

An Exploration of Queer Diasporic Subjectivities in Shani Mootoo's "Out on Main Street"

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Abstract. In view of the acute lack of analyses of Indian-Trinidadian queer diasporic subjectivities, this article will focus on Shani Mootoo's "Out on Main Street" by using a queer diasporic theoretical framework, one which hinges on unveiling the violent practices to which sexually and racially marginalized communities are exposed and on exploring the ways by which queer diasporic subjects subvert dominant assumptions. In order to carry out the analysis, I will, first, offer an overview of the uses and implications for invoking the concept of a queer diaspora to study Mootoo's story; second, I will scrutinize the manner in which the queer diasporic narrator is affected by exclusivist definitions of gender and national identities, and, third, I will examine the specific tactics through which she unsettles the normative logic. Ultimately, the study of Mootoo's story under a queer diasporic approach will offer a further insight into the diaspora experience, one which considers both sexuality and translocation as crucial factors shaping the way the narrator inhabits the city.

Keywords: Shani Mootoo; queer theory; diaspora; subjectivity; Cultural Studies.

[esp] Una exploración de la subjetividad queer y diaspórica en "Out on Main Street", de Shani Mootoo

Resumen. En este trabajo se estudiará el relato breve "Out on Main Street" (Shani Mootoo) a través de la aplicación de un marco teórico queer y diaspórico, que estará orientado a investigar la violencia a la que se exponen las personas con identidades sexuales y nacionales no normativas. Para llevar a cabo el análisis, se ofrecerá, en primer lugar, una descripción general de los usos e implicaciones del concepto de la «diáspora queer» en el relato de Mootoo; en segundo lugar, se analizará la manera en que la narradora se ve afectada por las definiciones exclusivistas de género y raza; por último, se examinarán las tácticas específicas a través de las que esta consigue desestabilizar y subvertir las ideas normativas y socialmente legitimadas. En última instancia, este trabajo proporcionará una visión más completa de la experiencia de la diáspora queer, puesto que tendrá en cuenta dos factores (las identidades nacionales y sexuales) que son cruciales a la hora de entender el modo en que la comunidad queer y diaspórica habita la ciudad.

Palabras clave: Shani Mootoo; teoría queer; diáspora; subjetividad; Estudios Culturales.

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1. Introduction

In an interview conducted by literary critic Pirbhai, Shani Mootoo, upon admitting that she is "angry with Trinidad for not taking care of its citizens who live alternative lifestyles" (2015: 230), expresses her desire to write stories that remind marginalized people of themselves, of their worlds. Precisely, her 1993 collection of short stories, *Out on Main Street*, constitutes a ground-breaking articulation of alternative lifestyles—i.e. of queer diasporic identities—, a portrayal which dares to tackle subjects otherwise deemed unspeakable or unnamable². Particularly relevant for a thorough understanding of the manner in which both sexuality and displacement shape the migrant's experience of diaspora is the title story "Out on Main Street". While numerous critics have examined this narrative in terms of the South Asian diaspora³, it remains to be fully articulated the ways in which heteronormative and

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² According to Alison Donnell, the fact that same-sex acts between women are still criminalized in some Caribbean territories has thwarted free expression of lesbian sexuality in both daily life and literature, creating a "no woman's land" (2007: 214).

³ See, for instance, Poole's "Cultural Bastards: Caribbean-Canadian Humor in Shani Mootoo's *Out on Main Street*" (2010), Schneider's "Challenging the Cultural Mosaic: Shani Mootoo's *Out on Main Street*" (2008) or Choudhuri's "Redefining Utopia: Negotiating Identities through the Diasporic Body in Shani Mootoo's *Out on Main Street* and *Sushila's Bhakti*" (2011).

