woman in an androcentric world, in *In Custody* she employs a different approach to highlight the disadvantaged status of the female. She foregrounds the male to demonstrate that males of even limited competence are allowed to achieve self-fulfilment while females, though they might be even more talented, do not enjoy such an opportunity. Even within such constraints, the novel shows, some women do pursue their own self-development.

In delineating Deven's quest, Desai reveals that even this "boring teacher who could not command the attention, let alone win the regard, of his unruly class" (13) is permitted in the patriarchal system to achieve a measure of growth and self-fulfilment. In this, the weak, unattractive Deven has the support of other males. Murad, for example, points out to him that he has not progressed since his college days: "You seem to be where you were in your college days" (10). Later, Murad encourages Deven

and Deven shortly comes to see that he

would have to stretch himself as he had never stretched before, reach for something he had not been trained to reach nor was qualified to reach, and use whatever capacities he had to the fullest in order to achieve something worthy of his hero. (114-115)

In time, the patriarchal society, with Deven's male support system playing a crucial role, enables Deven to achieve greater awareness and a more confident sense of self. He learns that it is important to ask questions, because they lead to a comprehension of the larger life. He discovers, too, that the confusion, the hubbub of life, embodied in his image, the whirlpool, is often a step toward growth and self-fulfilment:

He often had nightmares in which he struggled towards an unspecified destination but was repeatedly waylaid and deflected, never in any stretch of sleep arriving at it any more than he did in waking. His feet seemed to be enmeshed in the sticky net of the nightmare that would not let him escape at any level of consciousness. (31)

But Deven does escape. He finally realizes that it is he who must change, not the environment, and that he must accept the whirl and the "debris" (167) of real life. Instead of worrying about fleeing or getting caught, he adjusts, embracing the challenge of life with all its "calamities" (204). He relies more on himself now, "stopping to pull

environment, and that he must accept the whirl and the “debris” (167) of real life. Instead of worrying about fleeing or getting caught, he adjusts, embracing the challenge of life with all its “calamities” (204). He relies more on himself now, “stopping to pull a branch of thorns from under his foot” (204) rather than waiting for someone else to assist him. He will probably not be a worthy custodian, but he has been given the opportunity to develop, to know himself, and to face with self-confidence the uncertainties of life.

In stark contrast, the women in *In Custody* have little chance to step out of their conventional role, to achieve a strong self of self, or to secure self-fulfilment. Despite the constraints they face, however, they sometimes do manage to carve out some space for themselves. Raj’s aunt, for instance, is a sort of chela; she fed “whoever came to be fed – large numbers of *sadhus* in white or saffron, carrying begging bowls” but she also performed “long and elaborate *pujas* at dawn and dusk” (164). She has also offered to the gods and monks baskets of fruit Deven had brought her (166). This woman with the “gestures of a trained devotee” gains a degree of self-fulfilment, deriving satisfaction and happiness from what she does. As a woman, though, she can never formally become a chela. Imtiaz, too, can go only so far in contravening the norms of the patriarchal society. While she is Nur’s equal in terms of intellect and ability and demonstrates that she is well equipped to be his chela and successor, she is



in the end relegated to the margin. Deven finds the answer to his all-important question, “But where was the centre of this formless, shapeless town on the plain that had not even a river or a hill to give it any reason for existence?” (22). As he discovers, the centre is what *he* makes it; he has the chance to see that he is to operate as “the central character in the whole affair” (141). The women in the novel are given no such chance, and their growth is either still-born or stunted. They win for themselves, at best, a modicum of self-fulfilment and of liberation from the confines of the patriarchy. But it is not for want of trying.

