The subject of my paper is closely related with one of the more recently emphasised aspects of contemporary British society, that is its having a “multiethnic” and a “multicultural” composition. The results of the last census in Britain in 1991 revealed that some 5.5% of the population of Britain came from ethnic minority communities. According to a more updated report by Foreign and Commonwealth Office, the proportion of ethnic minorities in total population was nearly 6% in 1999 (FCO, 1), which indicates a trend of stable increase.

As far as the study of literature and culture is concerned, it is convenient to state that this demographic trend has found its reflections in the field of British Studies during the last two decades in the form of the study of literary and cultural productions by the ethnic minorities in Britain. As a result of the increasing interest in what is generally called “Postcolonial Literature” works of those writers with different ethnic origins who are living and writing as immigrants in Britain have also become subjects of study. However, this focus on what is sometimes referred to as “immigrant writing” has almost always been limited to the study of literary and cultural productions by only the two largest ethnic communities, which are West Indian and South Asian communities. Nevertheless, without the study of the literary productions of other ethnic minorities, an apprehension of “immigrant writing” and thus that of ethnic minority experiences in Britain will never be complete. A significant one among these other ethnic minorities is the Chinese community, which constitutes the third largest ethnic community in Britain (Baker, 298).

Since the Chinese ethnic community in Britain is considered to be the third largest, and since Timothy Mo is a Chinese immigrant writer living and writing in Britain, a study of his most popular novel *Sour Sweet*, which has been reproduced in a film recently, gives many ideas and clues about the immigration experiences of the Chinese in Britain as well as about the cultural processes to which they have been subject. In this respect, *Sour Sweet*, which is written in the realistic style, can certainly be read as the account of a cultural transplantation process or the process of cross-cultural adaptation.

Before the analysis of the major characters in the novel from the perspective of cultural transplantation process, it would be useful to give an overview of the conceptual framework. To be brief, one can define the process in question as the set of phases an immigrant subject goes through in order to be comfortably integrated into a socio-cultural environment other than his/her own. Within the context of migration, however, linguistic differences and physical dislocation also appear as major impediments that are to be encountered during cultural transplantation. The subject who can cope with and overcome all of these problems gradually develops a bicultural and hybrid identity and is successfully transplanted into the new cultural soil.
An important aspect of cross-cultural adaptation process is that there seems to be gender differences in terms of the completion of its successive stages by immigrant subjects. More specifically, in many cases female immigrants appear to adapt to the new environment more easily and faster than their male counterparts, who generally refuse or fail to achieve cross-cultural adaptation. This difference between the two sexes and the comparative success of female immigrants in integrating themselves into the host society are put forward as the outcome of a number of investigations conducted in the fields of sociology and cross-cultural psychology. Hence the gendered approach to the cultural transplantation process as reflected in Timothy Mo’s *Sour Sweet*, that is the subject of my paper, will depend to an important degree on the application of this empirical data to the analyses of major Chinese male and female characters in the novel.

In *Sour Sweet* the encounters of Hong Kong immigrants in Britain in the post-war period with the new cultural environment are presented through the experiences of the members of Chen family and other characters from the same ethnic origin. Although there are not many characters in the novel, those that are present are so successfully created and treated that through each character the experience of cultural transplantation can be analysed from different perspectives. These perspectives include that of unsuccessful and successful, and male and female immigrants. Accordingly, the male and female characters will be analysed as separate groups so that the gender differences in terms of the experience of cross-cultural adaptation can be explicitly seen and emphasised. Hence, the analyses of male characters, namely Chen and Mr. Lo, will be followed by the analyses of Lily and her sister Mui.