queer sexualities interact with other aspects of the diasporic condition. Considering the acute lack of analyses of Indian-Trinidadian queer diasporic subjectivities, I deem it appropriate to study “Out on Main Street” using a queer diasporic theoretical framework, one which hinges on, on the one hand, unveiling the violent practices to which sexually and racially marginalized communities are exposed, and, on the other hand, exploring the ways by which queer diasporic subjects subvert dominant assumptions. Drawing on these preliminary notions, in this article, I will, first, offer an overview of the uses and implications for invoking the concept of a queer diaspora to study Mootoo’s story; second, I will scrutinize the manner in which the queer diasporic narrator is affected by exclusivist definitions of gender and national identities, and, third, I will examine the specific tactics through which she unsettles the normative logic. Ultimately, the study of Mootoo’s story under a queer diasporic approach will offer a further insight into the diaspora experience, one which considers both sexuality and translocation as crucial factors shaping the way the narrator inhabits the city.

2. Queering Diaspora: Recuperating the Unnamed Desires

Cultural critics Stuart Hall (1990: 235) and Gayatri Gopinath (2005: 68), among others, have drawn attention to two aspects which are paramount in the establishment of conventional nationalist and diasporic ideologies: first, nationalist projects are organized around exclusivist and absolutist notions of sexual, gender, linguistic, religious and national identities; second, traditional models of diaspora tend to reproduce the heteronormative and hegemonic assumptions purported by nationalisms. In light of this, it seems that the concept of a queer diaspora challenges such conventional nationalist and diasporic ideologies by considering queerness as a significant factor shaping the diaspora experience. Queer diasporic criticism thus works to dislodge the concept of diaspora from its traditional adherence and loyalty to dominant nationalist ideologies and, accordingly, “recuperate those desires, practices and subjectivities that are rendered impossible and unimaginable within conventional diasporic and nationalist imaginaries” (Gopinath 2005: 7). This long-established tradition of cultural studies, to which my essay is deeply indebted, restores the impure, inauthentic, nonreproductive potential to the notion of diaspora, thereby challenging the fictions of purity and essence that lie at the heart of dominant nationalist ideologies and also of conventional diasporic beliefs (Gopinath 2005: 10-11)⁴. The notion of queer diaspora, however, is not intended to function as an all-encompassing, totalizing concept, since, as Gopinath (2005), Walcott (2012) and Ferguson (2004) have respectively demonstrated, different diasporic communities perform queer diasporas in disparate ways, and to diverse ends, which amounts to the necessity of providing studies that provide exhaustive accounts of the different ways and objectives. Shani Mootoo’s “Out on Main Street” offers a valuable insight into the Indian-Trinidadian queer diasporic experience; a consideration of queerness in a South Asian diasporic context is therefore required.

In her monumental study of the queer diasporic experience in a South Asian context, Gopinath (2005: 11) categorically asserts that, within patriarchal diasporic and nationalist logic, “woman” and “lesbian” were configured as mutually exclusive categories and a threat to “Indianess”. Being a lesbian and a woman was not something to be ashamed of because it was not even thought about: it was unthinkable, unimaginable and unmentioned, which entailed that, virtually, it did not exist. According to political scientist and anthropologist Chatterjee, this is explained by the centrality that the figure of the “woman” received in the articulations of nation and diaspora (1989: 628)⁵. Indian nationalism relied on the exclusivist fictions of essence, purity and heteronormativity for the construction of its own nationalist ideologies—fictions which existed as a holdover from the region’s colonial past. In turn, such nationalist discourses were reproduced in the diaspora within the realm of public culture, through intersecting concepts of sexuality, gender, nationality and religion (Gopinath 2005: 17). Notably, during this process, the figure of the “woman”—constructed as a pure and immaculate sexual being—became the boundary marker of ethnic/racial community in the host nation, which entailed that “notions of chastity and sexual purity” in relation to second-generation daughters were representative not just of “the family’s reputation but also, in the context of diaspora, of the purity of tradition and ethnic identity, a defense against the promiscuity of ‘American influences’” (Maira 2012: 27)⁶. This being so, it was unthinkable that “woman”, the preserver and the symbol of a pure Indian identity, would endanger proper “Indianess” by loving a body that was supposed to be unloveable. Notwithstanding the fact that this phenomenon has been extensively documented by historians (cf. Greene 1996; Chatterjee 1993; Sharma 2006; Brown 2014), little attention has been paid to the manner in which queer diasporic subjectivities are produced through the criminalization and exclusion of particular bodies, practices and identities (i.e. Gopinath 2010)⁷. As a case study, in the following sections,

