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Transcending Borders: Sheila Mysorekar's Reflections on Transnational Identities

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Abstract

The Indian-German essayist, poet, and journalist Sheila Mysorekar is a strong voice in debates about racism, multiculturalism and transnational identities in Germany. She consistently addresses human rights and minority concerns in her writing and uses satire as an effective strategy to underscore her arguments. For her, identities are political. She discusses growing up with a dark skin in a predominantly white environment. To combat her isolation in German society, Mysorekar formed coalitions with black Germans and other minority and migrant groups. She defines black politically to encompass all people of color from former colonies of the "Third World." For Mysorekar, blackness is inclusive and transcends national and ethnic boundaries. In keeping with her strong voice for minorities in Germany Mysorekar collaborated with the Turkish-German comedian and cabaret artist Fatih Çevikkollu on *Der Moslem-TÜV* (2008). They apply TÜV, an abbreviation of Technischer Überwachungs-Verein, responsible for ensuring the safety of such products as vehicles, satirically to a test for German citizenship designed to "protect" Germans from Muslims. In 2009 Mysorekar published her own satires *Dienstags gibt es Tantra-Sex: Politische Satiren über Rassismus, Sex und den Neanderthaler* (Tuesdays There is Tantra-Sex: Political Satires About Racism, Sex and the Neanderthal) in which she satirizes a wide variety of cultural and political practices, including issues of migration and concerns about illegal immigration. The first and only "pure" European, she writes, was the Neanderthal who was later displaced by hordes of illegal African immigrants, namely the intelligent Homo sapiens. Therefore, she concludes, the ancestors of all Germans were illegal immigrants. Mysorekar deconstructs notions of identity based on race and, using her daughter, who is of Indo-Anglo-German-African-Italian-Argentinean-Chilean heritage, as an example, she gives a nuanced picture of multi-ethnic identities, which in her view undermine notions of a "homeland," tied to place and transcend borders and boundaries.

Keywords: Sheila Mysorekar, transnational identities, human rights, migration, minority concerns in Germany

In the last decades Germany, like other European countries, has become an increasingly multi-ethnic, multicultural society. Since the end of the Second World War Germany has experienced migration by among others ethnic Germans from Eastern Europe, "guest workers" from South and Southeast Europe and Turkey, asylum seekers drawn to Germany's relatively liberal asylum policy, and economic refugees seeking a better life. Currently Germany has allowed large numbers of refugees fleeing from such war-torn countries as Afghanistan, Iraq and Syria to seek asylum, with over one million entering Germany so far. While many Germans accept and even welcome these migrants, others are opposed and continue to view their country as white and culturally homogenous. Since 1990 in particular, Germany has been struggling to define a post-unification identity to include citizens of the former German Democratic Republic and to integrate its own minorities and more recent migrants into this new national identity. Tensions arise between those who want to retain a perceived culturally homogenous national identity and those who argue for ethnic pluralism, who recognize that German identities are in flux. The Indian-German Sheila Mysorekar is a strong voice in the ongoing and often polarizing debate in Germany about who is a German. Like many "hyphenated" writers throughout the world she challenges notions of cultural homogeneity and contributes to thinking about identity, multiculturalism, and hybridity. She celebrates her multicultural roots and argues for transnational identities that are not confined by nation states or geographical borders.

Postmodern and postcolonial discourses on transnational identities and cultures are evident in Mysorekar's thinking. As Aijaz Ahmad observes, for example: "The cross-fertilisation of cultures has been endemic to all movements of people . . . and all such movements in history have involved the travel, contact, transmutation, hybridisation of ideas, values and behavioural norms" (Ahmad 1995, 18). Homi K. Bhabha (1994) has frequently argued that all cultures are hybrid and he envisions a constantly mixing world in which identities are not static but evolving and fluid and in which borders are broken down. In his view, migrants play an important role in transforming and renewing culture. In-between spaces, as he reminds us, are crucial for initiating "new signs of identity, and innovative sites of collaboration, and contestation" (1-2). These are views that Mysorekar shares.