The theme of female growth is much more strongly pursued in Marshall’s *Brown Girl, Brownstones*. With time, Selina comes to understand her mother better and the recognition of the similarity between herself and her mother eventually reinforces her determination to become her “own woman” (307) and to achieve her own self-fulfilment. In the early stages of her life, Selina loves her father more than she does her mother, Silla, associating him in her mind with the warmth and comfort of the sun parlour. She does not yet recognize Silla’s discontent and displeasure as symptoms of a precarious economic situation; all she sees is that her mother’s “lips, set in permanent protest against life, implied that there was no time for gaiety” (166). At this stage, Selina does not comprehend the plight of women like her mother, a situation Adrienne Rich probes so tellingly in *Of Woman Born*:

What of a woman who has to toil so hard for survival that no maternal energy remains at the end of the day, as she numbly, wearily picks up her child after work? The child does not discern the social system or the institution of motherhood, only a harsh voice, a dulled pair of eyes, a mother who does not hold her, does not tell her how wonderful she is. And what can we say of families in which the daughter feels it was her father, not her mother, who gave her affection and support in becoming herself? It is a painful fact that a nurturing father, who replaces rather than complements a mother, must be loved at the mother's expense, whatever the reasons for the mother's absence. (Rich 248)

Not surprisingly, then, Selina loves the "silence that came when the mother was at work" (5).

Yet, Selina has fleeting glimpses of the dissimilarity between the female and the male experience. As she listens to her mother's recounting of the horrors of her own childhood, when she worked "harder than a man at the age of ten" and picked "grass in a cane field from the time God sun rise in his heaven till it set," with "some woman called a Driver to wash yuh tail in licks if yuh dare look up" (45), Selina contrasts her mother's suffering with her father's relatively carefree existence "swaggering through the town as a boy and bounding on the waves in some rough game" (46). It was a momentary insight but, as the narrator notes, it would have a lasting effect for, while it "was no more than an impression, quickly lost in the haze of impressions that was her mind at ten," it "was there, fixed forever" (46). Selina begins to understand that her

“mother’s formidable aspect was the culmination of all that she had suffered” (46). More than that, though “still unyielding” (46), she begins to grasp the central importance of the mother’s role in the family:

Outwardly she was unyielding still, still uninvolved. But inside she was frightened by the thought of those memories always clashing within the mother. She was afraid that they would rend the mother soon and kill her finally, and she would be left without her. The world would collapse then, for wasn’t the mother, despite all, its only prop?” (46)

While, on the surface, Selina rejects her mother, she finds herself drawn to Silla almost against her will. In experiencing puberty, for instance, she feels comforted by Silla and spends hours sitting in the kitchen “out of the mother’s way yet near her” (67). She is again drawn to Silla when she is mesmerized by her “mother’s power with words” as she talks about the past and dispenses advice to the women who congregate in the kitchen (71). More and more, she sees the strength in her mother, and she is impressed by that strength.

In this connection, the trip to and from the factory marks another step in Selina’s development. She is dumfounded when she observes the conditions under which her mother works. She is also astonished at how her mother copes, for only “the mother’s own formidable force could match that of the machines; only the mother could remain

indifferent to the brutal noise” (100). As she watches her mother and observes her mother’s strength and tenacity, she feels a “grudging affection” for her (100). She is in the early stages, then, of viewing her mother in a new light. Yet, she does not fully comprehend her mother’s quest. In Selina’s eyes, her “mother was like the machines, some larger form of life with an awesome beauty all her own” (101), a force that makes the young girl “cringe” in her seat (101). Selina does not yet grasp the complete truth:

What is misread as power here is really survival – strength, guts, the determination that her children’s lives shall come to something even if it means driving them, or sacrificing her own pride in order to feed and clothe them. (Rich 203)

Selina sees her mother’s strength – and indeed she will later come to view Silla as the source of her own strength – but she does not yet perceive its real significance.

In time, Selina begins to understand her mother better, she comes to see why her mother displays so much joyless drive and tenacity. When Silla sells her husband’s land without his permission, he tells her: “If I don want to give you this money there’s no way on this Christ earth you can get it” (120). Shortly, Deighton squanders much of the money on presents. Selina regards him as irresponsible, and her mother confirms that he “always got to be the big sport...Always a lot of flash with nothing a-tall, a-tall behind it” (133). Selina gives him “a quiet look of disapproval” (125). She has

begins to comprehend the obstacles faced by her mother and by black women generally in a harsh environment. She begins to identify with her mother now. Unlike her sister Ina, who flees from the room after Deighton has finished distributing the gifts, Selina remains with her mother, for she knows “that for some reason she would always remain behind with the mother” (132), that “there was a part of her that always wanted the mother to win, that loved the dark strength and tenacious lift of her body” (133).

