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**“ALL WE NEED IS A PLACE TO BELONG”:
VISIONS OF LONDON IN CONTEMPORARY BRITISH
WOMEN’S POETRY**

Keywords: *alienation; displacement; dystopia; gynopoetics; London; metropolitanism*

Abstract: *For the latest generations of British poets known as the New Generation (1994), Next Generation (2004), and Next Generation 2014, London is the place of infinite possibilities that enhance mental versatility and emotional metamorphosis testing, contesting and ultimately attesting identity by blurring the boundaries of coherent individuality. This paper proposes an attempt to identify a gynocentric aesthetic orientation originating in urban selfhood by scrutinising several representative poems by Moniza Alvi, Patience Agbabi and Kate Tempest who advance alternative portrayals of the megalopolis in life stories of a generic homo urbanus (dis)located in London. The assimilation of the mega-city during the process of selfing forges a specific ethos interpreted through a variety of megalopolitan experiences among which one can distinguish Londonicity (the ability to conform to the metropolitan code), ventured Londonification (the endeavour to conquer the huge conurbation) and Londonimity (urban inadequacy, a tendency to display self-effacement). However, these poets’ urban psychogeography converges into a particular state of mind nurtured by their imaginary experience of London as assumed destiny, a way to shape and re-shape personal cultural codes, providing solid arguments in favour of a gynopoetics of the metropolis forged by the discursive strategies employed in the female-authored poetic texts.*

The notions of time and place mark the major strands of contemporary poetry written in the UK. The process of self-formation in poetry involves an inevitable sense of time and place as the ego needs to anchor and identify itself with a reference point, for to be located is to be bound by temporal and spatial presentness to a certain relevant moment and territory. Consequently, poets develop complex relationship with a place, whether real or imaginary, and poems arise as perfect acts of self-location, translated both as interest in geographic space and historic time, and concern with personal space and time. The poets’ attempts to locate identity in a geographic space and historical time are completed by what literary critic and theorist calls “self-situatedness” (Huk 12) within a personal space and time.

The vast majority of poets manifest a special attraction to the urban environment which opens great possibilities for spiritual development. To them, the urban place is the vast setting that concentrates most, if not all, human experiences and nurtures different identities since the metropolitan area is, by definition, a great opportunity. Its multiple facets mirror the fragmentation of identity and

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simultaneously allow the recombination of the “discontinuous self” (Huk 7) into harmonious alterity, thus establishing a sense of belonging, since the city is the ultimate place where the self gains a very specific identity.

The city is the vast setting that concentrates most, if not all, human experiences and nurtures different identities: the essence of personhood arises as a different mosaic of impressions, incorporated and further conveyed through language, the main means of interaction, the primary vehicle of articulating the self. Analysing urban culture in *Border Dialogues. Journeys in Postmodernity* (1990), Iain Chambers notes that “to inhabit a city is to be immersed in a common experience. . . . It is the chatter of the city that now maintains this site of discourse and dialogue” (Chambers 112).

London in particular is the place of infinite possibilities that enhance mental versatility and emotional metamorphosis, allowing simultaneous anonymity and simultaneous regeneration, placelessness and ubiquity that place the self on a border where all differences are erased. From this perspective, numerous British poets, especially women poets, scrutinise their relationship with the city governed by the strategy of self-liberation in narratives that generate almost endless significations of the self. Aware of the inimitable diversity of London, they venture in proposing a mosaic of highly personal imaginary accounts based on its multiple places of community and continuity, in a constant refusal of the stable self.

