



NARRATING LIFE, WRITING IDENTITY: READING ESTHER MARY LYONS' AUTOBIOGRAPHY *BITTER SWEET TRUTH*

Shyamasri Maji

ABSTRACT

The hybrid racial origin of Anglo-Indians often complicates their 'identity'. This article examines Esther Mary Lyons' (b. 1940) autobiography, Bitter Sweet Truth: Recollections of an Anglo-Indian Born During the Last Years of the British Raj (2001), highlighting the complexities in the identity of an Anglo-Indian woman who was born in India in 1940 and then lived in Australia from 1981. The book deals mainly with a daughter's search for her absent father in order to legitimise her identity in the broader Indian society and also within Anglo-Indian circles. In the narrative an overt rejection of patriarchal sentiment can be noticed when Esther chooses to be a single parent and sets forth to explore her identity as an individual in the Anglo-Indian diasporic space of Australia. This article aims to study critically this Anglo-Indian woman's search for her identity at different phases of her life as described in her autobiography. It traces the gender dimensions associated with her mixed racial origins, in her search for her own self.

INTRODUCTION

Esther Mary Lyons' autobiography, *Bitter Sweet Truth: Recollections of an Anglo-Indian Born During the Last Years of the British Raj* (2001), offers us an insight into the problematics of being a racially hybrid female in an environment of class, caste and racial prejudice. This article is divided into two sections: The first section deals with her search for her father, who deserted the family in 1946. The second section analyses her search for individuality beyond the conventional domains of feminine identity such as wife, daughter-in-law, mother and Anglo-Indian woman. In India, the lack of legitimate paternal identity can damage one's social prestige and be a serious

impediment to forming a respectable social identity. Lyons wanted to reclaim her paternal affinity in order to restore her social respectability. In narrating her personal experiences of being born out of wedlock to an Indian mother and an American father, she situates herself and her broken family in the broader constellation of Anglo-Indian community life which includes the Anglo-Indian households, railway colonies, convent schools and churches. Since paternal lineage is crucial to the construction of Anglo-Indian identity¹ in India and paternal recognition is considered obligatory for obtaining social acceptability by friends, relative and acquaintances she became desperate to ascertain her paternal identity. Although she succeeds in meeting her father in the U.S., she discovers that her struggles for reclaiming her identity and individuality are not so easily resolved. After she marries Major Naresh Chauhan, a Punjabi army man, she finds herself in a situation where her individuality and Anglo-Indian womanhood is severely questioned by her husband and her in-laws. It is at this juncture that her focus shifts from obtaining family identity—first through the search for her father and then her entry into married life—to a quest of her own identity as an individual. The experience of marriage constituted the turning point between the crisis of paternal affinity from which she had suffered since her childhood and the crisis of individuality that she encountered as an Anglo-Indian woman married into a Punjabi Hindu family.

Having encountered impediments to develop 'the self' in both contexts, she decides to begin a fresh chapter in her life she decides to begin a fresh chapter of her life. During this phase of her life, she realises that one can go beyond the complications of filial and marital bonds by seeking individuality in the professional sphere. She understood that she needed economic stability in order to take decisions about her personal and professional choices. While working towards economic independence, she realises the insignificance of paternal affiliation and she rejects overtly the patriarchal order by deviating from the behavioural norms of a wife. Her gradual initiation into single motherhood and her decision to migrate to Australia constitute an important turning point in her life. Living with her aged mother and her children without any male 'protector' is a unique experience for her. In the following sections, I have tried to capture the changing contours of her struggle through the critical lens of postcolonialism.

SECTION I - SEARCH FOR PATERNAL AFFINITY

An individual's identity is defined on the basis of his or her differences and similarities with others in respect of certain categories such as race, nationality, gender, class, social status and profession. In discussing the autobiographical work by an Anglo-Indian woman such as Esther Mary Lyons, these categories of identification both coalesce and collide in delineating Esther's identity. This is because the problems related to her racial-cultural identity differ from the identities of women belonging to other South Asian communities. The fact that Lyons' birth had been a consequence of a liaison between an American priest and an Indian nun makes her social status markedly different from Anglo-Indians who were the legitimate offspring of marriages solemnised by the Church. The issue of race probes the problematics of her community identity. The liaison between her parents underlines the complexities in her personal identity. In this section, I will examine these complications by analysing the contexts in which Lyons' discourse on identity is set.