That Selina herself is a strong person is evident from her early years. She shows her independence by going on her own to the factory in which her mother works (101), her incipient growth being symbolised by her wearing curls rather than a typical girls’ braids (95). On her father’s death, she senses that Silla perceives her as a possession no longer to be shared:

[Silla] smoothed her snarled hair. Yet, despite the tenderness and wonder and admiration of her touch, there was frightening possessiveness. Each caress declared that she was touching something which was finally hers alone. (185)

Her love-hate disposition toward her mother and the Barbadian community indicates her unwillingness to accept being possessed or moulded by either. While she eventually admits that the Barbadian community “had done nothing to deserve her insults, nor had she come any closer to her own truth by maligning theirs” (228), at this

eventually admits that the Barbadian community “had done nothing to deserve her insults, nor had she come any closer to her own truth by maligning theirs” (228), at this point of her life she rejects the society, viewing it as another form of ghettoization, as “a band of small frightened people. Clannish. Narrow-minded. Selfish” (227). It is not, in her view, an environment conducive to full self-development.

The evolution of an independent sense of self in Selina is given an impetus by her relationship with Clive. Her sexual initiation allows her to transcend the puritannical guilt inculcated in her by church and family. But Clive contributes to her development in other ways. He alerts her to the fact that, like her mother, she has strength and determination. He observes, for instance, that she is “truly her mother’s child” (248), and when he describes her as “someone ruthlessly seizing a way and using, then thrusting aside, others” (247), she feels that he is in effect describing “the mother’s way” (247). Selina would like to protest against this portrayal of her, but she concedes that perhaps “he *had* discovered this self crouched in the dim rear of her mind and had led it shivering, naked, despicable into the light to confront her” (248).

There is another important way in which Clive nurtures her self-awareness. Selina learns from him the truth about how blacks tend to be viewed in a white society:

Some of them probably still see in each of us the black moor tugging their white ewe, or some legendary beast coming out of the night and the fens to maraud and rape. Caliban. Hester's Black Man in the woods. The Devil. Evil. Sin. The whole long list of their race's fears... (253)

She has not thought in such terms before, has not analyzed the significance of colour in a white society. She now begins to discern the marginalization of blacks. Importantly, though, she refuses "to curl up and die because [she] is colored" (252). Unlike her father, who gave up in the face of obstacles he had encountered, she will not permit herself to do nothing or "try nothing because of it" (252). In this she is supported by Clive, who informs her that if she does nothing she will only be reinforcing a white construct of blacks. In the process, she will be devaluing herself: "You commit an injustice against yourself by admitting that, because, first, you rule out your humanity, and second, your complexity as a human being" (252). On the contrary, the challenge to the black is "to disappoint whites by confronting them always with the full and awesome weight of our humanity" (253). The black individual must grow, must "break through to the larger ring which encompasses us all -- our humanity" (252).

In addition to a strengthening self-awareness as a black, Selina also nurtures a

own competence:

In the moment's stillness she knew that she had been good. And when the applause rushed her like a high wind, it was as if the audience was offering her something of itself in exchange for what she had given it. (281-282)

In this state of self-realization, Selina can face the world with greater aplomb.

But Selina's development is by no means complete. Clive becomes an obstacle she must surmount if she is to continue her growth. On the occasion of her confrontation with her mother over her relationship with Clive, she does not give him up in order to pacify her mother. When he refuses to unchain himself from his mother, however, he becomes a liability and she extricates herself from the relationship (297). More critical for the development of her selfhood, however, is her encounter with Mrs. Benton. No longer is racism a hypothetical matter, she now feels its full blast. When she meets Mrs. Benton, she is greeted by the latter with "a courteous, curious and appraising smile" and with something "fretful, disturbed" lying behind the surface of her eyes and roving "in a restless shadow over her face" (285). Later, she will remember that expression, which will remain with her until her death, and "every white face would be suspect for that moment" (285). More importantly, Mrs. Benton's condescension – apparent in her remarks about her "efficient," "reliable" and "honest"



appraising smile” and with something “fretful, disturbed” lying behind the surface of her eyes and roving “in a restless shadow over her face” (285). Later, she will remember that expression, which will remain with her until her death, and “every white face would be suspect for that moment” (285). More importantly, Mrs. Benton’s condescension – apparent in her remarks about her “efficient,” “reliable” and “honest” black maid and in her observation to Selina that she [Selina] cannot help her colour (288) – and the stereotyping of blacks explicit in her statement that Selina has taken her “race’s natural talent for dancing and music and developed it” (288) help to drive home to her the significance of being black in a white society. When Selina sees her reflection in Mrs. Benton’s eyes, those eyes became in effect “a well-lighted mirror in which, for the first time, Selina truly saw – with a sharp and shattering clarity – the full meaning of her black skin” (289).

