



The Migratory Female Subject and the Construction of Rhizomatic Womb-Space

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Abstract

The rhizomatic womb-space is a term I coined from Gilles Deleuze and Félix Guattari's concept of rhizome. On the one hand, the term is derived from the ancient Greek philosophy of the wandering womb. On the other hand, the term expresses my quest not only to question dominant ideologies and politics about the female body and women's stories but also to create a new space through which women can reconstruct their identities. The rhizomatic womb-space pushes for new social formations and relations that are informed by migration, multiplicity, divergence, relations, and connectivity. It is concerned with how people are constructed in space and by space as well as how new spaces emerge as people move from one place to another, renegotiate their identities, critique their social positions, or positioning as well as differ from dominant ideological reasoning and conception. It is a social, biological, creative, intellectual, and ideological feminine space that is interested in questions of identity, gender, (un)belonging, and the critical interventions that women make in their immediate families and nations at large. As a theoretical construct, the rhizomatic womb-space is defined as a site of radical openness that pushes for new social formations and relations.

Keywords: Rhizomatic womb-space, migration, social relations, multiculturalism, and emplacement

The rhizomatic womb-space is a term I coined from Gilles Deleuze and Félix Guattari's concept of rhizome. On the one hand, the term comes from the ancient Greek philosophy of the wandering womb. On the other hand, the term demonstrates my quest not only to question dominant ideologies and politics about the female body and women's stories but also to create a new space through which women can reconstruct their identities. The rhizomatic womb-space pushes for new social formations and relations that are informed by migration, multiplicity, divergence, relations, and connectivity. It is concerned with how people are constructed in space and by space as well as how new spaces emerge as people move from one place to another, renegotiate their identities, critique their social positions, and differ from dominant ideological reasoning and conception. Undergirding this theory is the impact of migration on the migratory female subject and a consideration of how they can effectively emplace themselves in places where they have been displaced. While not neglecting the pains and traumas associated with displacement, the theory of rhizomatic womb-space focuses on places of emplacement to show the resilience and determination of migratory subjects in reconstructing their identities as well as building new homes in their host communities. Apart from the fact that it is a social, mental, ideological, and creative space, the rhizomatic womb-space is also a biological space that involves the conception and nurturing of babies. However, it not only explores the mother-child relationship but also considers how women can nurture ideas, nations, cultural identities, and foster new social relations. This aspect of the rhizomatic womb-space seeks to bridge the gap between the private and the public as it brings to bear the role of women in nation building as the domestic space becomes a microcosm of the nation. The rhizomatic womb-space is also interested in the politics of dwelling and socialization as well as how one's location (be it a physical place or an ideological standpoint) shapes one's identities. In connecting the concept of the rhizome to the ancient Greek philosophy of the wandering womb, my goal is to show how female migrants have resisted their subjugation as well as redefine themselves through migration and other cultural and social relations. In re-appropriating the concept of womb, I situate the womb as a site of conception where new ideas, nations, identities, and social relations and spaces are nurtured.

The womb has been subjected to different interpretations. For many centuries, it has continued to dominate cultural, religious, and medical discourses. The various meanings associated with the womb, garnered from different studies, have rendered the womb problematic

and difficult to pin down. As Germane Greer (2008, 53-4) notes, “since time immemorial the womb has been associated with trouble and some of the troubles shown by doctors to attend to anxieties that women feel about their tricky apparatus stems from this atavistic fear,” of the womb as evil. As she further notes, some doctors believed that “the womb is a part of every illness of the female sex. Women were assumed to be by nature subject to the tyranny of the insatiate womb, and to suffer symptoms from which men only suffered if they indulged in excessive self-abuse” (Greer 2008, 55). Apart from the fact that the womb was considered evil, it was also seen as a complicated and mysterious object. Darren Wagner (2011, 541) posits that, in late seventeenth- and eighteenth-century British society, “the exact physical descriptions of the womb were uncommon and inconsistent throughout the long eighteenth century. Attempts to affix precise definitions of that organ were frustrated by its complex cultural associations and confused by its enigmatic reproductive properties.” Accordingly, the different interpretations of the womb either portray it in relation to reproduction or its mysterious nature. For instance, Wagner (2011, 543) notes that within the early-modern culture, “the womb was understood both as a mysterious organ of the female reproductive body and as an abstract concept defining the space where generation or procreation occurred.” The predominant notion of the womb as problematic and as the major cause of women’s and societal problems could be traced back to the ancient Greek philosophy as seen in the works of Plato, Aristotle, and Hippocrates.

In ancient Greek philosophy, the womb was seen as a living animal that was capable of moving about in the female body and as a result caused a lot of discomfiting problems to the female body and mind. In Plato’s *Timaeus*, he describes the womb as a living animal desirous of childbearing that is distressed when it is not fruitful; hence it wanders in the female body. Plato states, “the so-called uterus...in women—there being in them a living animal desirous of childbearing...whenever it is fruitless for a long time beyond its due season, being distressed it carries on with difficulty and by wandering in every direction throughout the body, by fencing off the passages of breath, and by not allowing (the body) to catch its breath, it throws it (the body) into the extremes of helplessness and provokes all other kinds of diseases” (Plato, qtd in Faraone 2011, 3). Plato also portrays the womb in a negative light—capable of causing pains in women when it is not sexually satisfied and as an entity that can only be satisfied through its connection to the male. In essence, he frames the female body as dependent on men and as a body that derives satisfaction and completeness only in relation to men.

