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Love and Anxiety: Gender Negotiations in Chutney-Soca Lyrics in Trinidad

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Abstract

Chutney soca is commonly perceived to be a fusion of chutney, an Indo-Trinidadian folk music performed during Hindu weddings, and soca, which is Afro-Trinidadian fête music that developed through a mixture of calypso with soul.¹ Marriage, sex and the family are recurring themes in “classical” chutney music. When chutney makes the transition to chutney-soca, the themes remain but their articulation changes both literally, in the sense that English becomes the primary language, and figuratively, as their articulation is influenced by multiple sex/gender systems. It is my contention that in chutney-soca, Afro-Trinidadian and Indo-Trinidadian sex/gender belief systems come into intense interaction, causing symbolic disruptions in the Indian system of gender relations. These disruptions can result in the reconfiguration of gender relations for Indian women and men at a metaphoric level.² The desire of organizers of the Chutney-Soca Monarch competition to make it marketable to a foreign audience by conforming to ‘international’

¹ For the rest of the paper, when referring to Indo and Afro-Trinidadians, I use the terms ‘Indian’ and ‘black’ respectively. See also a glossary at the end of the paper for non-english words or idioms used.

² Although chutney-soca is a fusion music, and depends on the participation of both black and Indian artistes, it is still widely considered to be an ‘Indian artform’ due to the prevalence of imagery derived from Indian homes and customs, as well as the mostly Indian audiences at chutney soca events. Newspaper headlines like “Plenty chutney, too little soca” (*TnT Mirror*, 6 February 1998) and “Too much ‘jump and wave’ in chutney soca” (*Trinidad Guardian*, 15 January 2001) point to this perception. They also reveal the anxieties of Indians invested in defining an Indian culture distinct from the ‘dominant Creole’ culture due to fears of assimilation and cultural erosion. For this reason, I contend that the disruption resulting from interaction primarily affects the Indian system of gender relations.

standards also introduces North American gender ideologies. In this paper, I will look at how women and men, within the framework of the competition, negotiate gendered identities primarily through song lyrics, simultaneously challenging and reinforcing prevailing gender ideologies.

A history of chutney-soca

Research on the art forms reveals that the origins of both chutney and soca are contested, and that both resist easy definition (Ramnarine, 2001). The blending of the two is seen as a ‘natural’ development as both are celebratory in nature, create spaces for expressions of sexuality, especially women’s sexuality, and emphasize rhythms at the expense of melodies and lyrics. Yet chutney is said to have emerged from the religious context of Hindu wedding songs, and soca from the secular context of calypso. It is perhaps due to these diverse roots, or what are widely perceived to be diverse roots, that controversy about acceptable topics for compositions and judging have emerged during the Chutney Soca Monarch competition.

Race, gender and sexuality are deeply implicated in the development and expression of both chutney and soca. Chutney was a genre of songs performed by Indian women in some of the sex-segregated rituals of the Hindu wedding ceremony, before it became a popular art form. When chutney made the transition to the public sphere and adjusted to include men as performers and audience members, it was still considered an exclusive space for Indians. The art form was labelled ‘Indian soca’ and chutney shows ‘Indian alternatives’ to Carnival. Women’s sexuality, whether celebrated in *matikor* or exhibited during public chutney shows, has always been a focus of the art form and has been interpreted through the male gaze. The themes, relying on domestic imagery, are preoccupied with sexual relations between men and women, and gender relations in general. Some observers believe that the transition to the public sphere gave the art form a new lease on life. Folk songs and melodies that would have died with the women who sung them were revived, remixed and re-presented, largely due to the promotional efforts of the Mohammed brothers, with Mastana Bahar, Indian Cultural Pageant and weekend chutney fetes (see below).³

Ras Shorty I, a black calypsonian who is considered to be the ‘father’ of soca, stated that the music came about as an effort to revive calypso, which he, along with other artistes, perceived to be a dying art form:

³ Not all Indians, especially orthodox Hindus, appreciated these efforts. The Mohammeds (brothers who were producers of Mastana Bahar) were “severely criticized for being unscrupulous about the desecration of Hindu culture. They have been accused of exploiting the chutney phenomenon and the Hindu individual for commercial gain” (Ribeiro 1992).

I was looking for new avenues to improve the music, and from *Indrani*⁴ I went to Soul Calypso Music...Soca comes from calypso. It's the nucleus of calypso, the soul. I felt that everybody had tried with calypso. They called it soul calypso to link it with soul. I felt that to move on we had to change, get a new name. Calypso was dying a natural death. And to come up with a new name and a new form in calypsoul was what Sparrow was trying to do all along. Sparrow tried to add a lot of things to calypso and it didn't work. I felt it needed something brand new to hit everybody like a thunderbolt. I knew what I was doing was incorporating soul with calypso, but I didn't want to say soul calypso or calypsoul. So I came up with the name soca. I invented soca. And I never spelt it s-o-c-a. It was s-o-k-a-h to reflect the East Indian influence in the music (Boyke 1979).

Having grown up in Lengua, an Indian village, he felt that a new national music should include Indian rhythms, but the predominantly African community of calypsonians was not open to this notion at the time (Popplewell 2004). When he introduced the sound of soca on his *Love Man* LP (1974), he was criticized for 'playing Indian'. With his next album, *Endless Vibrations* (1975), soca began to catch on. By the 1980s, soca had become a major part of Carnival fêtes and black culture. Sexuality is also a focus of this art form, as critics and commentators have been obsessed with the image of the 'wining woman' in Carnival (Miller 1991). Gender relations as seen in the audience-performer relationship are similar to that of chutney, since the majority of popular artistes tend to be male, and the audience is perceived as being mostly female.

Historical context of chutney-soca

In the 1990s, Indians made a political breakthrough into the national consciousness with Basdeo Panday's successful campaign for Prime Minister. Ethnomusicologist Peter Manuel saw parallel cultural developments expressed in chutney and chutney soca as both "a concerted revival and assertion of Indian identity" and a "new spirit of creolization and syncreticism" (2000: 168). Panday commented on the fusion of chutney and soca in his opening speech at the first Chutney Soca Monarch (CSM), pointing out that the "cross-culturalization of music" was "a step in the direction of national unity" (*Trinidad Express*, February 1996). He specifically considered the creation of the competition as an "indication that people, despite our ethnic differences, are working together towards a common goal" (ibid).