For the most recent generations of British poets, known as the New Generation (1994), Next Generation (2004), and Next Generation 2014, London is the place of infinite possibilities that enhance mental versatility and emotional metamorphosis testing, contesting and ultimately attesting identity by blurring the boundaries of coherent individuality in quest for symbolic outer selves and inner others. This paper proposes an attempt to identify a gynocentric aesthetic orientation originating in urban selfhood by scrutinising several representative poems by Moniza Alvi, Patience Agbabi and Kate Tempest who advance alternative utopian/dystopian portrayals of the megalopolis in life stories of a generic ‘homo urbanus’ – or rather ‘femina urbana’ – (dis)located in the multifarious place whose politics of freedom allows playful journeys between identity and alterity. Their poems appraise the never-ending effervescence of the idiosyncratic city that perpetuates a constant performance of likeness and difference in a truly metamodern manner, i.e. an “oscillation between a typically modern commitment and a markedly postmodern detachment”, ‘situated epistemologically *with* (post) modernism, ontologically *between* (post) modernism, and historically *beyond* (post) modernism”, according to cultural theorists Timotheus Vermeulen and Robin van den Akker.¹

With Alvi, Agbabi and Tempest, the assimilation of the mega-city during the process of selfing forges a specific ethos interpreted through a variety of megalopolitan experiences. Their poems capture London’s distinct synchronous dynamics, exploring the ambivalent relationship between the individual and the huge conurbation: commitment-attachment on the one hand, and inadaptation-displacement on the other. The multitude of megalopolitan experiences reconfigures both individual and collective philosophies and forges a specific terminology that reflects the various

¹ See Vermeulen, “Notes”.

positions of power in relation to the city, such as ‘Londonicity’, ‘Londonification’, ‘Londonimity’, etc.

In my opinion, ‘Londonicity’ is the ability to conform to the metropolitan code, i.e. the state or quality of being a Londoner (by birth) or becoming a Londoner (by adoption). Either inherent or acquired, this quality goes beyond simple existence into an unfeigned mutual relationship in which the city forges personality and vice-versa, the individual complies with its code of conduct or, if possible, shapes urban environment in turn.

‘Londonification’ is the ventured attempt to conquer the huge conurbation, the process of self-reformation within a multicultural space by adopting it and adapting to it. It is a tough ritual of survival demanding determination and flexibility to pass through different degrees of personal deconstruction and reconstruction by altering one’s original inner structure and creating an imaginary other.

‘Londonimity’ is the negative counterpart to ‘Londonicity’, i.e. the genuine Londoners’ loss of identity under internal and external pressure. The metropolis perceived as a “pervasive threat” (Hassan 35), a site whose indifference and cynicism erases human identity. The individuals are unable to conform to the megalopolitan norms and, at the same time, they acknowledge the impossible escape from the city’s oppressive control – thus admitting their inadequacy and, ultimately, their failure.

The first perspective is explicit with Moniza Alvi, whose “Story of a City” (published in her second collection, *A Bowl of Warm Air*, in 1996) alludes to inner frailty within the urban environment. It is a story mainly told in the first person, a dislodged Londoner whose insecurity is perceptible behind the sober economy of the short lines: “I live in one city,/but then it becomes another” (Alvi 1-2).

The divergence between the urban places points to the dual status of the uprooted. divided between the lost original home and the willingly chosen strange land. The imaginary is summoned to overcome this division and to provide meaning to the ego, thus recreating it into an ideal other: “The point where they mesh – I call it mine” (Alvi 3-4).

Merging two different spheres into a personal space of urban experience, creating a complicated web of meanings and interpretations attempting to unify the divided existence, the very condition of the immigrant. By claiming unexplored territories, both inwards and outwards, one may detect a paradoxical reciprocity, finely revealed by the French feminist Julia Kristeva in *Strangers to Ourselves* (1991):

Strangely, the foreigner lives within us: he is the hidden face of our identity, the space that wrecks our abode, the time in which understanding and affinity founder. By recognizing him within ourselves, we are spared detesting him in himself. A symptom that precisely turns “we” into a problem, perhaps makes it impossible, The foreigner comes in when the consciousness of my difference arises, and he disappears when we all acknowledge ourselves as foreigners, unamenable to bonds and communities. (Kristeva 1)