In Hippocrates' account of the wandering womb, he focuses on the different places where the womb can attach itself and the various pains that come as a result of its wandering:

If the uterus seems to sit under the diaphragm, the woman suddenly becomes speechless ... and she experiences suffocation; she grinds her teeth and, when called, does not respond. When the womb strikes the liver or abdomen ... the woman turns up the whites of her eyes and becomes chilled; some women are livid. She grinds her teeth and saliva flows out of her mouth. These women resemble those who suffer from Herakles' disease (i.e., epilepsy). If the womb lingers near the liver or abdomen, the woman dies of suffocation. (Hippocrates, qtd in Faraone 2011,4)

Apart from Hippocrates's elaboration on the pains that the wandering womb causes women, he also considers the female body as physiologically cold and capable of producing fluids that must be purged. To stop the womb from wandering, he recommends that a woman get married. If a woman is single, he suggests keeping the womb moist through constant sexual intercourse. This also stops it from attaching itself to other moist parts of the body. If married, a woman is encouraged to become pregnant. If the womb has wandered, he recommended that baths, uterine infusions, and a series of physical manipulations and bindings of the abdomen be applied to force the womb back in place.

Although the womb is no longer believed to wander, this original idea of constant mobility, rupture, displacement, reconnection, emplacement, and positionality informs my use of the womb-space as a concept to explain the impact of migration on women. Unlike its negative portrayal in ancient Greek philosophy, the female body is not docile but is imbued with power to question, to renegotiate, and to create something new. By re-appropriating the concept of the wandering womb, I set forth to explore how women can begin to redefine their identities by breaking barriers, charting their own course, connecting with different people, and taking new social positions in their new social milieu. I argue that, like the wandering womb, women who migrate reconstruct their identities in relation to routes and through the various connections and contacts they make rather than through roots or fixed identities. It is my contention that the womb that wanders does so not only in defiance of men's control but in pursuit of its own space within the female body. This metaphorical pursuit can be interpreted as women's quest to have a place of their own in a world controlled by men. Unacknowledged in men's construction of the

wandering womb, is the fact that the womb is migratory, independent, and agentive and that it has the power to displace in order to emplace itself in other parts of the female body. Most importantly, is the fact that the womb that wanders within the female body not only escapes from its initial position but also resists control and confinement. In other words, the wandering womb resists fixity and rootedness to create, for itself, new routes of escape or movement. It is this notion of resistance to fixed location, identity reconstruction, constant movement, rupture, reconnection, and attachment to new organs and spaces that have informed my conceptualization of the rhizomatic womb-space.

In reconstructing the concept of the wandering womb in relation to the migratory subject, one begins to see how women have been able to break their silence and reposition themselves in places where they have been displaced. The concept of the wandering womb was dominated for many centuries by male scholars who denied women the right to claim their body and to write about it. Although there is a significant number of women who migrated to England during the Empire Windrush era, including Beryl Gilroy who migrated to England in 1950 as a single woman, little to nothing is known about women's experiences during this period because their works were neither published nor were they given an opportunity to tell their own stories about their migration. As Heidi Safia Mirza (1997, 6) contends, "[O]fficial statistics and texts written about and documenting the main period of postcolonial migration from the 1940s to 1960s writes (sic) out the female story of postcolonial migration." Similarly, Matthew Mead contends that the portrayal of 492 Jamaican males as representatives of black immigrants who arrived in London in 1948 shows the subtle process through which the presence of women is rendered invisible in history. Mead contends that, "there were more than 492 West Indian migrants on board the Windrush" (Mead, qtd. in Courtman 2012, 86); however, official record has continued to sustain that figure despite the fact that a 39-year-old female stowaway dressmaker, Evelyn Wauchape, was on board as well. The apparent omission of women's presence during the *Empire Windrush* is indicative of the ways in which dominant history has continued to render women invisible and to portray their experiences as trivial and unimportant to national discourse. Not only were women rendered invisible in history, they were also denied a voice in the narration of this unique experience. Recounting her experience with West Indian male writers, Gilroy states, "I wrote novels as well but...when my work was sent to the male writers from the West Indies to be read, these men, in order to be as erudite as they were expected to be, turned to the idiosyncratic and

the fastidious. My work, they said, was too psychological, strange, way out, difficult to categorize” (Gilroy, qtd. in Courtman 2012, 93-94). The suppression of early female narrative is attributed to its choice of subject matter, which is said to revolve around issues of love and representation of the emotional and psychological effects of interracial relationships. These subjects were considered by male publishers and reviewers as petty in relation to the dominant discourse of the time.

Redeeming the negative image of women has been important to many feminist scholars not only in terms of reclaiming the female body but also in breaking their silence and claiming their stories. In fact, Elaine Showalter (1993, 286) considers it as “the first step on the road to feminism, a specifically feminine pathology that speaks to and against patriarchy.” As Showalter (1993, 288) explains, in relation to dominant discourse on hysteria, “until recently, stories about hysteria were told by men, and women were always the victims in these stories rather than the heroines.” It is not only in the case of hysteria that men were given undue privilege to write about women but in many other areas. The consequence is, women are poorly represented in these male-authored narratives, which serve only to promote men’s ideology and dominance over women. As Christopher Rousseau (1993, 94) contends, the history of hysteria is as much the “‘history’ of male fear—in this case literally his-story...or any other wandering wombs. It is also the history of linguistic embodiments, rhetorics, and emplotments, many of which remain to be decoded and interpreted.” However, as he further explains, reconceptualizing the myth of the wandering wombs and hysteria helps not only to demystify it but also to relieve women of the agony of hysteria. Rousseau states that, “Language, rather than medicine (either theory or therapy), is the medium best able to express and relieve hysteria's contemporary agony... writing—perhaps self-expression through any of the arts, rather than treatment with drugs or psychotherapy—alleviates the modern hysteric's pain and numbness best” (Rousseau 1993, 93-4). Writing about the ways that women’s bodies and stories have been controlled, silenced, and subjected to various interpretations gives me the opportunity to engage in this discourse about women and for women as well as envision how the migratory female subject can see her displacement not as dislocation but as a site for emplacement, (re)discovery, strength, creativity, repositioning, and new beginning. As many feminist scholars have identified, women’s writings provide women the opportunity to reclaim their body and stories. Writing in relation to French Feminists’ positions on the female body, Ann Rosaland Jones (1981, 252) argues, “if women are