Before I delve further into the components of the Chutney Soca Monarch competition, and its precursor, *Mastana Bahar*, it would be useful to discuss functions of the competition in Trinidad and what these might signify for art forms, organizers and contestants. Competitions seem to form a central part of the major art forms in Trinidad and Tobago, such as calypso and steel pan, and now chutney. There are several reasons why this might be the case: they validated indigenous aspects of culture that were seen as inferior to European art forms; encouraged creativity and the transition from imitation to innovation; provided important venues for budding artistes to gain experience and exposure; and in the late 20th century, became profitable endeavours. In addition, in post-colonial Trinidad, competitions took on yet another meaning. The government's decision to sponsor competitions like Panorama, and the National Calypso Monarch, and not

⁴ Georgia Popplewell described the song *Indrani* as a "chronicle of African/Indian romance which telegraphed the nation's racial anxieties" (1996).

support others like Chutney Soca Monarch, indicates how the nation is being defined and imagined, as well as what cultural forms are considered central to the development and definition of a national identity (Anderson, 1983).

For Indian art forms, small, local competitions came into being at the turn of the 20th century.

As villages grew and people became more stable, individual singing took a special place and group singing declined in popularity. ‘Tent singing’ along with many homes now hired singers for entertainment and this propelled the building of a classical repertoire. In such a case, a couple of singers would vie against each other in striving to be the best throughout the sitting. Even from this early development, the idea of competition began to grow, which added to the popularity of classical singing (Maharaj 1994).

This idea of competition has now developed to the point where almost every aspect of Indian culture, from food and music, to standards of beauty is subject to competition.

In the post-independence period, Indian cultural competitions, particularly *Mastana Bahar*, also became a means to emphasize ethnic identity and sharpen the borders of the Indian community, which many Indians felt were being threatened by social developments at the time. Patricia Mohammed writes that in the post-indentureship period:

Community is defined by how people think about themselves as well as how the state and political structures reinforce the notion of difference. The formation or definition of an Indian community in Trinidad was encouraged by factors that facilitated such a demarcation (2002, 8).

The factors at that time were Hindi and Hinduism. By the end of the 1960s, Hindi was no longer a strong marker of difference, because most Indians communicated with each other in English. Hinduism, in terms of rituals and institutions such as the Maha Sabha and schools, was also declining (Vertovec 1992, 124). There was a fear of cultural erosion that was heightened by the Black Power Movement in 1970.

Enter *Mastana Bahar*. Sham Mohammed, described as being “endowed with a strong sense of continuity and preservation of his cultural roots, a mark typical of the early Indian immigrants”, had just returned from studying in the United Kingdom (Mohammed, 1976). On his return, he observed that “the masses of people showed greater appreciation to things foreign: food, clothing, song, music and general lifestyle” and that local song and music, “dominated by Afro-Saxon and Afro-American cultural forces”, was “not receiving a fair share of radio and TV time” (Ibid). Fearing “cultural erosion”⁵ Mohammed “saw the need for cultural exposure and development of local

⁵ Shamoon Mohammed never mentions the Black Power movement and the impacts of the social and political conditions at the time on the creation of *Mastana Bahar* (1996). Perhaps cultural erosion is an indirect way of referring to the Black Power Movement. Ken Parmasad, Indian cultural activist and scholar, was also reluctant to identify the Black Power Movement as a major factor leading to revitalization of the Indian culture: “The tendency to view the increasingly viable expressions of Indian cultural practices from the 1970s as a reaction to the 1970 movement is to delay the deeply embedded historical cultural formation

talent on TV and radio”, which led to the first local competitive Indian television show (Ibid). Public response was impressive, leading to an increase from the original 13-week half-hour series, to a 39-week hour-long series.

Mastana Bahar can be considered a precursor to both the art of chutney-soca and the Chutney Soca Monarch competition in terms of scope of competition, language, musical fusion and the fostering of local compositions. Competitions before *Mastana Bahar* had been small and localized to private homes and village events. On the set of *Mastana Bahar* some contestants seemed to be lagging behind. Shamoan Mohammed complained that many of them are:

merely content to immerse themselves in the naked copying of the songs of famous Indian and Pakistani singers. Surely, imitation has its values, especially as a springboard for the development of budding artistes and for those who are learning and desirous of mastering various song types. But once artistes have attained some reasonable degree of maturity, one would expect them to utilize the skills gained through imitation to display their creative and imaginative propensities (Ibid).

This tendency highlighted the need for more local compositions of with a higher standard of quality and deeper degrees of innovation. Mohammed placed the onus on both artistes and promoters who “can experiment with ‘soca’ and other innovative music” (Ibid).

Language, equated with cultural identity, was a major concern of the producers. Encouraging artistes to produce local compositions had an unwanted side effect — not speaking Hindi, they composed primarily in English. Songs like Sundar Popo’s “Nana and Nani” revealed the audience’s ambiguous feelings towards the English language. They lauded producers for appealing to both Indian and non-Indian audiences and criticized them for the lack of Hindi words. Mohammed expressed the resulting anxieties for producers from purely English compositions: “In such compositions, it is difficult to discern the oriental flavour, and once the latter is lost in compositions of this category; then they have no claims to be promoted under the guise of Indian culture in Trinidad and Tobago” (ibid). The writing of English language compositions was an indication of the process of “Westernisation”. Fearing the demise of Hindi composition and by extension Indian culture, Mohammed warned prophetically:

Besides, a trend could develop where local Indian composers and musicians will seek to concentrate mainly in pure English compositions. This definitely seems to be a retrograde step, especially at a time in our history when every step should be made to encourage a greater knowledge of the oriental languages not only among local Indian artistes, but among Indians as a whole (Ibid).

At that time, it was not conceivable how Indian music, and the Indian community could retain its “Indianness” without an Indian language. Popo’s “Nana and Nani”, one of many English songs that can be considered a precursor to modern chutney-soca, offered a solution, though it was not recognized at the time. The use of familiar folk melodies, and Indian-style enunciation, beautifully exploited today by artistes such as Rakesh Yankaran and Devanand Gattoo, gave the songs an “Indian” sound while widening their appeal to non-Hindi speakers.

in Trinidad... The formation of Indian identity, while it was rooted in the socio-political realities of Trinidadian society, was fortified by an on-going process whereby symbolic continuity with the ancestral heritage sought to be maintained” (1989, 25).