Sheila Mysorekar was born in Düsseldorf in 1961. Her father came from Southern India and her mother was a white German. She spent her early years in India, but went to school in Germany. She studied English and American literatures, cultural anthropology and drama at the University of Cologne and in London, is politically active in the black women's movement in Germany and has worked as a journalist in many countries. For example, for eleven years she worked freelance in Argentina where she covered broad topics, especially politics, economics and human rights abuses,

whether by the United States in South America or by homegrown dictatorships. For example, in “Hinter welchen Gittern werden die Täter sitzen?” (Behind which Bars will the Perpetrators Sit?) on August 22, 2003 she discusses president Néstor Kirchner’s attempts to confront the aftermath of Argentina’s dictatorship when between 1976 and 1983 the regime tortured and killed some 30,000 citizens. Shortly after taking office, she reports, he met with the human rights organization, the Mothers of the Plaza de Mayo, and repealed amnesty laws for ex-military involved in the crimes. In several articles in 2004, one of which “Krieger gegen Bezahlung” (Warriors For Pay) was broadcast in Germany on May 28, 2004, Mysorekar points out the growing use, especially by the United States, of private military consulting firms, often employed to provide mercenaries for undeclared wars, as in Colombia. She calls this an outsourcing of violence. As these examples suggest, Mysorekar has ongoing concerns with social justice and human rights. In a questionnaire in 2013, she responded to a question about what makes her furious with one word: injustice. In response to another question about how she hopes to be remembered she wrote that she wishes to be remembered as someone who did everything for her family and for a better world. On a lighter note, she added that she hoped she would also be remembered for her Indian butter chicken (Mysorekar 2013, 90).

These concerns continue to inform the articles Mysorekar writes in Germany. She now lives in Cologne and is president of the Neue deutsche Medienmacher (New German Media-Makers), an organization that works for more diversity in all aspects of the media. In a speech on January 31, 2012 entitled “Keine Angst: wir sprechen Deutsch!” (Don’t Worry: We Speak German) she notes that every fifth person in Germany has a migration background, but only every fiftieth journalist. She argues that colleagues with multicultural backgrounds offer different perspectives, are multi-lingual and inter-culturally competent, skills that are essential in an increasingly global world (Mysorekar 2012b). She is also engaged in training young journalists from such countries as Afghanistan, Egypt and Colombia and helps advise media in countries such as Libya.

Recent articles in *die tageszeitung* (The Daily Paper) demonstrate Mysorekar’s strong voice for human rights and her use of satire to ridicule attitudes toward migrants. In “No-go-Area” on August 22, 2009, she deplores the racial murder in Germany of a Muslim woman and the subsequent lack of outrage by politicians and the media (Mysorekar 2009b). “Produktionskrise in der Panik-Industrie” (Production Crisis in the Panic Industry), published on October 9, 2010, mocks Germany’s hostile image of Muslims. Referring to the acrimonious debate in Germany and other countries in the European Union about wearing headscarves she declares satirically that headscarves appear to be quite harmless, but are in fact fabric refusals to assimilate and therefore dangerous (Mysorekar 2010b). In “Hände hoch: Ihre Hautfarbe ist verdächtig” (Hands-Up: Your Skin Color is Suspicious) on August 7, 2010 she attacks racial profiling in Germany (Mysorekar 2010a). “Innerdeutscher Kulturschock” (Culture Shock Inside Germany), published on June 3, 2011, parodies German notions of homogeneity by pointing to differences within Germany itself. In her life, she observes, she has lived in many different cities, but her greatest culture shock was her move from Düsseldorf to Cologne, a city that is really another world (Mysorekar 2011b). In “Hassverbrechen aus Zufall” (Hate Crime by Chance) on July 9, 2011 she discusses the murder of a migrant from Iraq by neo-Nazis tattooed with swastikas, and the refusal of the authorities to consider it a racial killing (Mysorekar 2011a). “Von hier ist, wer den Sauerbraten kennt” (Those Who Know Sauerbraten Are From Here), published on January 8, 2011, is a light-hearted look at notions of belonging. In this piece, a multi-ethnic group is in a restaurant in the Rhineland. The waitress accepts the black, Asian and Mediterranean looking people because they know that the popular dish Sauerbraten is made from horsemeat and are not disgusted by it. They therefore belong and are “from here” (Mysorekar 2011c). As this sampling suggests, Mysorekar consistently addresses human rights and minority concerns in her journalism and she uses satire as a strategy to underscore her arguments.