to discover and express who they are, to bring to the surface what masculine history has repressed in them, they must begin with their sexuality. And their sexuality begins with their bodies, with their genital and libidinal difference from men.” In fact, Adrienne Rich (2003, 31) identifies writing about the female body as the ground from which women speak with authority. According to Rich, “the need to begin with the female body—our own—was understood not as applying a Marxist principle *to* women, but *as* locating the grounds from which to speak with authority as women” (2003, 31). I argue that writing about the female body provides women not only the grounds to share their experiences but also a space for a new beginning.

The quest for a new beginning, growth, and connection to multiple things which underscore Deleuze and Guattari’s concept of the rhizome is significant in the construction of rhizomatic womb-space as it allows women to see their displacement as an opportunity to chart a new course as they renegotiate their identities, resist fixity and determinism, and foster new social relations. Connecting the concept of the rhizome to the ancient Greek Philosophy of the “wandering womb,” one notes that the womb, in itself, is rhizomatic as it detaches itself, in Deleuze and Guattari’s term, from its “place of injury,” to emerge in a new place. In other words, the womb that wanders from its original position to a new place does so in pursuit of a new place of emergence. This initial displacement also speaks of the need for connectivity as the womb that moves about in the female body attaches itself to different parts of the female body thereby creating its own space. Similarly, connecting their theory of the rhizome to migration stories also helps one to understand how displacement can be a site of emplacement or new beginning. As Deleuze and Guattari (1987) explain in the introduction of *A Thousand Plateaus*, the rhizome resists fixed points of emergence and rootedness. According to them, when a rhizome is broken or injured in one location, it emerges elsewhere with multiple openings and growths. In this regard, a rhizome does not produce a single trait but leads to other connections, thereby creating multi-dimensional assemblages that can come from one of its old lines or a completely new line. Thus, the rhizome defies any rigid classification as it seeks to disrupt even the root that produces it. As they explain, “the essence of the rhizome is to intersect roots and sometimes merge with them” (13). For Deleuze and Guattari, what is important is not root or origin but re-emergence and new growths, which in terms of the migratory subject can be interpreted as a call to connect to different ideas, cultures, peoples, and concepts as they seek to renegotiate their identities.

Deleuze and Guattari see the rhizome as a generative space from which other things emerge. Their rejection of root signals an opposition to tradition and logical approach to knowledge.

The rhizome becomes a liminal space that fosters new growths and developments. According to Deleuze and Guattari, the rhizome “connects any point to any other point, and its traits are not regimes of signs, and even nonsign states. It is not the One that becomes Two or even directly three, four, five etc. It is not a multiple derived from the One, or to which one is added (n+1). It is composed not of units but of dimensions, or rather directions in motion” (1987, 21). Their reference to mobility, multiplicity, and new growths emphasize rupture and diversity rather than homogeneity. The reference also denotes the need to break barriers or forces that hold people down as well as reject any tradition or culture that stifles individuals’ abilities and identities. As they explain: “Any part of a rhizome can be connected to anything other, and must be. This is very different from the tree or root, which plots a point, fixes an order” (1987,7). In other words, the rhizome strives towards what Edouard Glissant refers in *Poetics of Relations* (1999) to as poetics of relations—multiple relationships with the Other.

To be rhizomorphic, therefore, involves the deconstruction of dominant ideas and ideologies with the aim of arriving on something new and beneficial. As Deleuze and Guattari explain:

A rhizome may be broken, shattered at a given spot, but it will start up again on one of its old lines, or on new lines...Every rhizome contains lines of segmentarity according to which it is stratified, territorialized, organized, signified, attributed, etc., as well as lines of deterritorialization down which it constantly flees. These lines always tie back to one another. That is why one can never posit a dualism or a dichotomy, even in the rudimentary form of the good and the bad. You may make a rupture, draw a line of flight, yet there is still a danger that you will reencounter organizations that restratify everything, formations that restore power to a signifier, attributions that reconstitute a subject—anything you like (1987, 9).

I compare the migratory female subject’s will to survive to that of a rhizome. Though the female subject may be dislocated and displaced by many sociocultural, economic, and political factors, both in the home and host communities, she is not deterred but determined to build a home in the new host community regardless of these challenges. In repositioning herself, she turns what

Homi Bhabha (2004, 209) refers to as “the scraps, patches, and rags of daily life...into the signs of a coherent national culture.” She does this by resisting the various mechanisms used in the past to silence and displace her and also puts in place a new world order created out of diverse histories and voices. Therefore, what is important in the construction of a rhizomatic womb-space is relations rather than roots. This in essence entails the willingness to embrace new culture, acquire new language, and connect to a different set of people and ideology separate from the ones that the migrant has been familiar with. As Glissant (1997, 14) argues in *Poetics of Relations*, “the root is not important. Movement is.” Glissant further explains that underlying the concept of rhizome is the knowledge that “identity is no longer completely within the root but also in Relation” (1997, 18). The relation that is needed in the construction of a rhizomatic womb-space is one that pushes against the boundaries of traditions and oppressive mechanisms that privilege one group over the other such as sex, gender, race, class, and ethnicity.