The subtitle of Lyons' autobiography, "Recollections of an Anglo-Indian Born During the Last Years of the British Raj," foregrounds a particular period in history as well as the individual identity of Esther as belonging to the Anglo-Indian community. Her gesture of historicising her community identity urges the reader to look at the interracial union between her parents as a consequence of the colonial encounter, which in its early phase had led to the formation of the Anglo-Indian community. Here, the reference conveys a deliberate effort on the part of Esther to assert herself as an Anglo-Indian. The question that arises in response to such an observation is, what might be the possible reason behind such an assertion? If one considers the idea that identity (both personal and collective) is "constituted in and through culture" (Brah, 1996, p. 21) then it has to be kept in mind that Lyons was not born into an Anglo-Indian family. There is a difference between being born as an Anglo-Indian and being born into an Anglo-Indian family. Construction of identity needs both filial and cultural orientations. Whereas in the latter situation the individual is initiated into the cultural rites of the community from the very beginning, in the former situation, where the individual is representing a first generation Anglo-Indian in the family circle, she may not always have an acquaintance with the cultural practices of the community. The difference shows that racial identity, or even legal identity, does not

provide an individual the consciousness of collective identity. Rather, claims to identity need evidence and justification, and to be experienced.

The issue of paternal affinity is associated with some sort of a plea for justifying one's filial bond with a particular family. The structure of Lyons' narrative is built on the edifice of this particular plea. In order to explore her autobiography as a text justifying her filial bond with the family of Rev. Michael DeLisle Lyons, her father, the narrative's structure is discussed under the following headings: 'Family tree,' 'Parental situation,' 'Finding out her father's address' and 'After meeting her father'.

Family Tree

A family tree or genealogy authenticates one's belonging to a particular cultural and ethnic group. In her autobiography, Esther Lyons has used her family tree to trace her paternal roots, which may express her anxiety to represent herself in a patriarchal society. Her narrative begins in 1922 in Detroit, USA, with her recollection of the economic condition of her paternal grandparents, Michael Patrick Lyons and Bertha Ida. While Patrick Lyons, son of a blind broom maker in Ohio, was of Irish descent, Bertha was the descendant of an affluent French family. They had six children and Michel DeLisle Lyons was their eldest son. Esther may have chosen to begin the narrative at this time because her father set out for India in 1922. The first paragraph of the book expresses her grandfather's reaction to hearing about her father's decision to become a Jesuit missionary: "Michael was shocked when their eldest son, Michael DeLisle, spoke of his desire to join the Jesuits as a missionary" (Lyons, 2001, p. 9). Esther tells us that he had to accept his son's decision because he was out of job at that time and it was very difficult for him to support his family (Lyons, 2001, p. 9).

The first chapter presents the family's lineage, economic condition and attitude towards religious ideals. It also narrates her father's experiences as a missionary in India through a series of blurred, overlapping images in which details are not given. It presents a mere skeleton in the book; the details are fleshed out gradually in the succeeding chapters. By presenting a description of her paternal family, she places emphasis on her biological roots at the very beginning of her book. References to her

genealogy acts as a fitting preface to the succeeding chapters in which she confirms filial ties with Rev. Michael DeLisle Lyons.

The genealogical chart complements the family album, which she presents as a part of her narrative. To Esther, as one belonging to a first generation Anglo-Indian, paternal lineage was crucial for establishing her community identity as well as the legitimacy of her personal identity. In her autobiography, the search for collective (community) identity overlaps with the search for personal identity. Inclusion of elaborate genealogical charts (Lyons, 2001, p. 393-402) exhibit her research in to the family's history and strengthens her claim on the legacy of Francis Bienvenu Dit Delisle, the French ancestor, who had migrated to Detroit from France in the first decade of the 18th century and "was amongst the first French pioneers who helped establish French settlement around River Detroit" (Lyons, 2001, p. 388). Through the family tree given in her book, her paternal relatives, the descendants of Francis Bienvenu in Paris and America, had come to know about her. Lyons tells us that she has been in touch with all her relatives—cousins, nephews, nieces and grandchildren—on "America Online and Instant Messenger" (Lyons, 2001, p. 388). She explains her relationship with each one with reference to the genealogy presented in the family tree (Lyons, 2001, p. 393-p.402). She also met most of them in person.