With regard to Michael Winkelman’s (123) model of the cross-cultural adaptation process, the major male characters in *Sour Sweet*, Chen and Mr. Lo, appear to be stuck in what is defined as the “crises phase.” According to Winkelman the characteristics and symptoms of the “crises phase” are as follows:

The crises phase may emerge immediately upon arrival or be delayed...It may start with a full-blown crisis or as a series of escalating problems, negative experiences, and reactions.... Life does not make any sense and one may feel helpless, confused, disliked by others, or treated like a child. A sense of lack of control of one’s life may lead to depression, isolation, anger, or hostility. (123)

To analyse Chen’s psychology in the light of this information, one may argue that he had many of the symptoms but especially the uneasiness, tension and isolation created by a feeling of being disliked by others. This is shown in the novel as follows:

Chen was still an interloper. He regarded himself as such....That English people had competed for the flat which he now occupied made Chen feel more rather than less of a foreigner; it made him feel like a gatecrasher who had stayed too long and had been identified.... There was a reassuring anonymity about his foreign-ness. (1, 9)

The one noticeable aspect of Mr. Lo’s depiction as a Chinese man in Britain, on the other hand, is his being isolated from mainstream society through interaction only with his own ethnic community and culture. As is explained in the novel, Mr. Lo is a lonely man who has been deserted by his wife a long time ago. Therefore, he is depicted as an encapsulated figure who is “quiet, withdrawn to the point of moodiness” (28), and as a Chinese immigrant
who is trying to survive alone in a different country and culture. As a matter of fact, Lo’s isolation might be considered as an indication of his being in the “crises phase” (Winkelman, 123) of the cross-cultural adaptation process all through the novel.

As a result, these two male characters are always in search of an outlet from this state of frustration caused by their alienation from the host society and its culture. Among these possible outlets are the criticism of the host culture, the maintenance of native cultural practices, the limiting of the social life with their own ethno-cultural environment and with what is called “ethnic media” (Walker, 158, 193), and most importantly, the hope of returning to Hong Kong someday. Winkelman states that the possibility of “return” seems to be the “absolute” outlet for those immigrants who cannot achieve to adapt to the new cultural environment (123).

The fact that Chen has always in his mind the possibility of “return” after earning enough money to start a better life in Hong Kong is clearly reflected in the novel in a dramatic scene when the Chen family goes to seaside during a weekend holiday. At the seaside Chen takes his son, Man Kee, into his arms to show him a ship on the horizon and says

Do you see the ship, Son?...It is a special little ship for people like us, Son. It is very little and very old but that is only what strangers see. We know better, don’t we, Son, because it is the ship that will take us all back home when we are finished here. It will take you to your homeland, Son, which you have never seen. (155)

However, Chen cannot use the option of return due to his complete dependence on the income he gains in Britain. Thus, he stays, but as a character who is alienated from the British cultural environment. As is stated above, Chen practices “maintenance behaviours” (qtd. in Winkelman, 123) that function as tools to constitute the ties between his life in London and his native socio-cultural background, thereby forming a supposedly impenetrable layer around his Chinese identity. Thus, it is impossible for him to achieve cross-cultural adaptation. In this regard, his mysterious death at the end of Sour Sweet may also be read as a confirmation of his failure.

Likewise, Mr. Lo’s cultural encapsulation is expressed by his social life, watching Hong Kong movies, and by his media options, namely outdated Hong Kong newspapers. In this regard, the point made by David Parker (149-151) concerning the role of Hong Kong popular culture as a bridge to the culture of origin of the Chinese immigrants in Britain is valid in Lo’s case. The only point that makes Lo’s case different from Chen’s experience is that towards the end of the novel there occurs a relative change in Lo’s attitude toward British social values. This change is signified by his acceptance of Mui, the mother of an illegitimate child, as a wife. Normally, as a traditional Chinese man he would not even think of marrying the mother of an illegitimate child. Yet, it may be speculated that as Lo gradually comes to acknowledge the fact that he would not be able to survive alone, he begins to adjust to the socio-cultural environment by the help of a female companion. To put it differently, Lo’s acceptance of Mui may be seen as an indication of his gradual coming to terms with some of the socio-cultural values of Britain, such as tolerance and flexibility.

To make a final statement about the adaptation levels of these two male Chinese characters in Sour Sweet, it may be concluded that their cultural transplantation into British soil is not achieved, at least not in the temporal limits of the novel. Because of their refusal
and rejection of the cultural norms of the host society, and their consequent alienation, they
either become lost as characters or remain as isolated members of the society for a very long
while. In the case of Mr. Lo it is possible to observe the beginnings of a slow and gradual
adaptation by the help of a female, yet even this change is not substantial enough to be
compared with the adaptation levels of the female characters in the novel.