The emphasis on movement or routes rather than roots not only makes reference to migratory women’s understanding of routes as the basis of their identity constructions but also explains how the age-long description of the wandering womb evokes notions of movements, ruptures, and connections and the ability of women to produce something new through constant movements and connections. It is significant to note that identity, as Stuart Hall notes, is always in a continuous process of becoming and never an end in itself. Human beings constantly renegotiate their identities as they face life challenges, remain in contact with other people, move about, or embrace new ideas and ideologies. While the degree to which someone who moves less frequently may not be easily discernable to one, the migratory subjects become aware of the changes taking place in their lives as soon as they leave the once familiar environment for another community. This is why migration is often associated with displacement. However, the rhizomatic womb-space theory proposes that displacement should not always be viewed in a negative way as it creates room for change. In most cases, emplacement takes place after displacement and if one views emplacement as a positive thing, then displacement, which is a precondition to emplacement, should also be viewed in a positive light.

Undergirding the construction of a rhizomatic womb-space, therefore, is the need to break barriers, critique the binary oppositions that separate and stifle a person’s identity, and the desire for new identity formation and new beginning. In his construction of Thirdspace, Edward Soja makes a case for “thirling as Othering,” as a precondition for new identity formation and

social relations. According to Soja (1996), the concept introduces a critical other than a choice that deconstructs all permanent constructions in its bid to reconstruct already established facts. The goal is not merely to add to already existing knowledge, but to give room for a continuous search for new ways of doing and seeing things. In this regard, the critical thirding can be described as a ground-breaking phenomenon that is geared towards deconstruction, recombination, reformation, reconstruction, and reordering of a rigid dichotomy in order to open up alternative ways to make practical sense of the contemporary world. It does so by expanding the already existing knowledge to provide alternative possibilities and meanings. For instance, in terms of social space, the thirding as othering provides alternative ways through which those who have been marginalized, excluded from the dominant culture can resist their marginalized positions in order to renegotiate their identities. Therefore, the thirding as othering flourishes on a culture of difference and resistance. In this regard, the Thirdspace of marginality becomes a site of resistance rather than an acceptance of marginality. Living in the margin invariably implies that one lives in a diversified social space that provides the opportunity for people from different social positions to interact.

Women situated in a rhizomatic womb-space, though marginalized, see their marginality as a site of creativity, renegotiation, and reformation of social relations. Many of these migrant women share the experiences of the marginalized people that feminist theorist, bell hooks, talks about in the preface of her book, *Feminist Theory: From Margin to Center*. hooks explains that the space of marginality belongs to the poor, underprivileged, and underclass blacks who do not wish to relinquish their identities for the dominant (white) culture. These are a set of people who are neither accepted by the white folks nor accepted as part of the privileged black few. Their presence is usually a disruption and a threat to both groups as they do not share or understand their perspectives. For this group to survive, hooks suggests that they must create their own space of radical openness, without which they cannot thrive in the culture of dominance. Explaining the position of marginality using her experience as an African American, hooks posits:

To be in the margin is to be part of the whole but outside the main body. As black Americans living in a small Kentucky town, the railroad tracks were a daily reminder of our marginality. Across those tracks were paved streets, stores we could not enter, restaurants we could not eat in, and people we could not look

directly in the face. Across these tracks was a world we could work in as maids, as janitors, as prostitutes, as long as it was in service capacity. We could enter that world but we could not live there. We had always to return to the margin, to cross the tracks, to shacks and abandoned houses on the edge of town... We looked both from the outside in and from the inside out. We focused our attention on the center as well as on the margin. *We understood both*. This mode of seeing reminded us of the existence of a whole universe, a main body made up of both margin and center. Our survival depended on an ongoing public awareness of the separation between margin and center and an ongoing private acknowledgement that we were a necessary, vital part of that whole. This sense of wholeness, impressed upon our consciousness by the structure of our daily lives, provided us with an oppositional world-view—a mode of seeing unknown to most of our oppressors, that sustained us, aided us in our struggle to transcend poverty and despair, strengthened our sense of self and our solidarity. (hooks 2000, 149)

The space of hybridity and inbetweenness that the marginalized subject occupy as a result of their marginality gives them an edge over those who are situated in either part of the social divide, and they are conversant with the happenings in both parts of the social world. The space of marginality creates an opportunity of being both in and out of the two spaces at the same time. Occupants of this inbetween space have a privileged knowledge that allows them to understand both sides of the world and live in them regardless of how fleeting that moment might be. Thus, this inbetween space creates room for multiple identity formation as these individuals become a product of two or more worlds, created from exposure to different people and cultures. To be in this space requires one's willingness to survive and a determination to make a difference as well as to imagine and create alternative new ways of being. It also entails moving beyond the binary oppositions of race, class, gender, and nationality into a space of multiplicity and fluidity. As hooks contends, the margin is not a site one gives up or surrenders as one moves to the center but it is "rather... a site one stays in, clings to even, because it nourishes one's capacity to resist. It offers to one the possibility of radical perspective from which to see and create, to imagine alternatives, new worlds" (hooks 2000, 207). This space of the margin becomes a new site of power, connectivity, resistance, and creativity for those who choose to inhabit it. Although these female migrants are marginalized, it is from this space of the margin that they begin to

reconstruct their identities and also move to the center-stage. They acknowledge their differences yet seek to create a culture of inclusion out of their differences.