She considers it unfortunate that she could not learn anything about her mother's parents in India because the orphanage where her mother was brought up did not keep any record of her parents (Lyons, 2001, p. 389). In the chapter "My Mother's Story", however, she describes what she had come to know from her mother about her childhood. Her mother, Agnes, was born in Latonah (a village in the Bhagalpur district of Bihar) to Elizabeth and Keilu Julius Didacus. While Keilu, "a fair skinned boy with blue eyes and red hair" (Lyons, 2001, p. 167), was an orphan, Elizabeth was "a Muslim convert" (Lyons, 2001, p. 167). Agnes was born in 1912. She looked after the cattle of other people in order to support her family and attended the church primary school in her spare time. At the age of nine, she was "taken by the foreign Bettiah nuns for further education and as a future candidate for an Indian nun" (Lyons, 2001, p. 168). She was granted the Middle Class Teachers' Training

Certificate by the German Loretto nuns, after which she joined the Sacred Heart convent as an Indian nun in 1934 (Lyons, 2001, p. 169).

Parental Situation

In colonial India, the centres of religious vocation such as the churches and convents had become loci of interaction between men (priests) and native women (Indian nuns). Sometimes, the interaction developed into romantic and sexual liaisons as had been the case with Father Michael DeLisle Lyons and Agnes Shah (Didacus), Esther's mother, who was known as Sister Cecilia in the convent. Lyons wrote that her mother had to terminate several other pregnancies with Father Michael and that it was on her friend Natasha's advice that she had decided to give birth to Esther in 1940. Natasha, an Indian Christian (of previously Brahmin converts), had joined the convent to become a nun but she left the institution with Agnes when the latter's pregnancy was revealed to authorities and the other sisters. Natasha convinced Michael DeLisle Lyons to establish a household with Agnes so that she could avoid social disgrace and their children could have some sort of a 'home' which many Anglo-Indian children with a similar parental situation were deprived of during that period.² Natasha did not imagine that the situation would be temporary and that after a few years, prior to Independence, Michael DeLisle Lyons would leave India and never come back to take care of Agnes and their two daughters. Esther claims that as long as he lived with them and looked after the family expenses, their paternity would not be directly criticised in the social environment. When it was confirmed by his prolonged absence that he had forsaken his family, then the issue of paternal recognition emerged as a serious matter for Esther and her sister. Absence of a male protector rendered them illegitimate children.

Since the social identity of an individual was constructed on the basis of paternal lineage, the absence of the father or lack of recognition from him brought disgrace upon the family. The worst consequence of this patriarchal convention is that one who faces criticism or humiliation has no power over his or her legitimacy. In Lyons' narrative, Father Evans, another priest, who had been very supportive of Agnes, had advised her to introduce herself as 'Mrs. Anthony, a widow' (Lyons, 2001, p. 86). Although 'Mrs. Anthony' was a fictitious name, Agnes adopted it in order to establish herself as a married woman and to legitimize the paternal identity of her two

daughters. To complete this process of acquiring false paternal recognition, the surname of her daughters was changed from Shah to Anthony (Lyons, 2001, p. 86).

Unlike her mother, Lyons was not ready to live with the false identity because it could not change the fact of her scandalous birth. The early part of the narrative in which Esther summarizes her childhood is packed with descriptions of humiliating experiences. An incident that had particularly distressed her was when the Mother Superior of her school told her that due to her scandalous/illegitimate birth she could not join a convent as a nun (Lyons, 2001, p. 180). The realisation that she was disowned by the Church was so painful that she became determined to find her father. Esther's desperate efforts included seeking her baptism certificate to confirm her paternal surname in the court of law in India, and travelling to the United States to meet her father. After leaving India, her father had made no contact with his family in India. The family did not even have his address. There were a few old photographs which documented her childhood experiences with Michael De Lisle Lyons. One of these photographs, she tells us, was taken by her father, which communicates that at one time he was affectionate and dutiful towards his daughters and his partner (Lyons, 2001, pic. 3, Illustrations between pages 150-151). Publication of the photographs from the old family album in her book is a strong means of connecting herself with her father and to bring this once hidden truth to the public domain. The photographs provided her with a sense of belonging to the Lyons family, which is a determining factor in the establishment of identity.