Peter Manuel's commentary on the style, structure and content of chutney and chutney soca brings to the fore contradictions in the music. He notes that:

Chutney, like "jam and wine" soca, generally functions as dance music rather than listening music, and its lyrics tend to be light and insignificant. If soca song texts are generally unimportant because of their brevity and triviality, most "classical" chutney lyrics are semantically insignificant because of their conventionality and, more obviously, because of the fact that they are sung in a language (Bhojpuri Hindi) that is largely unintelligible to most Indo-Trinidadians and Guyanese (2000, 176-77).

In chutney-soca, English or mixed English and Hindi lyrics have come to replace the pure Hindi lyrics of chutney songs. Yet, while the "lyrics in dance music are generally of secondary importance" and the songs "adhere to stock Indian folk-song themes", they become emphasised due to "chutney's strophic, melodically repetitious song structure [which] tends to foreground the verses to some extent" (2000, 176-78). It is these very contradictions that not only make chutney-soca a powerful, socially relevant vehicle for the transmission of gender ideologies, but also reveals the process of negotiation by which they are challenged, changed or reinforced.

Constructions of gender and race produced in MB continue to impact and shape the Chutney Soca Monarch today. Women's dress became an index of their morality and devotion to their culture. Their preference for non-Indian dress was frowned upon:

Shalwars, Kurtas, Gararas, Saris, Lungis etc. portray humility, modesty and a high measure of morality. Oriental wear in its full repertoire should certainly be encouraged as it would expose citizens of this multi-cultural country to their richness and diversity. This point I have emphasized strongly because some contestants and audience members have appeared at times on the programme in apparel that is certainly disgraceful and morally unpalatable, as far as an Indian cultural show is concerned. It is unfortunate that TTT camera crew seem to highlight bare backs and chests (Mohammed, *ibid*).

The women's Western attire became a physical marker of their "failure" to play the role of cultural transmitters. The inclusion of the category of Miss Mastana Bahar Queen in the Indian Cultural Pageant can also be seen as a way to define and control Indian femininity. The attention paid to Indian dress is still present in the Chutney Soca Monarch Competition today. Media coverage of female contestants tends to focus on their bodies and dress, rather than their talent, unlike male contestants.

While Mastana Bahar set certain parameters for female participation, it also led to an increase in the number of female performers in the public sphere. Few women, especially dancers, performed in public in the first half of the 20th century. Those who flouted convention, such as Champa Devi, were labelled prostitutes and considered 'loose women' at the time. It is likely that Mastana Bahar contributed to the gradual destigmatisation of female performers in public spaces and lifted the status of local folk forms, many of which were in the women's domain.

Although it was difficult for non-Indians to make it to the Grand Finals, Mastana Bahar was successful in exposing non-Indians to Indian music and making possible its integration in Carnival several decades later with the Chutney Soca Monarch. It set in motion the growth in output of locally produced records and provided a training ground for many of the contestants who would later compete in the Chutney Soca Monarch and other competitions. George Singh relates how this competition was created:

In 1995, a friend and I went to a chutney show in Penal. It was a culture shock, and an experience I would not forget. I was impressed by the performances of the artistes who were really simple folks, some of them living in abject poverty and dependent on their talents to make a living. In that year Sonny Mann's 'Lotayla' became a big hit. So there was not only a change in traditional chutney music but there was an obvious crossover of music between the chutney and the soca artistes, and a new blend of music emerging out of a dynamic musical culture. But I thought chutney artistes were exploited by promoters who would pay them pennies for their talent (*Sunday Express*, 25 January 1998).

Combining his concern for artistes with experience from organising trade shows, he established the Chutney Soca Monarch in 1996, with the noble aim of creating a forum for chutney and soca artistes to interact, exchange musical ideas and mix the two art forms to create a new blend that held promise for the international market.

Within two years, Singh beamed the show live to Guyana and Suriname. To "make sure that the international community is aware of chutney soca and the fact that Trinidad and Tobago has a diverse cultural society", he also teamed up with popular record label JMC to compile outstanding selections from the show on a CD for distribution in New York and other locations with substantial Indo-Caribbean populations (*Sunday Punch*, 1996). Two years later, in 2000, Singh stepped up his efforts to make the Chutney Soca Monarch a truly international competition. He opened Chutney Soca Monarch to artistes outside of Trinidad and Tobago, and took the show to Toronto, New York and other locations with Indo-Caribbean communities.

Methodology

Patricia Mohammed's study of *Gender Negotiations Among Indians from 1917-47*, (2002) illustrates the centrality of gender in identity formation. She shows how gender arrangements were re-constituted in an effort to define the Indian community after the rupture in gender systems caused by the indentureship experience. What is striking is how persistent the ideologies guiding these arrangements are and how their mediums of transmission alter over generations to adapt to changing social and political contexts. Whereas before they would be transmitted through folk tales and wedding songs, today they are transmitted through mediums such as chutney soca.

Mohammed's study revolves around the concept of negotiation because "cooperation and negotiations between men and women in economic, social and sexual relations are the cornerstones on which ethnicity and culture are grounded" (2002, 9). Any discussion of cultural forms then is presupposed by the underlying gender relations. Using the negotiation of gender relations as a conceptual tool enables us to explore:

the ways in which masculinity and femininity are constructed by men and women themselves, how they interpret received gender ideology and either challenge or reinforce existing paradigms. Situating the time period allows one to investigate the specific conditions which frame the expected roles and lived practices of each sex (2002, 12).

These processes, or gender negotiations, in chutney-soca lyrics are essentially a form of public dialogue on what is and is not acceptable behaviour for women and men and how these standards of acceptability change over time. The song lyrics document attempts to pin down gender roles by offering prescriptive images of men and women and by denouncing behaviours that do not conform to normative ideas of gender. They also challenge existing gender norms by offering alternative perceptions of femininity and masculinity, or potential ways for women and men to behave. In addition, they offer audience members the chance to reflect upon gender customs and their relevance to the present day. It is the tension between 'acceptable' and 'not acceptable' that encourages the scores of 'lashback' songs in which a singer responds to the lyrics of a popular song by denouncing the ideas, insulting the singer, or do both, and then offers his or her own views.

To explore these gender negotiations in chutney-soca, I briefly look at the space in which they occur and then move on to the lyrics. Mohammed (2002) focused on negotiations in the domestic sphere because this was an area where women had some degree of influence. This paper looks at negotiations in the public sphere of chutney soca because historically, chutney was a private, exclusively female space. Although men have dominated chutney in the public sphere, women still use the forum to voice their concerns, especially those related to domestic situations. The imagery, relying on domestic metaphors and themes, reflects their lasting impact on the art form.