The construction of rhizomatic womb-space encourages multiculturalism, change in perception, and a critique of dominant ideology, history, and the traditions that promote a fixed identity formation and limit women to the domestic sphere of childbearing and child-rearing. The construction of rhizomatic womb-space also challenges the traditional ways of doing and defining things and makes room for new social formations and diversity, especially for those who have relationships with people from different ethnic, cultural, and national boundaries. Unlike the traditional concept of womanhood upon which the concept of wandering womb was situated in the ancient Greek philosophy, women situated in rhizomatic womb-spaces transcend their traditional gender roles that confine them to the domestic space to engage in other roles in public spaces. They do not consider marriage and children as their greatest achievements, rather their ability to foster new social relations and nurture new ideas geared towards bringing a lasting change in any space they find themselves. There is also a conscious effort to bridge the gap between the private, domestic space and the public space as they make the family a microcosm of the nation. Thus, the rhizomatic womb-space becomes a metaphor for women's movements, journeys, displacements, pains, quests for change, and ruptures. In this regard, the construction of the rhizomatic womb-space becomes a journey in itself (both physically and mentally) that requires individual characters to reposition themselves socially, linguistically, culturally, spatially, and ideologically. In other words, it is a journey that demands that women give up those negative values that undermine as well as confine their self-potential. This, in essence, means that women must strive to move away from their places of displacement to new areas of emplacement.

As a theoretical construct, the rhizomatic womb-space is defined as a site of radical openness that pushes for new social formations and relations that are informed by multiplicity, divergence, connectivity, and quest for change. It is a social, creative, intellectual, and ideological feminine space that is interested in questions of identity, gender, (un)belonging, and the critical interventions that women make in their immediate families and nations at large. It is also a biological space that explores the mother-child relationship and how women have been able to redefine the sociocultural and political landscapes through childbearing and child-rearing. In situating characters in a rhizomatic womb-space, what is important is not race, class, gender,

or nationality but making connections, giving voice to the voiceless, redefining women's social positioning, and fostering new social relations geared towards creating a conducive environment for people. It also entails breaking not just one new ground but multiple ones as people begin to question and critique the binary oppositions that set them apart, create new spaces for minority voices to be heard and minority stories to be retold. Rather than the traditional approach to social categorization, the construction of rhizomatic womb-space requires a new approach that rejects the either(or) dichotomy that underlies identity formation and social relations as it privileges a diverse approach to sociocultural issues. The message embedded in the construction of rhizomatic womb-space is simple — it's about change in perception, orientation, ideology, and social relations. No more shall the future be left in the hands of one group or history be dependent on one voice but everybody irrespective of class, nationality, race, and gender has a stake in the community and nation at large and is capable of constructing a rhizomatic womb-space as well as fostering new social relations. The construction of a rhizomatic womb-space, therefore, requires constant renegotiation of identity, devising alternative ways to traditional approach to life, social and ideological repositioning, connection, and reevaluation of history.

In Black British female novels on postwar migration to England such as Buchi Emecheta's *Second Class Citizen*, Andrea Levy's *Small Island*, and Zadie Smith's *White Teeth*, one sees how migration helps the female protagonists break barriers as they reconstruct their identities as well as form new social relations in their rhizomatic womb-spaces. Significant is the fact that although these female characters are marginalized, it is from their marginalized spaces that they begin to reconstruct their identities as well as construct their rhizomatic womb-spaces. In Emecheta's *Second Class Citizen*, Adah, the protagonist's rhizomatic womb-space serves two broad purposes—the nurturing of Adah's children and the reproduction of social bodies. Adah uses her womb-space to nurture her children not just for the development of a multicultural British society but also to forge new social relations informed by diversity, creativity, recognition, and acceptance of gender equality. Having suffered so much in Nigeria on the basis of patriarchal culture and gender, Adah sees it as her duty to nurture children who can begin to question and deconstruct those social practices that inhibit self-development. Although she questions and resists the gender disparity and treatment of women in Nigeria, it is in England that she finally breaks herself free from the shackles of patriarchal strictures by distancing herself from her domineering husband. Thus, in her rhizomatic womb-space, Adah creates a new

identity for black immigrant children—an identity that is shaped by a different understanding and ideology needed to build a healthy and accommodating nation both at home and in the diaspora. Rather than a homogenous identity formation, Adah encourages multiple identity formations as she wants her children to be proud of their black cultural heritage while also assimilating the British culture and tradition. As Adah informs Francis, her children are “all going to be black, they were going to enjoy being black, be proud of being black, a black of a different breed. That’s what they are going to be” (Emecheta 1976, 141).

Conversely, Adah’s writing at the end of the narrative and at a historical moment when black women are denied a place in the dominant British history and black literary canon, is not only subversive but also becomes a tool through which she writes herself and other minority women to subjectivity. As a rhizomatic womb-space, Adah uses her writing to deconstruct old ideologies that relegate women to the background in order to reconstruct a new image for women. Her writing also serves as a locus of connection of different people, ideas, and ideologies. Her writing brings together people from diverse ethnic and national boundaries as they gather to read her novel. The quest to write and to effect a change through her writing is an idea that Adah conceives while in Nigeria. Thus, when she finally gives birth to this idea in London, it is not only one body that she gives birth to but multiple bodies comprising of both male and female, old and young, natives and immigrants who are reproduced as they come into contact with the voice of a woman speaking of her displacements, journeys, aspirations, desires, challenges, and determination to survive against all odds. Most importantly, she speaks of the need for change, especially in the ways that women are treated all over the world. In other words, her writing becomes subversive and deconstructive as she articulates new ways of being for women in particular. She also uses her writing to redefine what constitutes a Black British literature, which at the point of her writing was dominated by male authors as well as critique masculine ideologies. As Emecheta notes in her autobiography, *Head Above Water* about writing this novel, “when she finished it and read it all through, she knew she had no message with a capital “M” to tell the world, because it was full of scenes with sickly adolescent love sentiments” (Emecheta 1986, 164). By extension, in refusing to write a story with a capital “M,” Adah not only redefines Black British literature from a feminist perspective but also opens an alternative discourse to male-authored literature. Her story, as she notes, is all about “my social realities, my truths, my life in London” (Emecheta 1986, 64). By making her personal story a