⁴ Notwithstanding the fact that I mostly employ Gopinath’s ground-breaking concepts on queer diaspora, other more recent critics (Fortier, 2004; Puar, 2005; Wesling, 2008; Sinfield, 2014) have also provided significant ways of looking at a topic that is nowadays receiving wide critical attention.

⁵ Chatterjee’s article «The Nation and its Women» (1993) is also relevant and useful, since it offers further insights into the functioning of this phenomenon from a historical perspective.

⁶ For a comprehensive understanding of this complex process, see Irene Gedalof’s *Against purity: Rethinking Identity with Indian and Western Feminisms* (2005).

⁷ Gopinath’s article “Archive, Affect, and the Everyday: Queer Diasporic Re-visions” (2010) constitutes one of the most illuminating accounts of the ways in which queer diasporic subjectivities are formed and developed in the face of personal and external challenges. Here we are shown how relevant the concept of the archive is in the configuration (and transformation) of queer diasporic identities.

and drawing on a queer diasporic approach, I will analyze the ways in which the subjectivity of the narrator of “Out on Main Street” is framed. And I will do so by, first, examining how exclusivist and mutually-constituted notions of gender, sexual and national identities produce an impact on the narrator, and, second, by identifying the specific tactics through which she challenges the logic of these dogmas. The examination of the framing of the narrative voice in Mootoo’s short story will ultimately provide an insight into the narrator’s subjectivity, that is, into the subjectivity of a queer diasporic woman.

3. The construction of queer diasporic subjectivities in Mootoo’s “Out on Main Street”

Nations or, to use Benedict Anderson’s terminology, “imagined political communities” construct their own understandings of the world, an understanding that form the core for shared assumptions about reality (2006: 6). Conventional nationalist scripts, which are endorsed and maintained by social actors in cultural consensus, rely on totalizing and exclusivist formulations of gender, sexual, and national identities; and precisely because of this reason, they fail to accommodate other identities, i.e. queer diasporic identities. What is more, insofar as such dominant notions are endowed with the status of peremptory norms involving the distinction between legitimate and illegitimate ways of living, queer diasporic individuals (and, in general, those individuals who do not follow the hegemonic notions of identity) are perceived and made to perceive themselves as failed and incompetent subjects, that is, as individuals who are not capable of reaching the imaginary meeting points that everyone else seems to be accessing. Such is the case of Mootoo’s unnamed narrator, a queer Indo-Trinidadian woman who, right from the beginning, reveals that she and her girlfriend, Janet, cannot go to Main Vancouver’s Main Street—the area known as Little India or Punjabi Market—as often as they would like to because, to begin with, they are “watered-down Indians” (Mootoo 1993: 205)⁸ and, to continue, because she looks “like a gender dey forget to classify” (Mootoo 1993: 209). Such retreating from a public space brings to light, first, that, as Menéndez Tarrazo (2009: 103) has explained, the urban space of Little India is “governed by complex power relations, and by dynamics of inclusion and exclusion derived from social processes of identity formation”, and, second, that the narrator’s movements within such space are constrained by the nationalist coordinates of cultural purity and heteronormativity⁹.