In the transition from wedding tent to competition stage, from private to public, the notion of public and private itself comes under negotiation. This process, initiated in *Mastana Bahar* with the emergence of female artistes, continues in Chutney Soca Monarch. Observations and recommendations on appropriate dress, dance and song for women indicate that bodily practices and behaviour were closely monitored and regulated by the male producers. They set the parameters for a public Indian femininity in the 1970s. In the 1980s, when the chutney 'explosion' occurred at weekend fetes, women re-set these parameters by bringing private traditions into public spaces and expressing their sexuality vibrantly through song and dance.

Drupatee Ramgoonai's 'Lick Down Me Nani' is one such instance of widening the parameters.⁶ Drupatee transgressed borders through the content of the song and the spaces she chose for performance. Drupatee plays on the double meaning of 'nani' (which means grandmother in Trinidad Hindi and 'vagina' in Trinidadian slang) and widened the scope of sexuality for Indian women. The double entendre enabled her to challenge the notion that grandmothers are asexual due to their age; raise the taboo topic of sexual violence against women under the guise of humour; and highlight her own sexuality by demanding oral sex. Perhaps even more disturbing to critics was the fact that Drupatee moved out of the Indian public sphere into the black male public sphere of calypso. Thus, she negotiated the concept of public for Indian women to include non-Indian spaces as well. The outrage expressed by both men and women at the song,

⁶ See Shalini Puri's 'Race, rape and representation' in *Matikor* for an insightful discussion of the narrative of rape and violence in this song. She also uses the song to show the figure of Indo-Trinidadian woman becomes a site of negotiation for discourses on racial and cultural nationalist politics.

indicates that she transgressed not just the boundaries of Indian femininity, but also the borders of the Indian community.

In the early 1990s, there was a lot of debate and even a conference organised by the Hindu Prachar Kendra about the scandalous behaviour at chutney shows. Images of middle-aged woman in skin-tight clothes wining amidst a circle of leering men abounded. Women were asserting their right to do in public what they had done in private all along. There was, however, one major difference. In private, women had been performers and audience members. In public they were primarily audience members. Yet, through dancing, they had managed to expand the role of the female audience member into one of spectacle and performance. Perhaps, the underlying anger directed by critics at women's 'immoral' behaviour was the notion that women had upset the gendered relationship between the active, male performer and the passive, female audience member by refusing to be passive in their role as audience members.

I discuss the songs that appear on the Chutney Soca Monarch Finals CD compilations from 1998. The finals usually have 15 to 20 contestants who perform two songs each. The CD includes what the organisers consider the highlights of the competition, so they do not necessarily include songs by the top 10 artistes. While there are songs on many topics ranging from racial unity and harmony, to food and fetes, for this paper I only focus on those songs pertaining to gender and gender relations. I devote more attention to those that transcended the Carnival season and continued to receive airplay, indicating their popularity and their ability to resonate ideas about gender and gender norms. Each CD also has some selections that are primarily in Hindi, but I do not discuss these songs. The majority of the Indo-Trinidadian population no longer speak Hindi and the gender messages in these songs, if any, are lost on the public, who enjoy it primarily for its sound and beat.

I take it as a given that sexist and patriarchal ideas structure the song lyrics. Rather than pointing out the obvious, I attempt to analyse how such ideas are simultaneously contested and reinforced by both men and women. Gender ideologies are negotiated from several different positions in popular music. Performers negotiate them through lyrics and stage performance, which are in turn mediated by audience members through various interpretations. By studying the lyrics, I automatically privilege the contestations of performers over those of the audience. Peter Manuel problematises the study of song lyrics in his article entitled "Gender Politics in Caribbean Popular Music", and highlights the gap between consumer perspectives and academic interpretation:

If the sexism in many such song lyrics may seem readily apparent, interpreting their social significance is actually far from simple. A conscientious analysis of such music must take care not to overgeneralize from unrepresentative samples, and to recognize the often contradictory relationships between expressive discourses like popular song and actual gender relations and attitudes. Most important is the need to contextualize lyrics in their broader cultural milieu, and to consider consumer interpretations and the social practices embedding reception. Basic to such an approach is the recognition that the social meaning of a song cannot be unproblematically "read off" the lyrics by an analyst, however well-versed in modern literary theory he or she may be (1998,13).

His study illustrates that the intended message of the performer is often misread and always filtered through the subject-position of the listener. Since I was unable to gather audience responses due to the large number of songs covered, I incorporate whenever possible viewpoints from newspaper articles and opinion pieces to balance my own interpretations. I also try to contextualise, as much as possible, the songs and themes in social circumstances by discussing aspects such as the motivation behind the song, performers' thoughts on the song, the performer's background, and so on.

Much of this contextual information was gathered from thirty-three personal interviews with musicians, singers, dancers, producers and promoters between January and September 2004. Nine of those interviews took place in homes or offices, and these are taped and transcribed. Of those for which I took handwritten notes, fourteen were conducted in spaces that were not conducive to taping due to high noise levels such as backstage, rum shops and restaurants, and ten were conducted over the phone. Supplementing these interviews are informal conversations with artistes, promoters and producers in different kinds of spaces and situations, such as in cars while driving to a show, at performances while a singer was waiting backstage, during spontaneous 'limes' with artistes after a show, at radio stations, at clubs while accompanying a promoter or DJ, or at a studio with a producer. I recorded these informal conversations in field notes, along with discussions I had with audience members at chutney shows that solicited opinions on chutney shows, artistes, songs, and experiences in other musical spaces.

Regarding gender negotiations in lyrics, it is possible to identify eight different areas pertaining to notions of masculinity and femininity. In the first, *Dem man and dem so lazy: Grievances* in love and marriage, women redefine the role of the male provider to include emotional needs, in addition to physical and material necessities. Men's response to women's grievances is rooted in insecurity. They attempt to justify their inability to fulfil women's needs by focusing on her infidelity, which implicitly signals that women are not worthy of their trust and love. Part of the problem is that men find they cannot adequately define women, which makes it difficult to control them. It becomes clear that in patriarchal societies, oppression of women negatively affects men as well: it limits their own range of acceptable behaviour by labelling men who shy away from controlling women as 'weak'.