public one, Emecheta contends that the personal cannot be divorced from political or historical realities as the personal is the political. This, as Bhabha (2004, 13) notes, is her unhomey moment—that moment “where ‘presencing’ begins because it captures something of the estranging sense of the relocation of the home and the world.” In other words, the unhomey moment bridges the gap between the domestic world and the public world as it makes issues of national discourse part of the domestic sphere and vice versa. In Adah’s case, her unhomey moment is manifested in her ability to make her personal life experiences a part of national discourse as she shares her experiences with the world.

In referring to her book as her brainchild, Adah demonstrates that women are not only capable of producing babies but also meaningful ideas that can change the world as well as create new nations. Adah’s equation of her writing with childbirth is also suggestive of the important position that writing occupies in her life, and those of black people, especially women—as it gives them a voice to speak as well as recreate their identities when other doors are closed. Similarly, just as a woman reproduces herself in childbirth, Adah is able to recreate or reproduce her image and those of other silenced groups through writing. As Kathleen Komar (1994, 105) notes, “the space of the literary text becomes a site of critical rethinking and often of female rebirth. The textual space allows women writers to create new psychological shapes that displace the hierarchical patriarchal structures in favour of relationship, community, and interiority. This new literary space author/izes women to throw a few new curves into contemporary culture.” Adah’s writing becomes a rhizomatic womb-space through which she conceives and brings to life new ideas and social relations.

In Andrea Levy’s *Small Island*, the protagonist, Hortense’s ability to reconstruct her identity as well as become a forceful feminine voice for the construction of a multicultural British society and nurturing of hybrid racial identity comes as a result of her migration to England. Hortense’s journey to England depicts not only the desire of many immigrants to travel to England but also her desire to build a home in England having been doubly displaced in Jamaica by virtue of her family background and her gender. Although she stands in-between two cultures and identities, Hortense has always identified herself with the European culture and ideals. She expresses her sense of unbelonging in Jamaica and as such anticipates building her home in England. As she states when Gilbert finally decides to marry her:

In the breath it took to exhale that one little word, England became my destiny. A dinning-table in a dinning room set with four chairs... The house is modest—nothing fancy, no show—the kitchen small but with everything I need to prepare meals... I walk to the shop where I am greeted with manners, “Good day,” politeness. “A fine day today,” and refinement. “I trust you are well? A red bus, a cold morning and daffodils blooming with the colours of the rainbow. (Levy 2004, 83)

Hortense sees England as her destiny and is determined to build her home in England. As she notes about arriving to England, “I determined then to make this place somewhere to live—if only for this short while. For England was my destiny” (Levy 2004, 187). However, as an immigrant, she is aware that she occupies the space of the margin and sees that as a space of resistance and power. It is from her marginal space that she begins to deconstruct the old existing social relations and history in order to produce a new one. By constantly questioning Gilbert if this is the way the English live, she makes reference to the demise of English culture and identity and also calls for its reevaluation in relation to other cultures and nations that have contributed to its growth but have not been recognized in the British national politics. As Gilbert notes, Hortense’s questioning of the English way of life becomes a refrain, a lamentation, and a constant reminder of her disappointment in the decay she sees in the once glorious British cultural heritage. Similarly, in the course of her interaction with Queenie, the archetypal figure of British nation and culture, one sees her moving from the marginal position to the center. She juxtaposes her Caribbean culture with those of the English people and she also questions Queenie’s acclaimed superiority by engaging in dialogue to negate her social position and the stereotypes that frame her identity. Contrary to Queenie’s claim that she is in a better position to instruct her, Hortense usurps this power from her by constantly questioning and juxtaposing her culture with the English culture that Queenie represents.

It is also from her position as the nurturer of a new nation that Hortense delivers Queenie of her baby. The birth of the child, therefore, provides Hortense the opportunity to bring to fore her true identity repressed by many years of internalized English manners and ideals. On the other hand, the child also becomes the arc that connects Hortense to different places and things. The child connects her to Queenie and the British cultural heritage and becomes the bridge that links the domestic space to the public. Thus, by delivering the baby and nurturing the biracial

child, Hortense helps in the building of a new multiracial society that the child symbolizes. Furthermore, she draws attention to the position of (black) women in the reconstruction, reframing, and re-narration of British historical narrative and identity. By performing these roles, Hortense silences and displaces Queenie, and other male characters in the novel to occupy a prime place in the rewriting of British history. She locks the men out of the feminine space (the “birth-place” where Queenie’s child is delivered) and in so doing becomes the voice through which both the delivery of Queenie’s biracial child and the underlying history is told. Thus, while Bernard and Gilbert are fighting over the custody of Gilbert’s rented room—a room associated with white births and British homogenous culture—Hortense and Queenie are creating an alternative space for a new birth of a nation and a people. The alternative birth-place is significant because it symbolizes rebirth, fluidity, multiracial, and multiethnic identities. In other words, this birth-place becomes a liminal space where identities are contested and renegotiated. It is at this birth-place (Queenie’s room) that Gilbert questions Bernard’s racial identity, superiority, and homogenous culture to contend for the need to work together to build and nurture a multiracial society that Queenie’s child symbolizes.