In real-life terms, the Kristevan “consciousness of difference” gives rise to an abysmal crisis of self-representation, phrased in a rhetoric of absolute outlandishness doubled by the incapacity of language to comprise all the meanings of the new experience. Alvi vocalises this dramatic dispossession in an apparently relaxed tone,

unveiling a bleak image of the dystopian environment, for “One of them is displaced” (Alvi 7). It is an aggressive metropolis, of domination and submission, conflict and discord. Duality deepens personal drama, for “In the double city the beggar’s cry/travels from one region to the next” (Alvi 16-17), prompting alertness and circumspection, since

Under sapphire skies
or muscular clouds
there are fluid streets
and solid streets.
On some it is safe to walk. (Alvi 18-22)

The sharp contrast between light and dark, between stable and unstable deepens the alienation of the self caught between two worlds, in an illusory quest for coherence, stability and safety. Contrasted with the serenity of the original homeland, the “muscular clouds” are an ambiguous allusion to both the typical insular weather and the Cameronian conservative doctrine of “muscular liberalism” that proposes the integration of ethnic and religious minorities in what the present Prime-Minister called a “warm comradeship between self and other” (“State Multiculturalism”).

The protagonist’s philosophical musings are interrupted by a real-life episode: a demonstration led by the Southall Black Sisters, an Asian women’s organization based in London, in support of Kiranjit Ahluwalia, an Indian woman who burnt her husband to death in 1989; initially sentenced to life, she was later released, after it was proved that she was a victim of domestic abuse. The public re-enactment of Ramayana, the Sanskrit masterpiece praising the sacred values of virtue, duty and simplicity, is aimed not at immediate action but at awakening individual conscience. The performance seems affect the structure of the already divided self, further fragmented by doubt and uncertainty:

I make discoveries and lose them
little by little.
My journey in the double city
starts beneath my feet.
You are here, says the arrow. (Alvi 35-39)

The dystopian nature of the “double city” that nurtures estrangement and dissolution of identity activates deeply concealed reserves of the individual tormented by the temporary landmarks and volatile timemarks. The only solution to reconcile parallel worlds and to recompose the self is to relate it to a reference point. Since to be located is to be bound by temporal and spatial presentness to a certain relevant moment and territory, the fictionalised versions of the self transmuted to identifiable locations configure a strategy of survival for the purpose of self-authorisation.

Patience Agbabi, a representative of the Next Generation (2004), advances the same alternative utopian/dystopian portrayal but her approach makes the transition towards fictionalising the metropolis in her strongly autobiographical poem “Ufo Woman (Pronounced Oofoe)”, published in her second collection, *Transformatrix* (2000). The unequivocal title clearly points at alienation and inadequacy, while the

colloquial style unveils a picaresque poem in which the alien self develops a journey destined to help it find coherence in time and space, beyond its own boundaries. However, the huge conurbation seems to plot against the protagonist's attempts to decode the urban signs of self-recognition, arising as a pure site of dissolution.

The first part of the poem is a series of sextets developing from short to elaborate elliptical sentences - "Mother Earth. Heath Row. Terminal 5. Yo!" (Agbabi 1) -, intertwined with answerless questions hinting at an inflexible authority whose actions, bordering indifference and cynicism, erase human identity, inducing a state of insecurity and anxiety. The system is derided and undermined by the biting ironic of questions, a protest against rigid power structures:

Do I look hip in my space-hopper-green
slingbacks, iridescent sky-blue-pink skin
pants and hologram hair cut? Can I have
my clothes back when you've finished with them, please? (Agbabi 2-5)

Mother Earth
do *you* read *me*? Why then stamp my passport
ALIEN at Heath Row? Did I come third
in the World Race? Does my iridescent
sky-blue-pink skin embarrass you, mother? (Agbabi 8-12)

Oppositional elements introduce London as an intriguing mixture of benevolence and rejection, innocence and animosity:

LONDON. Meandering the streets paved with
hopscotch and butterscotch, kids with crystal
cut ice-cream cones and tin-can eyes ask "Why
don't U F O back to your own planet?"
Streets paved with NF (no fun) graffiti
Nefertiti go home from the old days. (Agbabi 13-18)