Finding her Father's Address

Esther discovered the address of Mrs. Emma Trombley, wife of her father's brother Frank in the United States, and then corresponded regularly with her. She addresses Mrs. Trombley as Aunt Emma, which reveals her effort to emphasize her filial tie with the Lyons family. Her rapport with this aunt had enabled her to meet her father's relatives in Ohio and finally to find out her father's whereabouts in Denver. Her dream of going to the United States was realised when she qualified as a participant in a programme called "Experiment in International Living," the aim of which was to present Indian culture to other countries. Being the only Anglo-Indian participant in the group of representatives, she was reminded time and again by the organisers that she should be conscious always to uphold the cultural distinctiveness of India.

Those reminders had aggravated her feeling of cultural alienation as one belonging to the minuscule community in which women wore “dresses” instead of *sarees* and followed a mostly western lifestyle (Lyons, 2001, p. 243). This experience not only reveals her compromise with the homogenizing tendency in cultural representations of the Indian nation but it also challenges the idea of ‘cultural diversity’ about which India boasts.

While her Anglo-Indian identity had triggered doubts in the minds of the organisers as to whether or not she would be able to represent India’s culture abroad, in America Mrs. Trombley had a different idea about her physical appearance. The fact that Mrs. Trombley nurtured a stereotyped notion about Indians becomes evident in the following observation made by Esther: “On the way home she told me she was surprised at my being so fair, because most Indians were dark-skinned like Afro-Americans and had a particularly strong unpleasant smell” (Lyons, 2001, p. 249). She had come to know from Mrs. Trombley that her father’s relatives had refused to meet her because they had thought that she was a dark-skinned Indian (Lyons, 2001, p. 251). Esther’s physical appearance did not conform to their imagination but their assumption revealed their racist attitude.

In America, she also met a Jesuit priest, who, having learnt that she was an “Indian,” asked her to take the role of a member of the Patna Mission in an exhibition on Jesuit Missions spread across the world. On the priest’s insistence she had to act as a live model by wearing a *saree*. It was he who gave her Michael Lyons’ telephone number. After trying several times, Esther was able to contact her father and he recognised her as his daughter over the phone. After making necessary arrangements with the American representative of the “Experiment in International Living” programme, her father brought her to his house in Denver.

Meeting her Father

A few years after leaving India, Mr. Lyons had left the priesthood and settled in Pennsylvania with another woman. When Esther came to know about this she was terribly surprised and pondered that the Catholic Church which prevented his father from marrying her mother in India now appeared to allow him to live with a woman in America. Esther accuses the church of showing undue leniency towards her father.

She has tried to justify her accusations in the following argument: “I didn’t understand how a priest was allowed to live with a woman openly when he was not allowed to live with his family; Mum and us two, in India. I had learnt in Catechism that ‘once a priest is always a priest,’ and that priests are not allowed to live with a woman and have children” (Lyons, 2001, p. 252). At times these accusations and interrogations seem to be subjective statements, which are but manifestations of Esther’s agony and anger. It becomes apparent from her attitude that she had expected her father to come back to her mother after he had left the Jesuit order. She could not accept the fact that another woman had stepped into her mother’s shoes. Esther writes that she and her mother had to suffer throughout their lives due to Mr. Lyons’ irresponsibility and his self-centeredness, which Esther perceived upon visiting his house. Although she does not mention it in her writing, it becomes evident during her stay in her father’s house that it was primarily he and not the church that was to be blamed for their troubles.

Petronilla, the woman with whom he was living, was a Lithuanian and she seemed to keep vigil on the father and the daughter during the latter’s stay. Most of the time he spoke to her in Hindi so that Petronilla could not understand their conversation. At the time of the author’s departure, he handed her a letter in which he acknowledged Esther and her sister as his natural daughters and requested her never to tell Petronilla about that. Although he was very affectionate towards Esther and had assured her that he would provide a life of comfort if she stayed in the US, he was not ready to acknowledge her as his daughter publicly. The only condition on which she could stay would be if she did so as the daughter of one of his Indian friends. Esther could not accept that and she decided to go back to her mother and sister in India.

Esther was grief-stricken by her father’s refusal to accept them publicly. She writes that she was shocked to see her father, whom she had always imagined as a strong and courageous person, turning out to be a weak and cowardly man. Although he had tried to represent himself as a remorseful figure to his daughter, it was evident from his attitude that he was persuading Esther to keep quiet about the injustice he had done towards Agnes and her daughters.