The range of acceptable 'masculine' behaviours is then limited, and in many instances, men are required to somehow exhibit a show of power in order to be considered men by other men. In the second *'Ranis and Rajas of Chutney: Songs of Self-Affirmation'*, men sketch out what it means to be an Indian male — one who can control women's bodies and is sexually potent. The music and lyrics allow men to possess power on a symbolic level. Some singers, such as Heeralal Rampartap in 'Chutney Kilkatay', do it in a subtle manner. Others, such as Chris Garcia in 'Roti', and Devanand Gattoo in 'Bacchanal', are quite blatant. In a sense, because there are few songs of self-affirmation by women, it seems that this is an area in which men primarily negotiate with other men for authority and power.

This definition of male is central in the third *'Dance Reena Dance: The Performer-Audience Relationship and the Influence of Party Soca'*. Having established the

requirements for masculinity in relation to individual women, the men now concern themselves with the negotiation of gender roles in public spaces in relation to groups of women. In this area, the songs, primarily by men, privilege the male by making him an active performer. He is completely in control of his music and he is able to hold an audience's attention through his performance abilities. Men relegate women to the dance floor. They become passive, anonymous receivers of the music, with little control over their bodies as the male performer directs them by providing instructions – an element derived from 'party soca'. These songs can be considered a lyrical response to women's attempts to negotiate the notion of public and private as discussed above.

As men draw out the blueprint for masculinity, they inadvertently define femininity. In the fourth '*Underneath de Bamboo Tent: Dulahins, Dulahas, and Marriage*', men circumscribe the scope of femininity through the image of the ideal wife. Supporting the notion of the ideal wife is the gendered division of labour and the concept of *patideva*, or husband-worship. A sub-image of the ideal wife that emerges is that of the simple country girl, whose talents are primarily physical and most evident in the kitchen, bedroom or the dance floor. Not only do men outline the duties and qualities of 'good' women by providing numerous examples of unacceptable behaviours and physical characteristics, they also clarify the duties and responsibilities of husbands. On this point, there is some disagreement. Some men support the conventional role of the emotionally distant husband whose wife exists to serve them. Others have a more progressive view of a husband who is attentive to his wife's needs and considers the marriage a partnership. All, however, support a gendered division of labour.

In the fifth, '*She Eh Easy: Demanding Women*', women speak back to the notion of the ideal wife and remind men that fulfilling partnerships require mutual respect. They break away from the image of the docile country girl by stating the terms of the relationship in strong, clear voices. Women resist men's efforts to push them to the periphery, and place themselves firmly in the centre. In reflecting on these demands, men tend to portray women as impulsive, emotional and irrational. In addition, they trivialise women's demands by interpreting them in primarily physical or sexual terms.

Women's sexuality becomes a means to redefine masculinity in a sixth negotiation '*Men Customize Gender*'. The fluidity of gender roles, and their relationship to social contexts, becomes clear in this area. In this series of songs, men take on traditionally female duties, such as providing sexual education to young women, thus appropriating the women for themselves. In a way, this can be considered a means to lay claim on the historically female domain of chutney. They also ascribe typically male behaviours to women and these tend to be negative, such as domestic violence and aggressive sexual pursuit. In this role reversal, men expand the scope of masculinity by allowing themselves to play women's roles, distance themselves from stereotypically negative male behaviours and attempt to curtail the expression of women's sexuality by pathologising it.

In the seventh area, '*Violent Love: Men Sing About Domestic Violence*', men attempt to take on the grave topic of abuse. While this is laudable, the party-oriented context of chutney soca prevents it from being addressed in the serious manner that it deserves.

These songs may have been a response to demands by cultural critics to make chutney soca more ‘conscious’. Interestingly, when women sing about domestic violence it tends to be descriptive. When men sing about the topic, they tend to be critical of other men and assign themselves a moral superiority on behalf of female victims and distancing themselves from the abusive men.

The notion of abuse, though not identified as such, is also present in the image of the wicked mother-in-law, which forms the last area of negotiation. *‘Mothers-in-law: Static Images’* shows that gender ideologies, once entrenched, are difficult to dispense with. This may be because although they are no longer socially relevant, they guarantee a response because they are deeply ingrained in the collective memory of the crowd. Sometimes songs can fit into more than one category. For instance, the song ‘Lazy Man’ is a grievance song, but it also has a sub-text of violence.

“Dem man and dem so lazy”: Grievances

In North Indian folk songs, Manuel identifies genres like *rasiya* which centre on women’s complaints (2000, 170). In Trinidad, chutney in the public sphere becomes a forum for both women and men’s complaints. Women’s complaints are about relationships that are unfulfilling emotionally, financially and sexually. The songs, possessing a sense of urgency, are often performed in a pleading tone. Men tend to perceive the same situations entirely differently. They acknowledge no fault of their own and are always at a loss as to what they did wrong. The woman’s decision to leave or commit adultery is unfathomable and inexcusable. Often the woman is portrayed as being fickle in love, irrational and impulsive, deceptive or simply indifferent. This image is not new and it derives from the stereotyping of women bolstered by colonial attitudes towards Indians, which painted them as ‘immoral and weak’ in character, and Hindu philosophy, which endows women with a powerful libido, which, if not controlled, could lead to destruction. In the songs, the Indian woman bears the entire burden for the failure of the relationship and sometimes the men ask her to leave. More often than not, violence, whether inflicted on themselves or their wives, functions as a reaction or a solution to the troubled relationship. All the songs point to a lack of communication and dialogue between men and women, which seems to be the root of the problems; yet this would appear to be the most constructive solution.

“Winer Boy” (2001) by Phulmatie Ramjattan also highlights heartache. Phulmatie is one of the few women who still speaks Hindi and she composes her own songs. When asked about her sources of inspiration, she waved her hand around her house, indicating that her home life and its domestic imagery become the text of her songs. The song, using images of country life, like the *jupanie*, shows the impact of globalisation and capitalism on gender relations in rural Trinidad. The boy, stung by the money bug, leaves his poor lover for America and the material wealth it offers. Sentiments of loss and longing, patriotism and social commentary come together plaintively in the last verse:

*You ‘fraid to marry me boy, you ‘fraid to marry me
You gone America, boy, you gone America
the same thing you searching*

we have it down here

This song takes two stereotypes of women – the winer girl and the dollar-eyed woman who assesses men by the weight of their wallet – and superimposes them on the “boy.” She is a casualty of the man’s materialism and not being able to lure him back with riches, she uses the only resources she has: her song and an inherent wisdom drawn from her personal experience.