In keeping with her strong voice for minorities in Germany Mysorekar collaborated with the Turkish-German comedian and cabaret artist Fatih Çevikkollu on *Der Moslem-TÜV* (2008). TÜV is an abbreviation of Technischer Überwachungs-Verein (technical inspection association), responsible for ensuring the safety of such products as vehicles. The authors apply this satirically to a test for German citizenship designed to “protect” Germans from Muslims. It is not clear how much Mysorekar contributed to the book, especially since the first-person narrator identifies himself on occasions as Çevikkollu (in his introduction Cem Özdemir refers to Çevikkollu and Mysorekar as a team, but in discussions and reviews of the book her role is either not mentioned or is downplayed). The texts, many developed from his cabaret performances, address Muslim experiences in Germany, such as integration and prejudices, and undermine commonly held German stereotypes of Muslims, such as the tendency to associate all Muslims with terrorists. In one piece the authors parody the stereotype of the full-bearded Muslim, loaded with dynamite and contemptuous of women and pork (Çevikkollu and Mysorekar 2008, 14). In another they attribute the Cologne soccer team’s losses to a terrorist plot master minded by al Qaeda (111). They also mock Turks in Germany. In one piece, for example, the narrator describes a virtual Berlin Wall of unopened consumer goods that his migrant parents are collecting in their tiny apartment for when they return to Turkey. Mysorekar and Çevikkollu use humor, irony and parody as effective weapons to illuminate and deconstruct prejudices.

In 2009 Mysorekar published her own satires *Dienstags gibt es Tantra-Sex: Politische Satiren über Rassismus, Sex und den Neandertaler* (Tuesdays There is Tantra-Sex: Political Satires About Racism, Sex and the Neanderthal) in which she satirizes a wide variety of cultural and political practices. For example, she makes fun of traditional Indian marriage customs, which she likens to a triathlon. In several pieces she attacks United States’ policies in South America and the

Caribbean. Of the invasion of Grenada she notes satirically that the 6,000 marines gained a surprising victory over 250 Grenadian soldiers. Her main focus is, however, German encounters with otherness. In one piece she satirizes both German notions of “racial purity” and attitudes to illegal immigrants. The first and only “pure” European, she writes, was the Neanderthal who was later displaced by hordes of illegal African immigrants, namely the intelligent Homo sapiens. Therefore, she concludes, the ancestors of all Germans were illegal immigrants (Mysorekar 2009a, 13-14). In other pieces she undermines German stereotypes of black and Asian women as exotic sex objects. She also makes fun of identity constructions as in the piece about a man whose mother was Syrian, whose father was Colombian, who was born in Germany and whose favorite sport is Nordic walking. Because of his heritage Arabs think he is Latino, Latinos think he is Indian, Indians think he is Arab, and Germans just think he is a foreigner (49). His three jobs force him to adopt even more identities. In the Italian restaurant where the cook is Pakistani he takes on the role of Luigi from Sicily; in the Indian restaurant, where the cook is from Ukraine, he becomes Dinesh, and still later as DJ he becomes Carlos. In his jobs he tries to conform to German stereotypes of different nationalities, but having to change roles constantly leads him to confuse his multiple identities. Mysorekar undermines here stereotypes and simplistic notions of identity construction based on nationality. In other pieces she attacks job discrimination against those who are “other” and expectations that only certain jobs are open to them, for example that all young foreign women want to become hairdressers. In another piece, in which the ill-informed narrator thinks that Barack Obama is the German chancellor and that prejudices and racism have vanished, she notes the small number of “hyphenated” Germans in politics. In these pieces she undermines German perceptions of otherness, racist attitudes and stereotypes, and identity.

In several texts Mysorekar focuses on growing up with a dark skin in a predominantly white environment. In her essay “Pass the Word and Break the Silence” written in the early 1990s, a time in Germany of attacks against other-looking people, she records her fear and rage at what she terms “pogroms” and reflects that black Germans have no community to turn to in times of danger. Most people of color in Germany grew up isolated from their Caribbean, African or Asian roots and had no older generation to serve as role models and teach them “how to survive in a white society” (Mysorekar 1995c, 80). As black Germans they are “surrounded by silence; surrounded by a society that denies our existence and negates the fact of racism” (Mysorekar 1995c, 83). In “Keine Angst” she notes that as a young journalist she was often praised for her orthography, which puzzled her. She realized that she received such praise because nobody in the editorial office expected she could write correct German since everyone who looked like her (those with dark skins) worked there as cleaners. She has heard thousands of times remarks like “You speak good German” to which she would like to respond: “I wish I could say that of you” (Mysorekar 2012b). Such remarks suggest that ingrained notions of a white homogeneous nation make it difficult for some white Germans to grasp that people with dark skins are fellow citizens.

Mysorekar tried to connect to German feminism, but sensed a lack of solidarity because white feminists ignored problems specific to black women. In her essay “Vagabundinnen mit Transitvisum (1990, Female Vagabonds with a Transit Visa) she points out that when feminists say “women” they mean white middle-class women. Black women are either ignored or put in the spotlight and treated as exotic. White feminists’ focus on sexism, also a problem for black women, does not address the racism that black women encounter in their daily lives. Mysorekar writes that as a black woman her solidarity is not automatically with other women, especially since she has encountered racism from both white men and white women (Mysorekar 1990, 22).