A closer examination of the reasons for not going out reveals the narrator’s feeling of ethnic inferiority as a “watered-down Indian” (Mootoo 1993: 205) who does not even know the proper names to order the Indian “meethai and sweetrice” (Mootoo 1993: 210) and who, albeit of brown skin, “doh even think ’bout India unless something happen over dere and it come on de news” (Mootoo 1993: 205). In a neighborhood inhabited by what the narrator calls “real flesh and blood Indian from India” (Mootoo 1993: 208), they are regarded and forced to regard themselves as “[not] good grade A Indians” (Mootoo 1993: 205), “kitchen Indians” (Mootoo 1993: 206) or “Indian-in-skin-colour-only” (Mootoo 1993: 212), that is, as personifications of a diluted, illegitimate Indianness. In fact, their presence and visibility in the public space of Little India is perceived as a potential threat to the Indo-Canadian identity rooted in this area (Menéndez Tarrazo 2009: 103). Remarkably, Mootoo’s story also sheds light on some of the “male-ordered strategies of confinement, inhibition” and marginalization through which, in the face of potential threat, social actors endeavor to safeguard the nationalist fiction of cultural purity (Mehta 2004: 192): ranging from disdainful looks and condescending attitudes¹⁰ to invisibilization¹¹ and the waiters’ reluctance to serve her in English¹², these subtle-but-effective tactics make the narrator intensely aware that she belongs nowhere, that she is an “in-between” or a liminal individual who does not fit into any of the normatively-enjoined ontological categories that are socially and culturally legitimated. As Menéndez Tarrazo (2009: 103) puts it, Mootoo’s story blatantly unveils “the problematics of accepting and embracing one’s identity as diasporic when faced with rejection from those *encountered* communities one would like to identify with”. The narrator’s ethnic identity situates her, both literally and psychologically, at the margins of the society she desires to be a part of, and, of course, this marginal position (the outsider) engenders in her ambivalent and difficult feelings that, once and again, she tries to understand.

Beside ethnic differences, differences of gender expression and sexual orientation constitute the second reason which prevents the narrator from going out to Main Street. As a lesbian, her gender and sexuality intersect with her ethnic origin, adding to her marginalization from an urban space which has been constructed as predominantly heteronormative and thus dependent on sets of binary oppositions which obviate in-between positionings along the gender and sexuality spectrums (Bondi 2005: 7)¹³. The narrator is well aware of the fact that she disrupts gender norms—i.e.

⁸ All quotations from Mootoo’s story are from *Out on Main Street & Other Stories* (Vancouver, 1993), to which the page references in the text refer.

⁹ Language constitutes another key factor which shapes the way Mootoo’s narrator inhabits the city; nonetheless, for reasons of scope, I will focus my analysis on the construction of her ethnic, sexual and gender identities.

¹⁰ “He start grinning broad broad like if he half-pitying, half-laughing at dis Indian-in-skin-colour-only” (Mootoo 1993: 212).

¹¹ “I stand up waiting by the glass case for it but the waiter/owner lean up on de back wall behind de counter watching me like he ain’t hear me. (...) ‘I would like to have one piece a meethai please,’ and den he smile and lift up his hands, palms open-out motioning across de vast expanse a glass case, and he say, ‘You choice! Whichever you want, Miss.’ But he still lean up against de back wall grinning” (Mootoo 1993: 212).

¹² “Dey insist on giving de answer in Hindi or Punjabi or Urdu or Gujarati. How I suppose to know de difference even! And den dey look at yuh disdainful disdainful—like yuh disloyal, like yuh is a traitor” (Mootoo 1993: 208).

¹³ I am here adhering to Bondi’s postulation that “cities are sites in which women and men routinely enact a variety of masculinities and femininities, [but] this diversity generally remains firmly bound within the dominant binary structure, which reduces differences to variations on a theme” (2005: 7).