Songs of heartbreak are a traditional component of Indian folk songs. The men are portrayed as being insensitive to women’s emotional needs, due to ignorance, selfishness, or both. In Rasika Dindial’s song “*Lazy Man*” (1998), the husband is absent emotionally, financially and physically; he contributes neither labour nor money to the household and prefers to go down to the river to lime⁷ with friends. On top of all that, he is also abusive and controlling: “If ah step out ah have to reach back before six/ If ah only talk its plenty plenty licks.” When Dindial, first-time contender in the Chutney Soca Monarch finals, sang about this no-good man, it caught the national ear. It has been remixed and appears on several chutney, chutney soca and Carnival compilations. It is also the song that earned Dindial second place in the Chutney Soca Monarch the highest a woman has earned so far in this competition. Perhaps it is the way Dindial, known popularly as the ‘*Rani* (queen) of Chutney’ performs the song, reminding listeners of a “true imitation” of strong-voiced Indian singers like Abida Parveen, while at the same time being distinctly Trinidadian with her use of primarily English lyrics integrated with Indian folk melodies and laid over the soca beat. Maybe it is the image of the abusive, useless man, which resonated with her female audience. Perhaps it is both.

Like Dindial’s “*Lazy Man*”, Drupatee Ramgoonai’s spouse in “*Husband Only Want Meh To Cook* (2003)” is incapable of treating her well and refuses to take her anywhere. She complains that she:

*Wuk so in de house
I don't know what to do
Meh husband have meh cooking
whole year thru.*

His demands on her make her feel that “he actin as if I is a maid he hired.” Compounding the problem is his miserly nature which prevents him from buying the latest domestic technology, and forces her to do everything the old-fashioned way, requiring more time and effort:

*It would be easier if I had a four burner,
no console, nor even fire proper,
Is wood chookin all day,
he expect me to hack.*

⁷ Editor’s note: The word ‘lime’ is idiomatic to Trinidad and refers to a wide range of leisure time activities - from a well organized party to an informal time spent together.

His demands can also be seen as a way to limit her free time, thereby preventing her from meeting other men. What makes the songs in competition particularly interesting is the singer's interaction with the audience. Performers who do well in the competition often draw the audience into the song. Drupatee does this by relating the lyrics of the song to the anxieties and concerns of women's everyday lives, while at the same time affirming the fete as a space for the release of those anxieties. She comments in the middle of the song:

Ladies, this one is for you. Man is only pressure. All yuh sexy ladies, I want to see yuh hands up. All yuh sexy ladies, let me see yuh hands up. Ladies this one is for all yuh. Lemme give yuh a wine.

Her words achieve the effect of building up solidarity between herself and the women in the audience who have also felt the pressures of marriage. By giving them a wine, she is in effect making a gesture towards their ability to put up with the pressure and still have the capacity to have a good time.

Grievance songs by women address multiple issues and concerns about men, and underlying them is the notion that as wives and lovers, they deserve better treatment. Men's songs, in contrast, which tend to focus on the woman's deceptive nature or the fickleness of her love, are coloured by a deep sense of insecurity. Devanand Gattoo's "Koochoor Koochoor" (2000), literally "Confusion Confusion", is a simple song about a woman who behaves as if she is single, even though she is in a relationship with him:

*yuh does tell meh
hush mi mouth
but yuh dressin up everyday
and yuh goin all about.*

She is indifferent to his love which is "like diamonds so precious and rare," and tells him lies that cause worries and tears. The confusion stems from his bewilderment at her behaviour and also from his inability to make a decision about whether to go or to stay. At the end, he does neither, and turns to God instead: "the only thing to do now is to bow mi head and pray". Not having the strength to end the relationship, he escapes into religion.

Other songs, however, do not offer such an easy solution. Kenny J's "Baboolal" (2001) is also about a man coming to terms with a relationship gone sour. Baboolal feels that he is "getting horned"⁸ by his wife, but cannot understand why:

*I don't know what ah do
I don't know what ah say
Jus so she pick up sheself
and gone away.*

⁸ Colloquial term used in Trinidad and Tobago to refer to infidelity.

The song has two narrators – the mournful Baboolal and the singer reflecting on Baboolal’s actions. While Baboolal is unable to figure out why his wife has left him, the singer’s reiteration of Baboolal’s actions makes it quite clear why she would:

*Baboolal eh eating boy,
he eh goin to work.
Limin and drinkin and gettin on real bad
Beatin she in front of de family in de yard.*

Baboolal sees it in a much more innocuous light. He confesses that he came home a “little drunk” on Saturday evening, but does not understand why such a harmless action would cause his wife to leave. Disturbingly, violence never figures into Baboolal’s mind as a possible cause for his wife’s leaving him. He also jumps to conclusions, seeing his wife’s departure as a marker of her infidelity, rather than dissatisfaction with his behaviour. While it is not clear whether Baboolal beat his wife for leaving him or whether the beating caused her to leave, he sees violence as a solution and a means to control her behaviour. The song ends with a chilling conclusion that is open to interpretation. Kenny J informs us about Baboolal’s position; he has money and plenty land and he “don’t know what to do like fish outta water.” In the end he decides to use his wealth to find an *obeah* man from Guyana, but his purpose is not clear. He might use his powers to lure his wife back or to make her life without him miserable. Either way, it spells misery for the wife.

The spiteful tone in “Baboolal” is also present in Adesh Samaroo’s “Rum Till I Die” (2003). It is fair to say that this is now the unofficial anthem of Trinidad and Tobago, with lyrics that glorify rum drinking, infidelity and trickery in love. From chutney shows in muddy fields and wedding tents, to dancehall clubs and soca fetes, the minute the DJ plays this song, the entire crowd cheers and becomes energized. As a young reveller remarked on its cross-cultural appeal:

if you’re at a club where there is mostly hiphop/ dancehall music playing, and all of a sudden de DJ play ‘Rum Till I Die’, the whole crowd turn Indian. Gyuls start doing Indian movements – all de time dey wasn’t Indian before. Even de Rasta men shaking dey dreads. Dey doh care, dey love it.

As the narrator tells it, his wife’s jealous nature leads her to jump to conclusions and accuse him of infidelity. He claims he was merely giving the other woman directions. His immediate reaction is, as the song title indicates, to drink himself to death.⁹ Yet as the song progresses we find this is just a flippant reaction. First his attitude changes, and then his entire story. He convinces himself that each day without her is better and better and even goes so far as to say, “I don’t know why you couldn’t leave a little sooner.” With this attitude shift comes a new confidence that leads to a double betrayal:

⁹ While Adesh Samaroo claims the song as his own creation, older singers I interviewed told me that the song has been in existence a long time with slightly different lyrics. Helen Myers, in her study of Hindu music in Trinidad, transcribes a strikingly similar song in which the narrator makes no attempt to regain self-esteem or hurt his wife (Myers 1998, 368). In comparison, Samaroo’s song takes on a tone of immaturity and reveals a need to save face before his peers.