The major female characters in Sour Sweet are Lily, Chen’s wife, and Mui, who is
Lily’s sister. In general, it may be stated that both of these female characters are able to
survive the “crises phase” of the cultural transplantation process; then move on to the
“adjustment and reorientation phase;” and eventually arrive at a “stage of adaptation”
(Winkelman 123). However, as stated by Winkelman, “there are many different adaptation
options” and Lily and Mui may be seen as the examples of two different ways of adaptation.
In Lily’s adaptation, the important factor is the emphasis on her own Chinese cultural
background, or rather, on the balance and reconciliation she achieves between her own
cultural identity and the socio-cultural environment of the host country. Mui’s adaptation,
however, relies heavily on the role of the elements of the host culture, more specifically, the
British media.

Since she has been educated by her father in Chinese temple boxing, Lily has a deep
and true understanding of traditional Chinese philosophy, at the core of which is the idea of
keeping the balance between opposites and extremities no matter what the conditions are.
Apparently, as can be observed all through the course of the novel, her true cognition of the
essence of Chinese philosophy and way of life helps her to live up to a genuine Chinese
identity, and achieve a state of balance, which is illustrated by her preoccupation with the
keeping of the balance between yin and yang.

Although early in the novel Lily is sometimes critical of the English, whom she calls
“foreign devils,” and their culture, as she moves to the “adjustment phase” her attitudes
change. As Winkelman puts, in the “adjustment, and reorientation phase,”

One develops problem-solving skills for dealing with the culture and begins
to accept the culture’s ways with a positive attitude. The culture begins to
make sense, and negative reactions and responses to the culture are reduced
as one recognizes that problems are due to the inability to understand,
accept, and adapt…. During the adjustment phase the problems do not end,
but one develops a positive attitude toward meeting the challenge of
resolving the issues necessary to function in the new culture. (123)

Hence, during this phase Lily’s criticism is replaced by a will to understand and rationalise
the host culture. Then, “foreign devils” become “foreign devil friends.” A good example of
this is when she thinks that maybe the mince, jam tart, and custard always given to Man Kee
at school, which she despises earlier, “was simply a generic term for food – as one said ‘eat
rice’ instead of simply ‘eat’ in the traditional evening greeting of the south [of Hong
Kong]?...She wished Son was still eating it” (172, 249). In other words, Lily’s attitudes gain
flexibility, a quality which is regarded by her as being “typically Chinese” (175).

At the end of the novel, this atmosphere of reconciliation and balance results in Lily’s
successful completion of the cultural transplantation process, or to put it in Winkelman’s
terms the arrival at the “adaptation stage” which is achieved
…as one develops stable adaptations in being successful at resolving problems and managing the new culture. There are many different adaptation options, especially given diverse individual characteristics and goals…one will acculturate and may undergo substantial personal change through cultural adaptation and development of a bicultural identity. It is important to recognize and accept the fact that an effective adaptation will necessarily change one, leading to the development of a bicultural identity and the integration of new cultural aspects into one’s previous self-concept. (123)

The change in Lily’s self-concept and her expression of her new identity occurs after the death of Chen when

She realised she was content with what her life has become…Surely Husband hadn’t weighed on her like that? He was such a quiet, self-effacing man. But it was as if a stone had been taken off her and she had sprung to what her height should have been. She thought she had found a balance of things for the first time, yin cancelling yang; discovered it not by going to the centre at once – which was a prude’s way and untypical of her – but by veering to the extremes and then finding the still point of equilibrium. (278)

When looked from the viewpoint of post-colonial theory, this state of balance accomplished by Lily would be a true example of what Homi Bhabha calls “hybridity” (20). From the perspective of cross-cultural adaptation, it can be argued that it is again her true cognition of the essence of the “Chinese culture [which] emphasizes harmony in relationships, avoiding conflict at all costs” (qtd. in Tang and Dion, 22), which helps Lily to achieve, eventually, a bicultural British Chinese identity in a multiethnic British society.