“ideal dimorphism, heterosexual complementarity of bodies and ideals and rule of proper and improper masculinity and femininity” (Butler 1990: 23)—as she compares herself with Janet who, in her own words, resembles “a walking-talking shampoo ad”, thereby making the narrator, with her “crew cut” and her “blue jeans tuck inside” her “jim-boots”, “look like a gender dey forget to classify” (Mootoo 1993: 209). Mootoo’s narrator is painfully cognizant of people’s endeavor to fit her into the gender binary and of their ensuing disappointment at failing to do so: “And den is a whole other story when dey see me” (Mootoo 1993: 209). At this point, it is worthwhile noting that not only do gender norms establish what will and will not be considered intelligibly “human” and “real” (Butler 1990: 23), but they also function powerfully as a series of ideals presented as “needing to be defended against those who violate the conditions of its reproduction” (Ahmed 2004: 146). Consequently, in attempting to protect what is collectively imagined as “a sanitized space of sentimental feeling” (Berlant and Warner 1998: 552)—that is, as a virtual meeting place, the nation’s heritage—social actors systematically resort to a variety of forms of discrimination, some of which are portrayed in Mootoo’s story. Similar to what occurred with regards to her ethnic identity, the narrator is subjected to the scornful and incriminatory gaze¹⁴ of some passers-by as well as to various forms of otherization and invisibilization¹⁵. As the above-analysis unearths, not only is the narrator’s experience in Main Street shaped by the fiction of cultural purity, but it is also conditioned by another factor which has been disregarded by most critics, namely her dissident sexuality¹⁶. A queer diasporic framework allows for considering both factors as determinant in the way the narrator inhabits the city.

After having identified the narrator’s difficulties with her national and gender identities as a queer diasporic individual, now the focus of attention is on how she bears the weight of conventional nationalist scripts and to what effect; more specifically, I will analyze the disastrous consequences that heterosexism, homophobia and the notions of cultural authenticity have for someone who is “not properly anything”¹⁷, who does not fit into the categories already established for her. To begin with, one of the recurring sensations the narrator experiments is that of discomfort, which, according to professor Ahmed (2004: 155), entails “a lack of ease with the available scripts for living and loving”, and also “a feeling of disorientation” as “one’s body feels out of place, awkward, unsettled, estranged”. That she experiences a sense of discomfort with the normative scripts is suggested by her urge to “parade in front de mirror practising a jiggly-wiggly kind a walk” (Mootoo 1993: 209) before going out to Main Street. The narrator is permanently aware of her own bodily gestures and of what other people might be thinking of those; such fixation with the surface of her body is consistent with Ahmed affirmation that “the sense of out-of-place-ness and estrangement involves” being fully aware of one’s body, which appears as surface, “when one cannot inhabit the social skin, which is shaped by some [heteronormative] bodies, and not others” (2004: 148). A similar need to prepare or rehearse ensues “Before entering de restaurant”, as the narrator asks “Janet to wait one minute outside with me while I rumfle up mih memory, pulling out all de sweets names I know from home, besides burfi and gulub jamoon: meethai, jilebi, sweetrice, and ladhoo” (Mootoo 1993: 210). Once she feels “confident enough dat” she “wouldn’t make a fool” of her “Brown self by asking what dis one name? and what dat one name?” (Mootoo 1993: 210), they enter the restaurant. As can be quickly noticed, entering a public space where gender and national identities are being negotiated prompts a similar act of preparation—a ritual—on the narrator’s part. In both situations, the narrator’s impulse to rehearse beforehand, as if in an examination or a public performance, directly points at her severe lack of confidence (and discomfort) over the available scripts.

A different negative effect is that of assimilation, which, in the words of Ahmed (2004: 140), “involves a desire to approximate an ideal that one has already failed”. Aware of the fact that the public space she inhabits is tailored to the normative gender roles and sexual codes, the narrator feels, at some points, compelled to perform the gender role society expects of her as a woman (Tonkiss 2005: 94-95). This performance entails practicing “a jiggly-wiggly kind a walk” (Mootoo 1993: 209) in front of the mirror, tucking in her elbows close to her sides so as not to resemble “a strong man”¹⁸, and putting on her “femmet smile” when she tries to avoid confrontation with the waiter at the restaurant. Likewise, the narrator is induced to imitate the dynamics of the heterosexual coupling, thereby adhering to the preconceived notions about the subordinate role of women in the public space and assuming and displaying traits and attitudes traditionally associated with masculinity: for instance, she is overprotective and possessive of Janet when men look at her—“He crazy to mess with my woman, yes!” (Mootoo 1993: 217)—and she pressures Janet into altering her appearance so that men do not notice her—“I tell she I don’t know why she don’t cut off all

¹⁴ “De men dem does look at me like if dey is exactly what I need a taste of to cure me good and proper. I could see dey eyes watching Janet and me, dey face growing dark as dey imagining all kind a situation and position. And de women dem embarrass fuh so to watch me in mih eyes, like dey fraid I will jump up and try to kiss dem, or make pass at dem” (Mootoo 1993: 209).