Hortense’s rhizomatic womb-space, therefore, becomes one that produces social bodies and social relations that are needed for the new nation. By being a site for reformation and reconstruction of social relations rather than one that gives birth to biological children, Hortense transcends the traditional gender roles that limit women to childbearing and child-rearing. In other words, by taking the responsibility of nurturing this new birth and the new nation that it symbolizes, Hortense bridges the gap between the domestic and the private spheres as she demonstrates that women can be actively engaged in the two spheres without compromising one or the other. This is also one of the interventions of this research to place women at different strata of the society as they chart a new course for themselves. In reconstructing her identity as a black woman and Queen’s biracial son, she envisions both of them living a golden life in London even when she is aware of the challenges that could undermine this dream. Regardless of these challenges, Hortense’s utmost desire is to define and create her own world and that of the child without undue interference from the man. She demonstrates this when she refuses to show Gilbert Queenie’s picture and the three hundred pounds (£300) that she finds strapped in the boy’s clothes. As she explains, she wants to keep this discovery a secret. By keeping this secret to herself, she seeks to separate herself from the patriarchal world to create a world of her own

that she is in full control of. In this, she refuses to be a man's appendage: a notion that women have been associated with as they are portrayed as lacking independence and as such depend on men for their various needs. As Hortense notes after her discovery of the money, "I had something in mind for them...I would put them to good use when they were required. Placing them in my bag, I determined to keep a secret of both the money and the photograph" (Levy 2004, 438). Opting to keep these secrets to herself, Hortense relies on her own instinct and knowledge in training the child and nurturing a new British society as opposed to depending on Gilbert's decision and directives.

In the rhizomatic womb-space that Hortense creates, she is able to deconstruct the myth of the wandering womb where women are confined to marriage and childbearing. Thus, in refusing to pay heed to Gilbert's instruction and in conceiving no child of her own, Hortense defies the patriarchal order in ancient Greek philosophy that sees pregnancy and childbirth as possible solutions to the wandering womb, and consequently, women's health and ideological problems. In this way, she becomes an agent of change rather than a passive or objectified being. In deconstructing this "myth," she makes a strong argument for women to transcend their traditional gender roles, as wives and mothers, to other viable ways of being. That she neither talks about pregnancy nor gives in to constant sex is a strong indication that, unlike the ancient Greek framing of the wandering womb, women are capable of conceiving different things in their bodies and as such, the role of women should not be confined to childbearing and child-rearing. In other words, it shows that women's roles in society are beyond pregnancy and child-rearing.

In Zadie Smith's *White Teeth*, Irie, the protagonist, shares a similar fate with immigrants in England even though she is a British citizen. Like immigrants, she is displaced in England because of her biracial identity. In this regard, she faces many initial challenges as English culture appeals to her more than Jamaican culture. But as the narrator explains, she embodies more Jamaican traits than English. More so, because she grows up in a society where English culture and civilization are seen as the ideal, she tends to neglect her Jamaican culture in her bid to assimilate with the English culture. In order for Irie to create her own identity, she must overcome her mixed-race identity problem. Throughout the narrative, Irie searches for different ways to resolve her identity crisis. Her discovery of her past history in the house of her maternal grandmother, Hortense, provides her the opportunity to claim her Jamaican identity and also to

explore the world in her quest to learn how things are done differently. Irie's discovery of her past marks the beginning of her journey towards reconstructing her identity and in writing a maternal history—a history that foregrounds the new multicultural British society and a new world order that she envisions. In reclaiming her past, Irie is able to resolve her identity crisis as she accepts her Jamaican cultural identity.

She had laid claim to the past—her version of the past—aggressively, as if retrieving misdirected mail. So this was where she came from. This all belonged to her, her birthright, like a pair of pearl earrings or a post office bond. X marks the spot, and Irie put an X on everything she found, collecting bits and pieces (birth certificates, maps, army reports, news articles) and storing them under the sofa, so that as if by osmosis the richness of them would pass through the fabric while she was sleeping and seep right into her. (Smith 2000, 331)

In laying claim to her past, Irie is able to resolve the tension arising from her bi-racial identity crisis. Her turning to her maternal roots is in relation to her quest to create a her-story since women have been displaced from the dominant history. Her discovery that there is a viable world outside of Britain is therapeutic as it gives her the opportunity to erase from her mind the negative ideas, which she acquired from her miseducation and association with mainstream white culture. As the narrator rhetorically asks, “Why bother when there was now this other place? For Jamaica appeared to Irie as if it were newly made. Like Columbus himself, just by discovering it she had brought it into existence” (Smith 2000, 332). By making these useful discoveries, Irie begins to explore and create a new world just like Columbus, who, in crossing the Atlantic Ocean, discovered the New World for his country.

Irie's return to the Caribbean Sea can be seen as a source of inspiration for her personal and collective growths. In other words, she sees the Caribbean Sea and possibly Africa as sources of inspiration at a moment when British society cannot provide her the mirror with which to see herself and the world around her. The British society that is portrayed is one that prides itself on homogeneity and, as such, refuses to wholly accept people of other cultures and nationalities, hence Irie's inability to see her image in the British mirror. In fact, as Irie tells her parents, the need to explore the world beyond British national identity and history—the need to embrace diversity as part of human life—is imperative in her construction of a new world that derives its strength on heterogeneity. Therefore, she sees Jamaica, as a fertile ground through

which new social relations can emerge and seeks to turn to it for inspiration. Irie's utmost desire is to create a new world that strives on openness and relationality rather than one of confinement as British society is portrayed. As she explains to her parents when she asks for their permission to spend a year off in the subcontinent and Africa, "I don't just *want* to have a year off. I *need* one. It's essential—I'm young, I want some experiences. I've lived in this bloody suburb all my life. Everyone's the same here. I want to go and see the people of the world...that's what Joshua's doing and *his* parents support him!... I just want to see how other people live!" (Smith 2000, 312-313). In desiring to learn from other cultures, Irie seeks to open a space for cross-cultural relationships. It is her contention that British culture has failed her and her generation with its continued hold on homogeneity rather than diversity and tolerance, hence the need to look elsewhere.