The racist violence of the early 1990s intensified Mysorekar’s feeling of alienation in German society. Her poem “Black Rage” expresses her growing fear in the “new Great Germany,” but also her determination to defend herself: “But I won’t wait/ until they come to get us/ until our bones burn to ashes” (Mysorekar 1995a, 215). By referring to the Holocaust she situates the racist attacks in the 1990s into a repeated pattern in German history from colonialism to the present of violence against minorities. In the poem “It’s Nation Time” she underscores both Germany’s growing ethnic diversity, such as the rumba in Dresden and spicy sausages in the industrial Ruhr, and a determination to resist: “Black voices in Berlin and Köln/ . . . and clenched fists,” the clenched fists of solidarity and resistance (Mysorekar 1995b, 215). In “Widerstand. Poesie des Überlebens” (Resistance. Poetry of Survival) Mysorekar develops strategies of resistance. Quoting Malcolm X she states that resistance means to fight against racism “by any means necessary.” It includes declaring oneself black and German, speaking out against all borders, whether political or invisible, and against the myth of a white Europe, which in its idealized imagined form has never existed. It means to resist until change occurs (Mysorekar 2007b, 339-340). Mysorekar gives examples of resistance such as the protest of school children in Soweto, South Africa that led eventually to the abolishment of apartheid. Resistance is crucial, she believes, so that future generations do not have to start again at zero.

To combat her isolation in German society, Mysorekar formed coalitions with black Germans. Mysorekar defines black politically to encompass all people of color from former colonies of the “Third World” (Mysorekar 1993, 111). Like other black Germans Mysorekar constructs an identity that is “the product and process of importing individual, social, and cultural meanings to blackness as a strategic form of self-definition and identification” (Camp 2003, 289). For Mysorekar black is inclusive and transcends national and ethnic boundaries. Including everyone with a non-white skin under the term black can, however, erase cultural and ethnic differences, but in a country like Germany with relatively few non-white peoples it is a useful political strategy because, in her view, when non-whites consciously call themselves black, they oppose white dominance. She acknowledges that not all Asians want to associate themselves with “black” because it still

has negative connotations and because in their strategies to divide and conquer the colonial powers fomented mistrust between Asians and Africans, as for example in Guyana where Britain incited hatred between those of Indian and African descent (Mysorekar 1993, 113).

Mysorekar believes that black people in the Diaspora have had to create themselves. The diasporic experience that includes “dispersion from an original home, a collective myth of return” does not exactly apply to those born in Germany since “Black Germans share no unifying origin or home (such as Africa)” and most “share no desire to return to such an imaginary or real homeland” (Faymonville 2003, 372). Mysorekar dreamed of societies such as New York, Brazil, or Cuba, where she could blend in, and she derived spiritual nourishment from such writers of color as Marcus Garvey, James Baldwin, Toni Morrison, Alice Walker, Maya Angelou, Salman Rushdie and Bharati Mukherjee, who made her realize that as blacks in Europe their connection to other continents is part of their heritage (Mysorekar 1995c, 82). This literature connected European blacks not only to the present black Diaspora, but also preserved their past and helped them form positive identities. In “Vagabundinnen” she stresses that as blacks in Europe their connection to other continents is part of their personal history. She notes that, like Africans, Indians have migrated to all parts of the world. For example, large Indian communities in London and Leicester resemble Mumbai more than the United Kingdom and in countries such as Guyana or Trinidad half the population is of Indian descent. Throughout these many migrations, Indian women have held fast to their cultural traditions by retaining religious customs, cooking Indian food, and wearing saris. In Britain a “Sari Squad” of Indian women comes together to fight against racism and discrimination (Mysorekar 1990, 21-23).

Fighting against racism and discrimination is an essential part of Mysorekar’s writing. In “Deutsche jeder Farbe” (Germans of Every Color), a speech she gave at the Heinrich Böll Foundation in March 2012 (Heinrich Böll was one of Germany’s most prominent postwar writers who received the Nobel Prize for literature in 1972), she undermines German notions of a homogenous white nation and the view that ethnic minorities do not belong in Germany. She stresses that Germany has long been a multi-religious country with Christians, Jews and Muslims. The first mosque was built there in 1732, and German Muslims fought in 1807 for Prussia against Napoleon. She shows that historically being German does not mean being white and Christian. In her view, German notions of homogeneity stemmed from Nazi racial policies and continued to inform German thinking for another twenty years after the war. The following waves of immigration reestablished a situation that had always existed in Germany and was quite natural. As she points out, Germany lies in the middle of Europe and has always been a crossroad. Citing the writer Carl Zuckmayer she calls Germany the “Kelter” (wine-press) of Europe and stresses that there are no “pureblooded” societies, neither in Germany nor anywhere else (Mysorekar 2012a).