¹⁵ “All six pair a eyes land up on she (...) a kind of irrational envy have a tendency to manifest in me. It was like I didn’t exist. (...) While I ain’t remotely interested in having a squeak of a flirtation with a man, it doh hurt a ego to have a man notice yuh once in a very long while” (Mootoo 1993: 211).

¹⁶ I have found two articles that consider both diaspora and queerness as essential phenomena shaping the writing of “Out on Main Street”. These are: “Diasporic Relationalities: Queer Affiliations in Shani Mootoo’s *Out on Main Street*” (Kini 2014) and “‘Courting Strangeness’: Queerness and Diaspora in *Out on Main Street* and *He Drown She in the Sea*” (Taylor 2011). And yet, these texts do not delve into the mechanisms by which these factors frame and code the narrator’s subjectivity.

¹⁷ In “Sushila’s Bhakti”, Mootoo’s narrator similarly feels that she is “not properly anything”, that she is a “rootless” and “floating” individual (Mootoo 1993: 60).

¹⁸ “I tuck mih elbows in as close to mih sides as I could so I wouldn’t look like a strong man next to she, and (...) I jiggle and wiggle in mih best imitation a some a dem gay fellas dat I see downtown Vancouver, de ones who more femme dan even Janet” (Mootoo 1993: 211).

dat long hair, and stop wearing lipstick and eyeliner” (Mootoo 1993: 217)¹⁹. In submitting to the gender roles one is supposed to fulfill in a heterosexual coupling, the narrator exhibits her yearning to identify her lesbian relationship as a heterosexual one, and this, in turn, reveals the narrator’s perception of the heterosexual coupling as the ideal mode of coupling. Following the reflections of Meyer and Dean (1998: 161), that numerous non-heteronormative subjects have heterosexuality as a dream or a goal is part of a deep “nostalgia for the ordinary, for politics free of compromise”, a longing to feel one’s body comfortably “sink into” a space that has already taken its shape. Of course, this longing is never fully realized, and the feelings of uneasiness and awkwardness conspicuously prevail in these spaces: the body cannot easily sink into a space that does not accommodate its needs.

The undesirable effect of assimilation that has been observed at the level of the narrator’s gender and sexual identities is also detected at the level of her ethnic identity. A climactic moment occurs when she is treated with scorn by the waiter serving her because, according to him, she misnames the traditional Indian sweets: it suddenly dawns on her that her mixed heritage makes her a “bastardized Indian”, and that “all a we in Trinidad is cultural bastards” (Mootoo 1993: 213). Against professor Brah’s assertion that diasporic identity is by definition plural, shifting and multi-locational (1996: 194), the narrator renounces “multiplicity and multi-locationality and wishes she could adopt a fixed, non-hyphenated, monolithic identity” (Menéndez Tarrazo 2009: 103): “I looking forward to de day I find out dat place inside me where I am nothing else but Trinidadian, whatever dat could turn out to be” (Mootoo 1993: 213). In this same vein, the narrator asserts that “I used to think I was a Hindu par excellence until I come up here and see real flesh and blood Indian from India” (Mootoo 1993: 208), which reveals that she does not consider herself to be a “real flesh and blood” Indian, but an unreal, unauthentic, impure Indian. As can be noticed, the narrator has interiorized the nationalist discourses of cultural purity and authenticity, and, on account of those, she has grown to regard herself as a failed individual—an impure, untrue, unreal, inauthentic subject. From this follows that assimilation not only implicates a desire to comply with what is culturally accepted as legitimate, but it also involves targeting the damaging social attitudes toward the self, that is, identifying with one’s designation as a failed subject (Ahmed 2004: 140). Having internalized the nationalist ideology that her mode of loving and living as a queer diasporic subject makes her a failed subject (a non-subject, one could say), the narrator aims her fury at her self: she accepts the exclusivist and dominant notions that she is a “cultural bastard” and a “gender dey forget to classify”, notions which engender a feeling of utter shame and guilt, and which make her react in the following ways: she retreats from the public space—“yuh know, sometimes I wonder if I ain’t mad enough to do it just for a little bachannal, nah!” (Mootoo 1993: 209)—; she masks her Trinidadian identity in order to “pass” for “grade A Indians” (205), and she enacts a straight—and thus a heteronormative—performance. Even while living in Canada, the narrator exemplifies professor Mehta’s claim that “Indo-Caribbean women find it difficult to free themselves from the haunting national and diasporic legacies of repression and invisibility” (2004: 192) and that a reconfiguration of “home” in terms of voluntary exile does not expunge one’s innate ethics, but actually amplifies them, since “diasporic communities like the Indo-Caribbean tend to maintain their cultural identity through migrating notions of gender-role conformity” (Mehta 2004: 209). By regarding the fictions of purity and heteronormativity as definite indicators of the invalidity of her national, sexual and gender identities, Mootoo’s narrator is indeed endorsing the same logic which otherwise excludes her.