What completed Esther's disillusionment about her father's character was that Petronilla had been his mistress although he had referred to her as his 'wife' in his will/legal testament (Lyons, 2001, p. 380). She mentions that "[i]t is clearly stated on one of the FBI Reports that they could find no record of his marriage to Petronilla" (Lyons, 2001, p. 383). It was also stated in the report that Mr. Lyons had bought property in his wife's maiden name (Lyons, 2001, p. 383). These pieces of information seem to have hurt her very much, perhaps because he had never recognised her mother as his wife, due to which her mother had to tolerate social ignominy throughout her life.

After his death a major part of his wealth was donated to the charitable organisations and churches all over the world but not a penny was given to Esther and her sister (Lyons, 2001, p. 380). Esther surmised that such an action could, if they had occurred, have been taken as evidence of accepting them as his daughters in public. Esther seems to draw the conclusion that these pieces of information reveal a racist attitude, which perhaps had prevented him from accepting in public the fact that he had been involved in an interracial relationship. The reason behind such an attitude might have been the fact that in the 19th and early 20th centuries major sections of Western populations still considered miscegenation to be a transgression of sexual and racial-cultural norms (Young, 1995, p. 16-19).³

Michael DeLisle Lyons' death in 1974 ended her struggle to gain his public acceptance of her as his daughter. Still, Esther continued to try to gain recognition of her paternity even after the death of her father. She had "developed a sense of identity and a desire to be accepted as an American citizen, being the natural daughter of an American" (Lyons, 2001, p. 370). Demonstrating this, she had written a letter to the US president George Bush telling him the story of her life. Her initiative proved to be successful when after some investigative protocol, the US High Commission provided Esther and her sister their American Passports recognising them as American citizens (Lyons, 2001, p. 370). Although they received this recognition in their fifties, quite late in life, Esther was very pleased to receive it because it was their "birth right being the daughters of an American" (Lyons, 2001, p. 370). The possible reason as to why Esther did not migrate to America after obtaining citizenship was that her father was no longer alive to see her achievement.

Moreover, by the time the recognition had come, she had carved out a life of her own in Australia, where she had been living since 1981. It was here that she had discovered her individuality as an empowered woman.

SECTION II - SEARCH FOR INDIVIDUALITY

Although their attitude towards social identity was different, both the author and her mother adhered to patriarchal norms of identifying themselves in society. Both had endeavored to enhance their social status by seeking recognition from a 'male protector' within the family space. While Agnes had tried to achieve this by playing the role of a wife of a fictitious person—that of being Mrs Anthony—Esther had done her best to collect evidence of her filial bond with Rev. Michael DeLisle Lyons. Agnes' suffering and humiliation due to being an unwed mother had instilled in Esther's mind the notion that marriage could provide strength and stability to the social status of a woman. But, a pertinent difference between mother and daughter is that after being deceived in her 'conventional family-life' Esther deviates from the beaten track of earning social respectability by representing herself as 'wife'. While her mother had struggled against their economically precarious circumstances, the daughter had stood against the injustices done to her mother, her sister and herself. The most remarkable difference between the mother and the daughter is that the latter achieved empowerment which the former could not. 'Empowerment,' here, refers to a condition in which women can execute their right of taking decisions in personal and professional lives. This section will analyse Esther's transformation from the stereotyped role of a conventional wife to an empowered individual. It will examine how she reconstructed her social identity by deconstructing the patriarchal notions of woman's identity.

In her article "Women, Ethnicity and Empowerment" (1993) Yuval-Davis observes that "'Empowerment' has been a central aim, at least since the late 60s, on the political agenda of all grass roots resistance movements...raising women's consciousness or for a more general 'return' to 'the community'" (1993, p. 1). Here, Yuval-Davis refers to Jill M. Bystydzienski who defines empowerment as "a process by which oppressed persons gain some control over their lives" and "[t]his process involves the use of power, but not 'power over' others or power as dominance as is traditionally the case" but "rather, power is seen as 'power to' or power as

competence which is...shared by the disenfranchised as they begin to shape the content and structure of their daily existence and so participate in movement for social change” (Bystydzienski qtd. in Yuval-Davis, 1993, p. 1). Prior to her migration to Australia, Esther had been earning her living as a teacher and commercial model. In spite of being financially independent, she did not have the “power to” represent herself according to her own will. In this section, I will initially analyse the socio-cultural factors that prevented her from acting according to her will. Discussions in the following subsections focus on her experiences in marriage and thereafter elucidate the factors that made her seek an identity of her own, beyond the conventional discourses of identity formation.