In this speech Mysorekar addresses the question of integration. She insists that integration should not be equated with assimilation. In her view integration is a dynamic process that allows immigrants to retain their cultural traditions, whereas assimilation means adopting the new culture at the expense of the old. While she believes that all people living in Germany should speak German this does not mean that they should give up their own language or that they should not raise their children bilingually. Mysorekar perceives a hierarchy of language and culture. For example, nobody in Germany would expect immigrants from England or France to give up their language or culture. Unlike the favored Northern or Western Europeans, however, Muslims are expected to give up speaking Turkish or Arabic (Mysorekar 2012a).

In her essay “Guess my Genes” Mysorekar parodies notions of the polarizing binarism of German/Not German or White German/Black and, using her daughter as an example, she gives a nuanced picture of multi-ethnicity. On her father’s side, her daughter’s grandfather is Argentinean of Italian heritage and her grandmother is African-Argentinean with a father from Chile. On her mother’s side her grandfather is from India and her grandmother is a white German with British heritage. Her daughter is therefore of Indo-Anglo-German-African-Italian-Argentinean-Chilean heritage (Mysorekar 2007a, 162). For her daughter this heritage is part of a perfectly normal family history. As Mysorekar demonstrates here identity based on race makes little sense and she refuses to be categorized. How she defines herself is purely her own business.

In many of her pieces, Mysorekar addresses the issue of racism, a word hardly used in Germany: “In Germany, they talk about anti-Semitism and xenophobia, but ‘racism doesn’t exist here,’ they say. ‘It’s a clash of cultures. Different religions. Mistrust of foreigners. But racism? No’” (Mysorekar 1995c, 81). In “Widerstand” she states firmly that the German preferred word “Ausländerfeindlichkeit” (hostility to foreigners) is disguised racism. Racism is obvious in attacks and murders of dark-skinned migrants by skinheads, but is also evident in many aspects of supposedly normal life, such as schoolbooks and advertising (Mysorekar 2007b, 339). In “Guess my Genes” she points out the pervasiveness of racist stereotypes and the racial hierarchy of color that is even communicated to blacks themselves. Some black men, for example, find lighter skinned women more desirable than those with a darker skin (Mysorekar 2007a, 166).

Migration to Germany has played and continues to play an important role in questioning notions of identity. By straddling two or more cultures, the ever-increasing number of “hyphenated” German writers such as Mysorekar dispute notions of a unified national identity and argue for flexible transnational identities that transcend national boundaries. By breaking down national and ethnic binarisms and arguing for inclusivity, they challenge Germans to rethink not only their own identity but also what makes up German culture. In their texts they dispute and redefine the boundaries of identities in flux across national borders. Because she believes that cultural differences should not be suppressed but should enrich Mysorekar affirms transnational and global identities. The streets they tread, she observes, lead to brothers and sisters all

over the world: her own family, for example, is spread over four continents. Being a vagabond, for her a positive notion, is an integral part of migrant experience. Such a “transnational diasporic existence” functions as “an alternative political space where people of color in Germany can construct positive forms of identity.” While she works for solidarity with other blacks in Germany, she also finds comfort and support “in a shared international outsidership” (Faymonville 2003, 376). Mysorekar believes that blacks’ multicultural heritage prevents them from being forced into the corset of one culture and allows them to challenge the notion of a “homeland” tied to place. This lack of a geographical homeland gives them freedom of choice. With India as her fatherland and German as her mother tongue, she declares, she inhabits the whole world (Mysorekar 1990, 24). In “Widerstand” she envisions increasingly multiracial generations who will not have to struggle to construct and defend an identity because definition by race will no longer be valid. She concludes this essay with a compelling vision of continents with open borders, whose cultures flow into each other and create something new (Mysorekar 2007b, 345).

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Biography:

Jennifer E. Michaels is Samuel R. and Marie-Louise Rosenthal Professor of Humanities and Professor of German at Grinnell College in Iowa, USA where she has taught courses on language, literature and culture. She received her M.A. degree in German from Edinburgh University and an M.A. and Ph.D. in German from McGill University in Montreal. She has published four books and numerous articles on German and Austrian literature and culture with a focus on twentieth and twenty-first century literature. She has recently done research on Jewish exile in Shanghai during World War II. She has served as president of the German Studies Association and the Rocky Mountain Modern Language Association.