*But when you leaving something
Always leave for better
That is why I leave she
And I take she sister.*

This last verse, in which the underlying notion is compensation for a wounded masculinity, is significant for two reasons. First, he reverses the roles so that now he is the one leaving. The reversal, along with the fact that he brings his wife's sister into the fray, points to how deeply his sense of manhood is affected and the vengeance this provokes. Not only does he fabricate a story, but he also shames her and her family. In an attempt to regain control over the situation, he portrays women as fickle and disloyal, not only to men but to each other as well by using violent language. Tikasingh, writing about Indian men in the indentureship period, observed that:

More than any other group, Indians were noted for an unmatched tendency to use violent language (that is, language connoting sexual intercourse)...almost without fail the phrases used connoted sexual intercourse with all the defendant's female relatives...the connotations were almost in terms of boasting, and of being the potential and aggressive actor of the imagined relationship" (cited in Mohammed 2002, 211).

Patricia Mohammed noted the effect of such language on both the person using it and the person being addressed:

The male language of address, whether of open abuse or that tainted with sexual brushstrokes, is an undeniable method of social control over women.... The conveyor of such messages must have felt powerless in many ways and speech was adopted as retaliation, shaming being as effective in some ways as physical abuse (2002, 212).

Also produced in 2003, "*Leggo Meh Hand Meena*" by Lall Bharat, is a simple ditty about a man who is certain that he is being horned, and is asking Meena to leave him. The entire song is a complaint about her manipulative behaviour. She is not only deceiving him but the entire community. Whenever they go out, she pretends to be jealous every time he talks to another woman. Her feigned jealousy is an intricate trap and a cover-up for her own infidelity. She makes it seem as if he is the one with the wandering eye, which makes it impossible for him to leave her without tarnishing his reputation as a dishonest man. She attempts to deceive him at home as well but he can see through her actions. At night she tosses and turns in the bed, making it seem as if she desires him, but he feels that she is actually lusting for the other man. His pathetic attempt at dialogue is to "bark" at her but this only makes the dog bark at him. Since angry words do not solve the problem, he decides that the only solution is for Meena to leave him. What is interesting and unusual is that the preservation of his integrity is much more important to him than being seen as a virile male capable of satisfying his lover. Most men in chutney soca songs opt for the latter.

Based on a real-life situation, Daddy Chineese offers up the same solution to his unfaithful girlfriend in "*Two Face Neemackharam*" (2002), but in a much more forceful and bitter manner since he has caught her red-handed:

After all that I've done for you

*You do meh bad
Ah feelin sad
Dahlin get out of de yard.*

As in Drupatee's "*Husband Only Want Meh to Cook*", the interaction with the audience adds another dimension to an otherwise simple song. About halfway through the song, he addresses both the audience and the "two face neemackaram":

I cyar understand what this girl doing meh eh? You think I could make back with you after all dem wrong things you do, eh? Wha what yuh really think yuh do Daddy Chineer gyul? What yuh think yuh do? Whe yuh trying to prove? What yuh trying to prove? Look look leh go meh hand, leave! Like yuh want meh call de cops or what? Call de police or what? I say take your things and go.

His request for her to leave becomes increasingly threatening. However, the fete becomes a space for him to shrug off the pain and regain his sense of self, with the audience as a witness. While he does admit to "feelin sad", he must prove that he is strong enough to survive the rigours of love. He does this by reclaiming his identity as a performer. In typical soca style, he urges the audience to scream and join him in the performance. Then, like Drupatee, he establishes a sense of solidarity with the men before he launches back into the song:

All yuh understand wha I sayin? It's pain I feeling. Every man does go through this thing in life. It's the norm.

By normalizing women's infidelity, he absolves himself of personal responsibility. Since every man experiences this, the fact that she went with another man says nothing about his ability to please women. What is more important is that he can overcome it, like Adesh Samaroo in "*Rum Till I Die*". In effect, he seems to be saying that it is a no-win situation for men, so why bother to reflect on personal behaviour?

Ranis and Rajas of Chutney: Songs of Self-Affirmation



Almost every year there are one or two songs, in which singers affirm their own sexuality and talents as chutney singers. Of the nine songs I identified here, only two were sung by women. Perhaps this points to the deeper insecurities of men. Chutney, in the wedding context, was a space where women could poke fun at men without having to answer for their bold statements, and also be validated by other women in their criticisms and jokes. Men, always in the public view, had to be more cautious in guarding their masculinity. Of course, this did not stop men from airing grievances about women. However, for all the grievance songs, there were others, raw in sound and emotion, which told of the man's undying love for or deep attraction to the woman.

Chutney Performer Photo courtesy Noor Kumar Mahabir

For all the songs that described women as deceitful, cold and indifferent, there were also others that described them as beautiful, loving and irresistible. The fact that men bemoan women's faults often reveals how deeply they are affected by what they perceive to be women's betrayals and cunning manoeuvres in love and marriage. It is perhaps to compensate for this lack of control that men must sing about their sexual prowess. Their ability to sing chutney therefore becomes a metaphor for sexual prowess itself

Women rarely sing songs of unadulterated praise about their husbands and lovers. More often than not, they are singing grievance songs about how their partners have failed them. Denise Belfon's 'Ah Looking for an Indian Man' and 'Ah Bounce Up Mih Dulaha' by Phulmatie Ramjattan are exceptions. The reaction to Belfon's song by some black men in the newspapers points to a growing insecurity, which is not so much about the ability of Indian men to capture black women's attention, but about being overlooked by black women. In an editorial entitled "African men hurting over Indian man calypso", one man wrote:

Denise Belfon has done her race a great disservice by attempting to project the Indian man as an object of sexual desire to African women. To boast that African women should get "ah Indian man to jam meh inside de session" because they "yearning", "hungry" and "thirsty" for an Indian man is disrespectful to the African male and damaging to his pride... It is insensitive and certainly does little to help with the low self-esteem that exists...Ms Belfon must realise that while every Trini enjoys calypso, it is an art form that is indigenous to African people. Wearing a sari and hurting "the black man who just feeling to party" by spurning him in favour of Indian men is unfortunate...I hope that this is an aberration that will peter out! (*Trinidad Guardian* 25 January 2004).