Marriage

In the patriarchal society of India, marriage is considered to be a “rebirth” for women because their paternal identity, which is formed after one’s birth, is usually recreated after marriage. Since Esther’s paternal identity had subjected her to the shame of being born out of wedlock, she was obsessed by the idea of improving her social status through marriage. Justifying her decision to marry a Hindu-Punjabi man, she says that “[i]n my obsession to make my life a success as a good wife and mother and to acquire respectability and an identity, I married a person from a different religion. I thought this would help me forget the past” (Lyons, 2001, p. 348). However, after marriage, she was disillusioned. She found it very difficult to cope with the domestic norms prescribed for the women of the house such as eating vegetarian food and walking barefoot in the kitchen. Through her encounter with the cultural norms of her in-laws, she discovered that she could not negate her past completely because the ‘past’ comprised her Anglo-Indian upbringing and identity. Her marriage turned out to be patriarchal institution for subjugating her sexually and economically. While her husband, Major Naresh Chauhan, had made her a child-producing machine his family members had expected her to do all household work singlehandedly since she had come from a poor family and had not brought any dowry with her. In this respect, Lyons’ experience in marriage was that of an exploited labourer in the domestic economy. Naresh worked in the Indian Army and had been married earlier. Prior to their marriage, he had even proposed to Esther that they live together without getting married. Being a devout Catholic, she could not agree to this proposal. Besides, she was perhaps driven by her dreams of leading a

respectable life by being a wife. She did not want to get involved in any relationship which lacked social recognition and could put her identity and reputation in jeopardy. After their marriage, Naresh did his best to direct and control her earnings and investments. He had also subverted her Anglo-Indian identity by asking her to wear a *saree* instead of dresses.

He had concealed from Esther the true reason for his divorce from his first wife, by whom he had three disabled children. It was only after Lyons gave birth to her first child—a stillborn baby—that Naresh disclosed to her that he had a genetic defect which had resulted in him fathering abnormal children. Due to this situation, they decided to adopt a child. In May 1974, they adopted a five day old baby from a hospital in the suburb of Allahabad. Later on, she had discovered that this adopted child, Aman, was allergic to sunlight. In spite of his genetic defect, Naresh did not take any precautions to avoid Esther's pregnancy. After a few months, she was pregnant once again. In 1975, she delivered her second child, Mario, who was both physically and mentally challenged. In 1977, when Lyons gave birth to her third child, a healthy baby, her husband, instead of being delighted, suspected her of being unfaithful to him. She found it impossible to cope with Naresh's self-centeredness. Yet she was not in a position to leave him because of her children, who were very young at that time and one was critically ill. In Esther's view Naresh was so insensitive as a father, and as a human being, that he had asked Esther to put the terminally ill child and the one who was mentally-physically challenged, in an orphanage. He also refused to offer money for the treatment of the two boys because he was saving money to buy a three bedroom flat in Delhi. After purchasing the flat, he rented it instead of living in it with his family. Esther had to look after the children as well as earn money for their children's medical treatment. Gradually, she was re-enacting her mother's role by looking after her family and children singlehandedly.

At this point she decided to immigrate to Australia to get rid of what she saw as the tyrannical bonds of conventional Indian family-life, where most of the time women are expected to be subordinate to their husbands. She had become subservient to the whims of the male power within the gendered space of the family.

Seeking Empowerment

Her husband stayed in India for his job. He visited them when he came to Australia. As has been discussed previously, Esther portrays him as a selfish man, who hardly cared for his children and wife. Disgusted by his selfish nature, she realised that she “didn’t need a husband anymore” (Lyons, 2001, p. 352). In Australia, she did not pay attention to the authority he attempted to wield over her as a protector. It might be that she felt helpless at times but she knew that she would not get any kind of emotional support from her husband. Looking back at her decision to migrate, she mused, “I was then forty years of age and still searching for my identity” (Lyons, 2001, p. 354). Thus, it was not only the idea of rebuilding her future in Australia that had motivated her to withdraw herself from the conventional domains of ‘family’ and ‘nation’ but also the wish to reconstruct her individual identity beyond the patriarchal norms of identity formation. She could not detach herself immediately from her husband as unemployment in the new country had made her dependent on him. However, she never agreed to his proposals of leaving their handicapped son in an orphanage (Lyons, 2001, p. 352), or giving their healthy son to his sister, or leaving her mother to her sister in Australia and going back to India like an obedient wife (Lyons, 2001, p. 356-57). She also rejected his proposal that she earn money in India by stitching labels in garments. Although she needed money, she revolted against his patriarchal ego of subjugating the ‘wife.’ She asserted that she could not give away her professional identity as “teacher” by stitching labels (Lyons, 2001, p. 357). Unable to make her dance to his tune, Naresh made it clear that he would not provide any kind of financial support to her. He made abusive remarks against her by saying, “Well then, do as you like. I knew that a woman like you, with your background of Christian and Anglo-Indian, would never be able to understand the priorities of life. You people just eat and live. You are the curse of my life” (Lyons, 2001, p. 356-57).