In contrast to the previous instances where the narrator’s concern about the illegitimacy of her queer diasporic identity conduces her to masking it, at other times, she fiercely asserts her “true colors” (Mootoo 1993: 209), thus unsettling the normative logic of the urban space. For example, once in the restaurant, upon ordering some Indian sweets, she confronts the condescension and mock of one of the waiters who insists that she is using the wrong terms. On this occasion, not only does the waiter try to impose his own names of the Indian sweets, but he also endeavors to fit her into the binary category of “Miss”; the narrator, however, does not remain silent and submissive in the face of his attempts to define her, and strikes back by trying to impose her own Indian-Trinidadian names of the sweets and by redefining him as “Mr. Chum-chum”²⁰. As this hostile encounter discloses, naming provides power and the narrator is fighting for her own definitions as woman and as Indian-Trinidadian²¹. Equally relevant is the passage in which the narrator, upon realizing that one of the waiters is bothering Janet, shows no fears in displaying the gender expression she feels more at ease with: “I didn’t give Janet time fuh his intent to even register before I bulldoze in mih most un-femmet manner” (Mootoo 1993: 217). Still, just a moment before her putting on the “most un-femmet manner”, she had been displaying the “femmet smile” in order not to make the waiter suspect her queerness (Mootoo 1993: 217). As these instances show, the narrator is simultaneously uncomfortable and fiercely protective of her brownness in the same way as she is at once proud and wary of her crew-cut and non-heteronormative status. While declaring herself to be a “bastardized Indian”, she also embraces her own diasporic identity—““Yeh, well back home

¹⁹ Note that Janet’s response to the narrator’s demands is that of re-asserting her own autonomy: “Janet get vex with me and say I overreacting, and is not fuh me to be vex, but fuh she to be vex. Is she he insult, and she could take good enough care a sheself. (...) She get real vex and say dat nobody will tell she how to dress and how not to dress, not me and not any man” (217).

²⁰ ““One piece a meethai’ (...). ‘That is korma, Miss’. (...) ‘Where I come from we does call dat meethai’. (...) ‘And mih name ain’t Miss’. (...) ‘These are all meethai, Miss. Meethai is Sweets. Where are you from?’ I ignore his question and to show him I undaunted, I point to a round pink ball and say, ‘I’ll have one a dese sugarcakes too please’. (...) ‘That is called chum-chum, Miss’. I snap back at him, ‘Yeh, well back home we does call dat sugarcake, Mr. Chum-chum’” (Mootoo 1993: 212).