London's candid nature suggested by "hopscotch and butterscotch", and "crystal cut ice-cream cones", turns evil in the anti-immigrant rhetoric encoded in harsh interrogations and categorical imperatives: "Why/don't U F O back to your own planet?" (Agbabi 15-16) and the "NF (no fun) graffiti/*Nefertiti go home*" (Agbabi 17-18). Like an urge to maintain racial and ethnic purity in a multicultural environment, they reveal the contemporary world's latent tendency towards violence in the sense of global as well as personal apocalypse. There is a suggestion that, if the union with the city eventually happens, it is an experience that should be rather avoided.

Being denied the privilege of anonymity granted by the huge English conurbation, the alien acknowledges an ontological progress, as the second part of the poem emphasizes the deep fracture in personality deliberate relocation within geographically recognisable coordinates: Sussex, "the crazy crazy cow pat" (Agbabi 21). The rapid succession of sentences measures the rhythm of a relentless, frantic life consuming the individual embarked upon a mad race to an illusory destination:

Perhaps my antennae plaits in winter
 naked twigs cocooned in thread for bigger
 better hair make them dare to ask to touch.
 “Can we touch your hair?” Or not ask at all;
 my two-tone hand with its translucent palm,
 life line, heart line, head line, children, journeys (Agbabi 25-30)

The issue of colour, however, raises the question of being different – and again, questions without answers – “*Why’s it white on the inside/of your hand? ‘Do you wash? Does it wash off?’*” (Agbabi 31-32) – point to the impossible absorption into normality. And again, Agbabi exposes the incapacity to understand the intricate hybrid nature of identity. To her, identity is always at a crossroads of nation, race, gender, sexuality and class; under the pressure of personal and collective history, no one has the privilege to be absolutely pure. Thus, history – or, in Agbabi’s interpretation, “HERSTORY”, i.e. “a symmetrical tree/which has identical roots and branches” (Agbabi 44-45) – is no longer an impersonal chain of events as private stories become the central vehicle in the movement from oneness to otherness, in simultaneous identification and dis-identification, a process by which re-identification occurs. Common sense dissipates in favour of emotion that gives coherence to the individual, as an ultimate form of empowerment: “I can no longer reason, only feel/not aloneness but oneness” (Agbabi 46-47).

The power of the word gives the power of the self and the ego is able to attain power by learning how to use rhetoric effectively in order to acquire self-autonomy. Personal discourse accommodates debates about memory and existential timeframes for the better understanding of the present since verbalising the past allows analogies and correspondences with the present and anticipates the future. To foresee its future, the imaginary “I” assumes an explorer’s destiny, travelling back to “Motherland”, again a recognisable geographic place (Lagos, the most populous city in Nigeria). The third part of her-story records the return to the original home towards which the persona directs her hopes of achieving harmony by externalising sameness and subsequently internalising otherness on “streets paved with gold-threaded gold-extensioned/women and silk-suited men; market-stalls/of red, orange, yellow and indigo” (Agbabi 53-55).

But the “spectrum of life” (Agbabi 57) is not the place to provide a secure sense of belonging; on the contrary, the bright, dense colours are in sharp contrast with our protagonist’s “bold wide” complexion, drawing explicit boundaries around the individual who is perceived as blatantly dissimilar in “the way I wear my skin, too uptight,/ too did-I-wear-the-right-outfit-today,/ too I-just-got-off-the-last-London-flight” (Agbabi 58-50) and “my shy intergalactic lingo/my monospeak, my verbal vertigo” (Agbabi 51-52). Distinguished by a strong sense of being other, the individual seems to be the perfect illustration of Kristeva’s definition of a foreigner: “The one who does not belong to the group, who is not “*one of them*”, the *other*” (Kristeva 95). With Agbabi, the self is the UFO, i.e. the unfamiliar, the foreign, the outsider, the unusual, the freak, the odd. Acknowledging her incapacity to adapt herself to an identifiable geography, she finds refuge in a personally-created space: “I

withdraw/into myself, no psychedelic shield,/no chameleonic facade, just raw” (Agbabi 66-68).