Her journey as a single mother was not easy. Until she secured a teaching job, she had to work at a Kentucky Fried Chicken restaurant. It was only after she had upgraded her teaching qualifications to conform with the Australian regulations, that she could obtain a teaching job. Her experiences of raising her physically challenged children led her to becoming a Special Education teacher. This achievement gave her immense satisfaction and she writes that she thanked God, saying “[t]he Creator

without whose Will nothing is born or dies, allowed my birth on this earth for a purpose and gave me strength throughout” (Lyons, 2001, p. 364-65). This was how, she explains, she reconstructed her personality, gradually emerging stronger as an individual.

She also sponsored the immigration of some of her relatives who decided to migrate to Australia. Above all, she reinvented herself as an author by writing this autobiography. The authorial role signifies the power to represent oneself and others. The act of writing down her own story in which the previously passive and submissive woman gradually emerges as an active member of the family and community can be viewed as “empowerment”. Her father died in 1974 but the publication of her autobiography in 2001 helped her to challenge Petronilla’s right to her father’s property (although she informs us that the matter was settled outside of court and she was offered a small amount of money from her father’s estate). Publication of the book also drew the attention of Mother Teresa and others in India, who had received charitable donations from his estate. Some of these beneficiaries had also contributed a small amount of money as a gesture of recognising Esther and her sister as the daughters and rightful heirs of Father Michael D. Lyons (Lyons, 2001, p. 381).

Most important of all, the book has been instrumental in fulfilling her wish to be recognised by her paternal relatives. The bitterness of her childhood memories seems to have been sweetened, as illustrated by the following observation towards the end:

Although all of my father’s sisters are dead and his brother Frank is also dead and so is my father, at fifty-nine years old I have found and been accepted by all the wonderful family members in the USA and France. Due to this acceptance, my sister’s and my children, can finally speak with pride about their American grandfather and his relatives in the USA, without shame. They will not have to tell lies to cover up a family scandal and a shame any more. (Lyons, 2001, p. 388)

Seeking Individuality

During the late 1960s, the racial issues in the immigration policies of Australia had become quite flexible. Australia was gradually introducing constitutional provisions of

multiculturalism. Esther was told at the office of Australian High Commission that “Australia needed teachers” (Lyons, 2001, p. 279) and that “she would be accepted” (Lyons, 2001, p. 279) because “[a]t that time there was not much difficulty in migrating to Australia from India, if one could prove oneself to be an Anglo-Indian with European background” (Lyons, 2001, p. 279-280). Lyons was successful in the interview as Fr. Cyril George, President of the Anglo-Indian Association in Allahabad, had given her a letter in which it was written that she had a European father and that she was a member of the Anglo-Indian Association ((Lyons, 2001, p. 280). The description of her personal experiences in Australia reveals her struggle for acculturation – mainly due to the challenges her Anglo-Indian accent and Indian origin created.

Before deciding to migrate, Esther had been to Australia twice. During her first visit to Australia in January 1971, she was appalled to learn from a conductor in a train that the kangaroos were as ferocious as the lions in India (Lyons, 2001, p. 337). She had found the Australians rough and the attitudes of the young Indian immigrants towards sexual liberty had shocked her deeply (Lyons, 2001, p. 339). At this point a question may be asked that in spite of meeting with such an unfamiliar social environment what motivated her to settle down in Australia. Perhaps, she had felt that Australia with its more open immigration policies would provide better conditions than the United Kingdom or the United States of America. Another reason that might have directed her to move to Australia were job opportunities for teachers in Australia. During her second visit she was offered a permanent job at Narembeen High School, which was a few hours from Perth by car (Lyons, 2001, p. 349). She also managed to obtain Australian citizenship during her second visit to Australia in 1972. Since the rules for appointing ‘foreign’ teachers had tightened by the time Esther finally decided to settle down there in 1981, she initially had to accept temporary jobs with less income.