In this “instant of death” (289), Selina is gripped by terror for she now grasps that whites “all, everywhere, sought to rob her of her substance and her self” (289). As she peers into a store window she sees herself as Mrs. Benton and other whites see her, as “the heart of darkness within them” (291). Her failed attempt to shatter the store window is an indication that the powerful image/constructs that whites have created of blacks cannot readily be destroyed. Although it is “only an illusion,” this image will “stalk her down the years...intrude in every corner of her life, tainting her small

triumphs...and exulting at her defeats” (291). She sees that “like all her kinsmen, she must somehow prevent it from destroying her inside and find a way for her real face to emerge” (291).

Now Selina can empathize with her mother and other blacks; she can feel the pain they have suffered as victims of racism and the resultant marginalization in America. She perceives now that Silla’s “swift rage” and “uncalled-for outbursts” might be explained by the possibility that “she must have borne the day’s humiliations inside” (293). She sees and appreciates her mother’s strength, marvelling at how Silla has endured and “not chosen death by water” (293) as Deighton has. She sees, too, the strength in her people; she comes to admire “the mysterious source of endurance in them” (302). She recognizes as well that the people in her life have contributed to her self-development, that “they had bequeathed her a small strength” (308), and it “was not only admiration but love she felt” for them (302).

In the end, it is clear to her that she is more Silla’s daughter than Deighton’s and that, like her mother, she has to abandon her home in order to achieve a complete self of her own:

Everybody used to call me Deighton’s Selina but they were wrong. Because you see I’m truly your child. Remember how you used to talk about how you left home and came here alone as a girl of eighteen and was your own woman? I used to love

hearing that. And that's what I want. I want it!" (307)

Selina is aware of the racism about her, but she is determined not to "curl up and die" (252). She will continue her journey toward becoming her "own woman" (307), toward finding "her real face" (291). She decides to accept a job that will enable her to "get down to the islands" (308). There she will discover the true nature of her homeland and of her people, knowledge that will assist her in determining the future direction of her growth.

The female protagonists in all five novels attain some degree of psychological growth. Self-awareness is a vital stage in such development. The protagonists all recognize the reality of the female's position in a patriarchal and/or colonial society. Selina, Elaine and Imtiaz Begum actually begin to break free of their confinement. Their quest for an independent selfhood and for self-realization is an on-going experience. In Nanda Kaul's case, enlightenment occurs quite late in life, but it does occur, and – as *Fire on the Mountain* implies through her alter-ego Raka and her own unease and questioning about her own life – she, too, can act to empower herself. Antoinette does not have time to effect change in her life but she does gain insight into the truth about the limitations on the development of her selfhood in a patriarchal, colonial society. She has thus attained a state conducive to further growth.

## **Chapter V**

### **Conclusions**

As a group, the five novels examined in the present study probe the experience of women in diverse social contexts; the female protagonists are members of colonial or decolonizing societies or are migrants into a new cultural milieu which does not welcome them. What the women have in common, though, is an experience they share with colonized peoples everywhere: they are voiceless and marginalized and, if they are to gain social acceptance within the dominant group, they must do so on its own terms. They must conform to an idealized image of their role constructed by those who have power over them. It has been shown in the foregoing discussion that, in scrutinizing the female experience, the novels pursue two initiatives crucial to the feminist agenda -- the raising of female consciousness about the realities of women's position in society and the nurturing of new "forms of consciousness, of a totally new order" (Castro 159).