²¹ For a thorough and measured reflection about the importance of names, naming and identity in the context of postcolonial and diasporic territories, see Thomas Blom Hansen’s recent book *Wages of violence: Naming and identity in postcolonial Bombay*. Princeton University Press (2018).

we does call dat sugarcake” (Mootoo 1993: 212)—; by the same token, just as she complains about men not paying attention to her (Mootoo 1993: 211), the narrator also expresses her concern that her gender and sexual identities should be “over-exposed” (Mootoo 1993: 218).

This ambivalence—the fluctuation between asserting her mixed heritage and queer identity and concealing them—is subversive in its own right, since ambivalence entails a lack of definition and an impossibility of classification into the very categories one is coerced to comply with. Following De Certeau’s postulations, for those who are deemed impossible within hegemonic nationalist and diasporic discourses, this tactical proposition of an ambivalent self constitutes a weapon of everyday life through which to recompose the most fundamental places of resistance. Ambivalence, the cultural critic purports, consists of insinuating the queer diasporic self “into the other’s place, fragmentarily, without taking it over in its entirety, without being able to keep it at a distance” (De Certeau 1984: xix). The tactic of ambivalence hence depends on adopting “well-accepted attitudes” and, at the same time, introducing “subversions, deviations” (De Certeau 1984: 32). By that combination, ambivalent people, “without leaving the place where they have no choice but to live and which lay down its laws for them, establish within it a degree of plurality and creativity” (De Certeau 1984: 30)²². Accordingly, the ambivalence Mootoo’s narrator displays—this being neither here nor there, but somehow, through play, in both—becomes a highly subversive oppositional strategy on account of the potentiality that surfaces out of escaping the very ontological categories she is being forced into. By introducing this playful ambivalence into the foundations of power, i.e. in an official and public space²³, Mootoo’s narrator is indeed reconstructing the system she inhabits and proposing alternative modes of living in the city as a queer diasporic subject, modes which escape both the gender binary and the fiction of cultural purity. The narrator is ultimately destabilizing the rigid and normative boundaries of a static place and introducing a different logic and organization of such space (Gopinath 2005: 28).

4. Conclusion

In summary, in this article I have studied Shani Mootoo’s “Out on Main Street” using a queer diasporic framework, one which has involved, first, offering an overview of the implications of employing the concept of a queer diaspora to study Mootoo’s story, second, analyzing how mutually constitutive notions of gender, sexual and national identities produce a negative impact on the queer diasporic individual, and, third, scrutinizing the ambivalent proposition of self by which the narrator contests dominant assumptions. The use of a queer diasporic framework has allowed for a consideration of the ways in which both dislocation and sexuality shape the manner in which migrants experience their encounter with the host nation, an appreciation which, due to the general homophobia of the Caribbean territories and the taboos and restrictions around Indo-Caribbean women’s sexuality, was missing in much feminist and postcolonial scholarship on the South Asian diaspora. In addition, the exploration of queer diasporic practices has revealed an extremely complex picture of the intersection and collision of gender, sexual and national identities. Above all, a more comprehensive understanding of the manner in which queer diasporic individuals experience diaspora has been attained by reason of considering not only dislocation but also sexuality as theoretically significant factors shaping diasporic lives.

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²² De Certeau’s postulation of an “ambivalent self” is similar to Butler’s notion of gender ambivalence (1990: 22). Indeed, it is very appropriate to analyze the narrator’s gender expression in terms of Butler’s concept. The narrator uses gender ambivalently as a sort of weapon: when she desires to pass unnoticed, she adopts the normative gender roles; when she wants to defend Janet, she goes back to her true colors. Therefore, she uses gender as a cloak, as a piece of clothing she puts on or takes off for her own ends. In this manner, drawing on Butler’s terminology, she is “doing” and “undoing” gender, she is performing gender, never settling in any of the fixed scripts (1990: 28).

²³ The potential she raises for a different logic and organization of female desire (against totalizing notions) is enormous, since, as Susan Ruddick (1996: 135) has explained in her influential article, public space is not simply a passive showground for the display and exhibition of certain predetermined social behaviors but it is “an active medium through which new identities are created or contested”. And this very dynamicity opens the door for movement, that is, for different social performances.

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