Irie considers her journey to Jamaica, therefore, as the "beginningest of beginnings"—a beginning of a new world after the apocalypse—the destruction of the physical world and the ideological world of reasoning that categorizes people based on racial, cultural, and national identities. Also, it signals an end of her dependence on Britain for inspiration as she seeks to connect to the world beyond her contemporary British society. In this regard, the journey to the Caribbean Sea also establishes a new phase in her life as she returns to her roots to learn from them. As Irie states, she imagines Africa in general and the Caribbean in particular, as a fertile ground where new identity formations can emerge from:

Where things sprang from the soil riotously and without supervision, and a young white captain could meet a young black girl with no complications, both of them fresh and untainted and without past or dictated future—a place where things simply were. No fiction, no myths, no lies, no tangled webs—this is how Irie imagined her homeland...And the particular magic of homeland, its particular spell over Irie was that it sounded like a beginning. The beginnings of beginnings. Like the first morning of Eden and the day after apocalypse. A blank page. (Smith 2000, 332)

When one sees Irie, her daughter, Hortense, her grandmother, and Joshua, by the Caribbean Sea at the end of the narrative, it is in fulfilment of her dream of exploring the world to gain the much-needed experience to create her new world—a world without complications, fresh, and untainted. In other words, she conceives a world where people are simply allowed to live without

undue interference with history. Thus, the new world that she envisions is one that takes into consideration other people's culture and also defies confinement. It is one that privileges openness, transcultural relationships, and multiple identities. Her vision of her homeland as a "blank page" where new forms of social and racial identities can be written informs Irie's construction of rhizomatic womb-space and it entails the destruction of old values that inhibit self-identity and the criss-crossing of many constructive cultural identities. In this regard, Irie's rhizomatic womb-space is ideological, physical, mental, and cultural.

Irie's unborn child symbolizes the new beginning that Irie envisions—not just in terms of the reconstruction of a new British identity but also in personal identity formation that is needed for the new nation that she conceives. She is "rhizomorphous" as she is an embodiment of different identities, genes, roots, and histories. By connecting to these multiple identities or traits, she breaks the old homogenous British culture that identifies and divides people based on their race or cultural and ethnic belongings. Biologically, she is the daughter of either Magid or Millat and Irie as Irie has sex with the twins within twenty-five minutes interval. In terms of root, she is Jamaican, English, and Bangladeshi and Jewish—by virtue of her connection to Joshua, her foster father. She is also a product of racial, colonial, British, and familial histories. In fact, as Peter Childs (2013, 223) explains, "in Irie's daughter all the families of the book are brought together, mixing British, Caribbean, Bangladeshi, and Jewish heritage." But as Irie anticipates, her child will not be pinned down to any of these complex identities and histories but will weave them together for her own good. This is because neither roots nor histories matter nor constitute an important trait to her identity formation.

The new post-racial British society that Irie nurtures in her rhizomatic womb-space, therefore, is one that derives its strength from personal identity and individual contribution rather than on historical past or roots. In constructing her rhizomatic womb-space, Irie contends that rather than homogeneity, fixed identity, and historical past contributing meaningfully to the present conditions or situations, they become a burden and a source of trauma. However, this does not mean that the past does not impact on the present or even the future. It does. Rather than depending on the past and histories, emphasis should be placed on the different connections and routes that shape individuals' identities. In this way, Irie urges people to move outside any fixed identity or determinism. Irie's unborn child, therefore, represents the new multicultural British identity that Irie and the other minority women envision. Having come this far, Irie envisions a

new British society, where questions of race do not play an important role in the construction of identity. Rather than race, the choices before the inhabitants of the new sociocultural milieu, as Marcus Chalfen identifies, are not “between a blue eye [English identity] and a brown eye [black identity], but between eyes that would be blind and those that might see” (Smith 2000, 437). The blinded eyes, in this context, refer to those that still uphold racial identities and inequalities. For them to create this new British society, Irie recommends that the old structure must be destroyed or reviewed to retain only the positive values.

In each of the novels under study, therefore, the rhizomatic womb-space is constructed in different ways depending on the position of the female character in her immediate environment and the nation at large. Put differently, the rhizomatic womb-space constructed by these women is used for different purposes depending on the challenges that they face and the new world or social relations they envision. Exploring the different ways in which these women employ their rhizomatic womb-spaces helps as it places them at different positions in the family and the nation at large and also shows that women are capable of living in multiple places as well as doing different things. Exploring these different contours also demonstrates that what is conceived or produced in the womb-space is not only biological children but also different ideas, ideologies, and social relations. Similarly, the children that these women nurture are those that can uphold the ethical values needed to build a healthy and accommodating new society where race, gender, class, and nationality are not the defining factors but one’s willingness to make changes and to contribute meaningfully to the development of the nation. Thus, as a metaphor, the rhizomatic womb-space stands for alterity, rupture, reformation, reconnection, mobility, nurturing, and rebirth.

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