Atwood's *Cat's Eye*, Desai's *In Custody* and *Fire on the Mountain*, Rhys' *Wide Sargasso Sea* and Marshall's *Brown Girl, Brownstones* all expose the marginalization of women. The novels are mirrors in which women might see reflections of themselves, of their experience and of their common responses within a patriarchal system. They enable women to discern more clearly the barriers that have restricted

their personal growth and hindered their attainment of self-fulfilment. Women can comprehend, too, the futility of typical female responses to marginalization. As in Elaine's case in *Cat's Eye*, their inclination to reduce their Otherness by conforming to models held out to them by the dominant sex does not necessarily bring about their acceptance as equals by the more privileged in the society. Even if they become aware of their Otherness, they may lack the understanding of the real causes of their predicament that might trigger their independent growth. Selina in *Brown Girl, Brownstones*, for instance, perceives her Otherness fairly early in life but she does not yet understand its foundation sufficiently to further her own liberation. She needs to see – and overcome – the real obstacles in her way if she is to grow. It becomes evident to readers of the novels as well that women may be their own worst enemies because, in conforming to the model of femininity prescribed by the male, they are frequently disposed to encourage other women to adopt the same model or they may refuse support for those of their sex who assert their own individuality. *Fire on the Mountain*, for example, provides instances of both these tendencies. Asha encourages her daughter to persist in her marriage to a man who physically abuses her; the man is valued as a suitable mate because he is a “successful diplomat” (14). The economic status, the power and the dominance of the male are therefore reinforced. As Cixous explains,

Men have committed the greatest crime against women. Insidiously, violently, they have led them to hate women, to be their own enemies, to mobilize their immense strength against themselves, to be the executants of their virile needs. ("The Laugh of the Medusa" 310)

Again in *Fire on the Mountain*, Nanda Kaul, who has not yet had her moment of full illumination, does not come to the assistance of Ila Das, who has been so spirited in her quest for independence. Besides alerting women to the fact that they might themselves be obstacles to female development, the novels also permit the female a view of how resistant the quintessential patriarchal society can be to an enlargement of the possibilities for women. Indeed, as Desai's *Fire on the Mountain* reveals, a female like Ila Das who chooses not to adopt a conventional passivity may be ruthlessly crushed. On the whole, the novels have the potential to create in women a strong sense of their entrapment and disempowerment in societies that define their role in rigidly traditional terms.

Another major thrust of the novels – and of feminist writing generally – is the imagining of alternative possibilities for women. This is an interest feminist writing shares with post-colonial analysis. As Tiffin notes with regard to the post-colonial writers' quest for a new order,

such establishing or rehabilitation of an independent identity involves the radical interrogation and fracturing of [the] imposed European perspectives, and their “systematic” ... replacement by an alternative vision or the attack on or erosion of the very notion of system and hegemonic control itself. (Tiffin 172)

The novels examined in the present study are indeed interested in “an alternative vision” of women in society. Along with post-colonialists, according to Ashcroft, Griffiths and Tiffin, feminists desire “to reinstate the marginalized in the face of the dominant” (175). One prerequisite for the attainment of a new state, the novels imply, is female enlightenment about women’s true status in a patriarchal society. Such an enlightenment may be facilitated by an association with other women – and sometimes men -- who are also marginalized or who might model alternative traits and dispositions. In *Brown Girl, Brownstones*, for instance, Selina forms an alliance with Rachel, who has become an Other in her own family. In this case Selina, with Rachel’s encouragement, begins to see new possibilities for her own development.

It is not surprising that, given the existence of “multiple feminisms” (Commeyras and Alvermann 31-32), the novels as a group would explore differing routes to more complete selfhood and self-fulfilment. *Cat’s Eye* and *Brown Girl, Brownstones*, for example, illustrate the relatively benign strategy of effecting change

in the female self by disregarding the obstacles created by the dominant group and independently pursuing growth. In *Wide Sargasso Sea* and *Fire on the Mountain*, on the other hand, a somewhat more radical notion seems implicit, the notion that the patriarchal system must be annihilated if women are truly to grow. Despite such variations, the novels are united in their insistence that the full development of the female is a very real possibility. For the moment, though, the novelists are engaged mainly in conjecturing about alternatives. Their “projects,” as Ashcroft, Griffiths and Tiffin indicate, “are oriented toward the future” (177).