What makes Mui’s case special is that her adaptation process follows a rather radical line in terms of her oscillation between “cultural authenticity” and “assimilation.” Laura Hall grants Mui the role of “cultural mediator” (95). However, being aware of Mui’s special case, it is much better, for the most part, to see Mui’s random bridging between two cultures as a fringe benefit of her dangerous stand at the edge of cultural assimilation through extreme amounts of media exposure.

As I have stated earlier the consumption of the media productions of the host country is the major factor to affect Mui’s experience of the cultural transplantation process. This argument can be supported by empirical data, too. The role played by mass media in immigrant adaptation is explained by David K. Tse and Wei-Na Lee (57) who found that the “acculturation process seemed to be affected by immigrants’ original media consumption behavior and language ability. Media exposure was found to relate significantly to immigrants’ acculturation of the new social norms” (57). Similarly, Doug Walker suggests that female immigrants “may turn to television to satisfy their connectedness when interpersonal opportunities [with members of the host society] are lacking” (qtd. in Walker, 194) much more than their male counterparts do.

This, actually, explains Mui’s experience, who

…was an addict. She was even watching children’s puppet-shows with Man Kee and giving every sign of enjoyment. She did not leave the sofa, with an
appropriate faint sigh of compressed air escaping from the cushions as her weight was removed, until the last bars of the national anthem faded away into the high-pitched whine which denoted an end of transmissions.... Next morning Mui would be tuned in again to the schools programmes. (10)

After the period of acculturation through an extreme amount of media exposure Mui’s perception of the real world is also shaped only by the information, whether true or false, she receives from television. It is true that there are a number of examples of how she tries, sometimes efficiently, to use this information for real life circumstances and for the benefit of the other members of the family, such as her using the new communication device at their restaurant, that is the telephone, thanks to her acquaintance with the vocabulary and the device from the television serials. Yet, it is also true that Mui’s addiction to media for communication with the outer world has its damaging effects on the development of her new personality in her new home. She is so much pulled into and influenced by the illusionary world created by television programmes that she commits what Haryy C. Triandis and his colleagues have defined as “overshooting” (qtd. in Tse and Lee 59), that is idealising the host society and its culture even more than the natives of the country. In other words, she becomes more “English” than the English. The most concrete example of this is her objection to Lily’s idea of driving without a licence and bribing the policeman if necessary. She believes that “the English police-force is the finest in the world” again “thinking of Dixon of Dock Green, one of her favourite programmes” (152). It is true that the particular television serial has taught Mui some of the social norms of the host country, but it is also true that, as Lily says, “life is not a TV programme” (152) and that just like any other society, their host society has its defects, too.

However, Mui’s exposure to the images of the host country transmitted by the media also gives Mui examples from which she can draw an understanding of the new social norms. For instance, it because of her familiarity with the idea of single-parenthood through TV serials that she is relaxed about giving birth to a child without being married. Even though this leads to a conflict in the novel, it is also resolved at the end when Mui marries a Chinese man, namely Mr Lo, and brings a balance, of yin and yang, to her new life in a new country where she refers to as “my home” (276).

The conclusion to be made from this analysis of Timothy Mo’s Sour Sweet is that unlike the major male characters, who fail in transplanting themselves into the socio-cultural environment of English society through a successful adaptation, the major female characters in the novel, namely Lily and Mui, are able, through different means and experiences of adjustment and adaptation, to arrive at a stage where their Chinese cultural identities are fused in a reasonable proportion with the cultural patterns of the host society. Thus, Lily and Mui are successful in transplanting themselves into the multicultural society of Britain, which is implied in the novel by the reference to the “two cells, sharing the same territory, happily co-existing but quite autonomous” (277). Both of these female characters reach this stage by creating for themselves bicultural and hybridised identities and a balanced and stabilised existence in British society. In keeping with this, at the end of the novel a unity out of duality is achieved by the establishment of a balance between yin and yang, “male” and “female,” “sour” and “sweet,” and Chineseness and Britishness.
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