In spite of her Australian citizenship, part Western lineage and Christian faith, Esther was considered to be an ‘Indian’ because of her country of birth and her accent (Lyons, 2001, p. 357). In the professional field, as indicated earlier, she had to upgrade her qualifications. The diasporic space in a multicultural society could not efface the flux of in-betweenness ingrained in the racial and cultural identity of an

Anglo-Indian. Esther's experiences in the professional sphere indicate the discrimination possibly faced by other members of the Anglo-Indian community in Australia. Critiquing the loud claims of cultural equality in a so-called multicultural society, Blunt (2005) has made a significant comment:

The ambivalent place of Anglo-Indians in multicultural Australia reflects broader debates about the contested nature of European, Asian and Australian identities, and about the normalization of whiteness, particularly in relation to the hegemonic power of an Anglo-Celtic Australia and concerns about its demise in the face of migration and multiculturalism. (p. 165)

Lyons' autobiography presents her identity from various perspectives, her diasporic experience being one of these. Although she had faced discrimination based on her racial identity in Australia, she continued with her efforts to carve out a place of her own in the 'professional' space of that country. Finally, in 2000 when she was offered a teaching position as a Support Teacher in a Catholic School in New South Wales, she expressed her gratitude by saying that "I feel I am accepted with all my qualifications and as an individual" (Lyons, 2001, p. 391).

CONCLUSION

The autobiography of Esther Mary Lyons is remarkable in the sense that the same text presents a narrative of conventional gendered roles as well as a counter-narrative of it. The two sections of this article show that her search for her father, her desire for paternal affinity and for a sense of secure belonging through marriage have been countered by disillusionments which have hurt her tremendously but at the same time these have made her more determined to establish herself as an empowered self-reliant figure. The counter-narrative in the text implies that to her, paternal recognition and marriage, two determining factors in identity formation, no longer remained important criteria for enhancing her social status. Her friendship with Dr. Wallace Suchting, a Reader in Philosophy at the University of Sydney, presents a new dimension in relationships with men. Dr. Suchting had inspired her to complete her autobiography and edited her book. He had also proposed marriage to her (Lyons, 2001, p. 368). Though she did not agree to marry him, she writes that he maintained his admiration for her till the last day of his life. If her marriage with Naresh had been an experience of confinement in the prison of traditional norms, her friendship with Dr. Suchting had been an experience of liberation from the prejudices

of racial and cultural differences in a society where racist attitudes could at times be explicit. Through this life narrative, she has interrogated the conventional norms that govern the social identity of women. Her search for identity ends with the discovery that in a globalised world, both gendered roles and cultural identities have emerged as concepts marked by traits of fluidity and open-endedness.

Shyamasri Maji is an Assistant Professor in English at Durgapur Women's College, West Bengal, India. She completed her MA and M.Phil in English from the University of Burdwan (India) where she is, at present, pursuing Ph.D on the memoirs and the novels of select Anglo-Indian authors (dissertation submitted). The title of her doctoral thesis is "Anxiety of Representation in Select Anglo-Indian Writers." Areas of her research interest include Diasporic Studies, Postcolonial literature and the Anglo-Indian community. Her articles have been published in both national and international journals. Email: shyamasri.2010@gmail.com.

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NOTES

1. According to Article 366 (2) of the Indian Constitution, for instance, the term "Anglo-Indian" refers to a person who has a European ancestor on the side of paternal lineage and permanently domiciled in India..
2. In her autobiography Lyons describes the fate of illegitimate children born as consequence of interracial unions between European men and native women. They were mostly disowned by both Indian and European parents after their births and were sheltered in homes and orphanages run by the Christian missionaries. The standard of living was miserable as it is evident in the following description: "They (the Anglo-Indian boys) walked barefoot and grew up amongst great hardships. Their education was in English but lasted only up to Class 7...which was considered sufficient to get jobs in the railways and other Government departments" (Lyons, 2001, p. 93).
3. The contemporary view was that miscegenation represented racial chaos. It led to the loss of vigour and strength in people belonging to the superior

racess. The progeny from interracial unions were supposed to be mostly weak and infertile(Young, 1995, p. 18-19).

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