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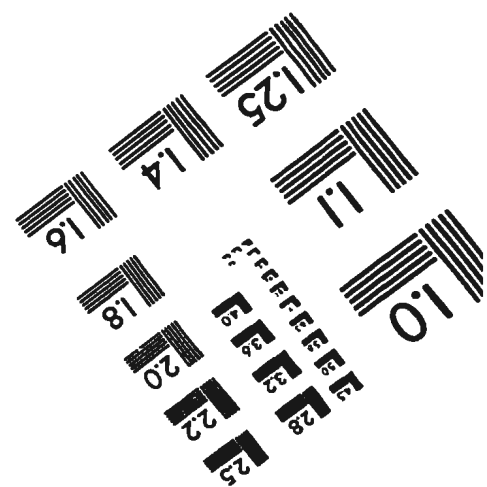
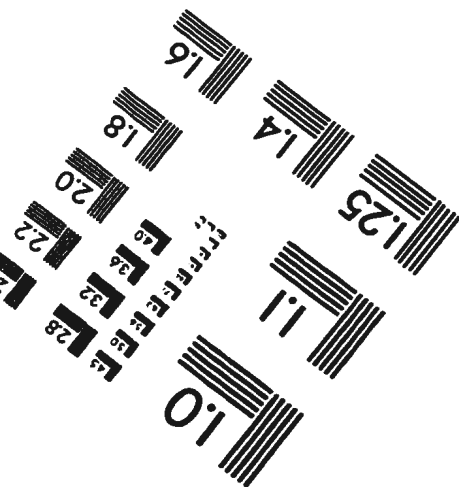
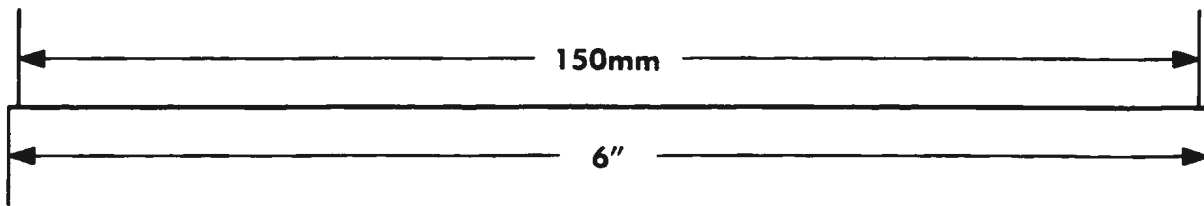
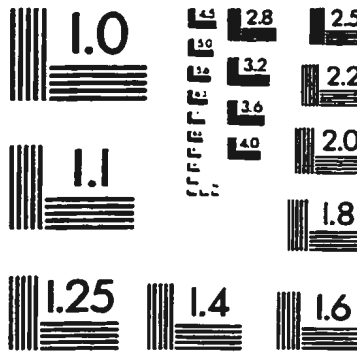
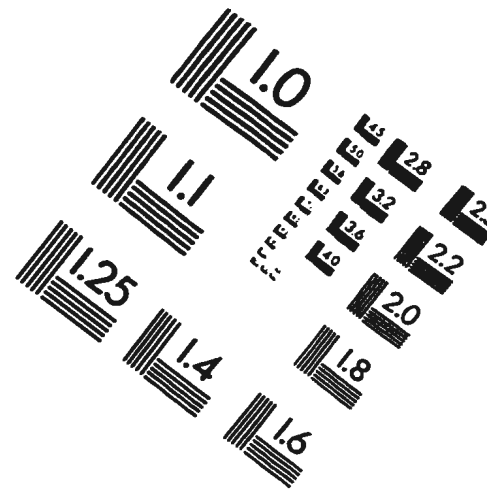
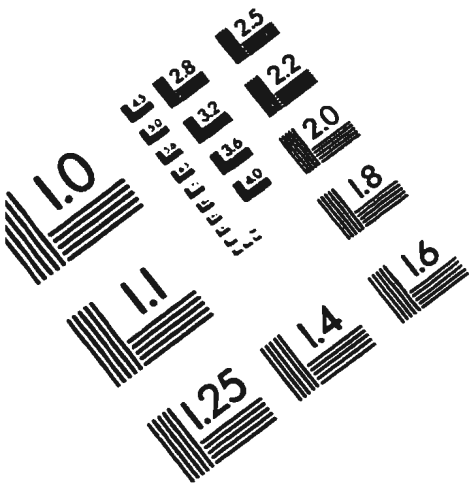
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