The fourth (and last) part of the poem suggests a different kind of identification in a highly private universe, where all differences are erased and identity can be perpetually re-created. Agbabi proposes a self that accepts its rootlessness and allows identification in abstractions rather than in the concrete attachment to time and space, postponing the plenitude of the desired but alien Shangri-La that is, however, envisioned in a distant future: “Their world may be a place worth fighting for/I suggest in the next millennium” (Agbabi 75-76). Thus, she creates an identity of infinite options, a self that assumes the right to be different under any circumstance, in a constant movement upwards “searching for that perfect destination” (Agbabi 82).

Appealing to this complex and complete relationship with place, Kate Tempest inscribes *Brand New Ancients*, her epic published in 2013 that won her the Ted Hughes Award for innovation in poetry, in one of the latest trends in contemporary poetry: myth-revisioning. Starting from the Blakean assumption according to which “All deities reside in the human breast”, which she uses as a motto, the poet reshapes ancient mythology in her anti-heroic story about genuine misfits and their crisis of self-representation. Characters from the primordial fictions of humanity (Dionysus, Medea, Pandora) turn into common South-East Londoners with ordinary lives: the main heroes, Clive, a rebel without a cause, and his half-brother, Tommy (Spider), an artist, their parents (Mary and Brian, Jane and Kevin), and Gloria, Tommy’s girlfriend. All these characters are “brand new” destinies, like a promise of a fresh, innocent beginning. They take turns in assuming a central position both in the story and in their own lives, and expose irreconcilable oppositions justified by personal emptiness doubled by “the empty skies” (Tempest 13) of the city. Their acute feeling of inadequacy and desperate need to belong require dissenting strategies and forms of communication that challenge narrow conventions and inflexible formalism in an energetic continuous flow of the story.

Tempest is fully involved in harsh reality, painting a somber picture of the common people and their ordinary lives in South East London where everything seems subdued to the indifference of the residents who have turned into emotionally rigid human automatons: “That face on the street you walk past without looking at,/or that face on the street that walks past you without/looking back” (Tempest 21-22) – all of them “Millions of characters,/each with their own epic narratives” (Tempest 27-28). These dislocated selves trapped in their private spaces seem to discard human presence not only as otherness but also as individuality, acknowledging the impossibility to transgress their personal border to honest emotions and unrestrained feelings, since “it’s hard to be an angel/until you’ve been a demon” (Tempest 29-30). It is the same crisis of identity vocalised by Alvi and Agbabi: the drama of the dispossessed and their need to find “a place to belong” (Tempest 35) and to establish a natural connection with familiar things, objects and persons that give power and meaning to one’s life through their very existence.

Greatly observant and sensitive, Tempest is an angry denouncer of injustice, pleading the cause of the marginal and the vulnerable. Her depiction of the specific cultural and spiritual individualism of Peckham and Lewisham is realistic, yet the picture is romantic owing to the deep sensitiveness of the poet, animated by generous

humanism and a high sense of responsibility. Her occasional descriptions of a dark London periodically subordinate the other elements of the narrative, anticipating the turning points in personal history, as a reminder of human vulnerability before unknown fate. Even though the ancient times of heroic deeds are long gone, individuals still need a code of conduct to help their spirit survive:

There may be no monsters to kill,
no dragons' teeth left for the sowing,
but what there is, is the flowing
of rain down the gutters,
what there is is the muttering nutters. (Tempest 42-46)

The "rain down the gutters" (Tempest 45) hinting at the residues of the destinies broken by the merciless metropolis, is reminiscent of Oscar Wilde's bleak reflection alluding to the pervasive feeling of breakdown and desperation: "We are all in the gutter, but some of us are looking at the stars" (Wilde 172). Tempest is a skillful manipulator of gloomy emotions, her intensity of vision and rap rhythm articulating a crude drama of tough neighbourhood heroes animated by a sense of failure and personal wrong:

Well, working out right from wrong is never easy
when there ain't no morals,
when there ain't no justice;
when everything's weighed on the scales of profit,
it can be hard for a young man to grow up honest. (Tempest 246-250)

Tempest's London is a dark territory of violence and infidelity, sacrifice and love, where dwellers struggle to survive according to their own elementary laws of continuity. Yet, they attract immediate sympathy for their earnest feelings, for their refusal to compromise and fit into regular patterns. The poetic tone compassionately resonates with their shades of character, disorder of reason and defiance of conformity. Their moral crisis acquires a deep human quality with Tempest who openly declares:

I want humanity.
I don't want this vacuous cavity
ripping the bowels out of our capacity
for quietly excellent acts.
Small heroics. Everyday epics. (Tempest 740-744)

Appraising the never-ending effervescence of the idiosyncratic South-East London that perpetuates a constant play of identity, Tempest's vision provides the uprooted, strangers in their own land, with a sense of personal and cosmic infinity in the nightmare city "thick with bodies", "shadows and rain", where everyone seems to go nowhere. Frightening but very much alive, a place she knows well as she grew up and still lives there because "It's beautiful and full-on and filled with magical stuff

that happens every day”, as the poet confesses in an interview with Katherine Leedale (“Kate Tempest Interview”).

As seen from these three representative examples, contemporary British women poets reject universals in favour of particulars that assign meaning to highly individual alternatives, moving from history as the chronological sequence of significant facts and events considered together, towards personal universes that alter spatial and temporal identification, authorising self-location in an imaginary locus and chronology. The replacement of the general with the particular esteems the policy of personhood, as the individual achieves a special status, guaranteed in its recognition by otherness.

Aware of the inimitable diversity of London, contemporary British women poets venture in proposing a mosaic of highly personal imaginary accounts based on its multiple places of community and continuity. They explore the complex relationship between the individual and the huge conurbation in a variety of discourses and ideologies, from introspective and highly romantic stories to intense parables and affective mythologies. Their urban psychogeography generates a particular state of mind nurtured by their personal and imaginary experience of London as assumed destiny, a way to shape and re-shape personal cultural codes. It provides solid arguments in favour of a gynopoetics of the metropolis that reflects the dynamics of self-creation within the identifiable geographic space and chronological time of London.

Forged by the imaginary variations on the rhythms and pulses of the megalopolis, the discursive strategies employed in the female-authored poetic texts are centred upon several distinctive features.

The first is metropolitanism, a marked preference for the urban environment. Even though they perceive it as terrifying, a dystopian universe that nurtures estrangement and dissolution of identity, poets dedicate numerous odes to London, either directly or obliquely attracted to its charm. As seen from the above poems, they highlight different sides of the relationship between the individual and the metropolis: the need to find a spiritual home, the impossibility to anchor the self and the burden of an inimical domestic space, which leads to various shades of disappointment – temperate/critical/compliant – expressed in an inner-oriented, meditative or an expansive, unreserved tone.

One could also detect alienation, an antisocial approach, ranging from moderate (with Moniza Alvi) to highly intense (with Patience Agbabi), which could be explained by the colonial roots of the authors (Alvi was born in Pakistan and grew up in England, while Agbabi was born in London to Nigerian parents), and half-way between energetic and sympathetic (with Kate Tempest), explained by her English heritage. Consequently, their attitudes range from optimistic hope for integration (Alvi) to relocation to an unnamed and unnameable place (Agbabi), and confinement to an inescapable destiny (Tempest).

One last feature that these poets have in common is their subjective idealism, since each poet’s own reality and personal universe revised by highly individual cultural, temporal and spatial localisation. Approaching the issue of affiliation and uprootedness, quite often women poets invent utterly quintessential outsiders who test the borders of imagination, charting complex and complicated personal maps whose

sinuous roads and many crossroads point to the protean condition of the individual who is always in search for the “perfect destination”.

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