A Black woman, however, supported this 'aberration' and spoke out about the double standard for both Black women and Indian men:

It seems as though it's ok for them to fantasise and sing about Indian and other women, and this is no problem. But we African women must never look beyond black men. If Indian men complained about the constant focus on Indian women, these same brethren would have damned them as racists. From Sparrow's "Sexy Marajin" and Crazy's "Nanny Wine" to Machel's "Nothing wrong with wining on ah Indian gyul" and the ever-present desire to marry a "Dulahin," Indian women have always been targeted. African women never complained about the adverse impact of all of this on their self-esteem and pride (*Trinidad Guardian* 25 January 2004).

Anand Ramlogan, an Indian columnist with the *Guardian*, applauded the song for striking at stereotypes of Indian men and setting a new trend in the portrayal of Indian men as sex symbols:

This calypso will at least give the Indian man some prominence and exposure on the national Carnival stage. The stereotype that has confined Indian men to being portrayed merely as rural farmers, doubles vendors, shopkeepers, doctors and lawyers, but never ever as sex objects, will hopefully now change. The lyrics of calypsos over the years have never focused on the Indian man (except when Panday was in power and he was gleefully portrayed as corrupt) (*Guardian*, 18 January 2004).

On the whole, having little affirmation from Indian or black women and feeling threatened by the myth of black men's sexual prowess, it is no surprise that there is a series of self-affirming songs on the CDs. A sub-text that runs through these songs is "Since I can't control her emotions, I can at least control her body through my music and song." Songs of self-affirmation for men are also songs of compensation. Songs discussed in the next section of '*Dance Reena Dance*' can also be considered self-affirming, in that by singing about girls that find them attractive, the singer affirms his own desirability. Often such songs, using exaggeration, portray girls that are so out of control, that they will do anything, risk everything, to gain the man's attention and favour. Their jealousy makes them 'easy', somewhat undesirable, because they are so available.

In "*Chutney Kirkatay*" (1998), Heeralal Rampartap's declares at the beginning of the song that, "they call me de wonder boy in TnT, I say without a chutney song, there is no fete for we." In these three simple lines, Rampartap not only affirms his talent but also what is integral to having a fete. Chutney is now a necessary element in many Trinidadian fetes, because chutney, along with soca, calypso and steel pan, defines the national identity. In the rest of the song, he encourages the audience to dance:

*leh meh see you dance
leh meh see you prance
Come leh me see you til lay lay
and dance de killkatay.*

The killkatay, his new dance, he tells us is "The latest greatest dance craze take over Trinidad." He can move the audience: "Well, the action start, everybody gettin mad" and his music can cross ethnic boundaries so that everyone, regardless of race, is affected by the infectious rhythms. For Heeralal, this sense of self-assuredness is rooted in positive interactions with his fans, which translate into a sense of duty towards his audience. One of his most popular songs, "Basmatie", was inspired by a young woman who asked that he write a song for her because she loves to dance to his music.

Rooplal G's "*Rumal Mangay*" (1999), with its nonsensical lyrics in Hindi, is about a girl dancing on the stage, who is "movin up she body like she in a rage". Affirming Rooplal's effectiveness as a singer, she asks him to keep singing:

*De lurki say she want more,
she tell me sing again
Sing for me Rooplal G,
leh meh dance and make meh name.*

It is an audience-performer relationship with mutual benefits. He gets the pleasure of watching her dance, and she gets an opportunity to display her dancing skills using his songs.

"*Roti*" (1999), sung by Chris Garcia, involves much more than self-affirmation; it offers an opinion of what women find sexually desirable through the metaphor of *roti* and establishes his own sexuality as a virile, straight male. The song starts out with a self-

assured declaration: “I have number one *roti* shop in Trinidad,” followed by a triumphant laugh. It goes on to tell the story of a Mexican woman who lands in Trinidad and develops a taste for Garcia’s *roti*:

*A sexy Mexican-ah come down to mi island-ah
say she love de chutney, she want to eat some curry
then she come by my shop-ah, i gie she buss-up shot-ah
now everyday buyin, the pepper has she singin*

The nature and depth of her addiction is then specified:

*Roti boy, she like roti, goat and beef, chicken no shrimp,
roti in de mornin
roti in de evenin
roti in de night time
roti all de time.*

Using *roti* as a metaphor for the phallus, Garcia goes on to reinforce the stereotype that size does matter, especially to women. But it is not only size, it is the frequency as well. The Mexican woman, apparently addicted to Garcia’s *roti*, wants it non-stop. After each phrase, we hear her in the background shouting, “Give me”. Lacing his song with *double entendre*, he sings about how his success with the Mexican woman gives him ambition to expand his business. Soon he can claim, “you’ll come again! Come! Come! Come!” Then to clarify, he adds:

*If all yuh see trouble!
If all yuh see people!
Is only ladies
each love meh roti*

Having long hair, and being a self-described ‘pretty boy’, Garcia faced allegations of being gay.¹⁰ According to a producer who arranged a show for him in Guyana, Garcia

¹⁰ In an interview with Garcia, he also described himself as the first phallic symbol for the Indo-Caribbean male. Reading newspaper accounts of his hit ‘Chutney Bacchanal’ in 1996, it becomes apparent that he certainly was a sex symbol among women, and that perhaps he paved the way for other Indian performers to be seen as sexually desirable. His status, however, was undermined by what was perceived to be an ambiguous sexuality (Personal interview, 18 February 1996).

was performing on stage when he heard the crowd murmuring about his sexuality. Stopping mid-way into his song, he declared, ““You know plenty places Ah go, people say Chris Garcia gay. But hear it from Chris Garcia... I am just like ah Chinee man, ah like to eat cat too!”” (Personal communication, 6 August 2004) The song, in this case, then becomes a forum for Garcia to set the record straight about his sexuality.

“*Chutney-Soca Tabanca*” (1999) by Ramraji Prabhu is one of two songs of self-affirmation by a woman, with the other being “*Rool It*” by Asha Kamachee. It is also different from other songs in that Prabhu not only validates herself – “They call me the Chutney Queen”– but she also notes the efforts of fellow singers and pays tribute to others. In the first two verses, she celebrates the efforts of two male chutney singers, Boyie Basdeo and Sonny Mann. Of Boyie, she sings:

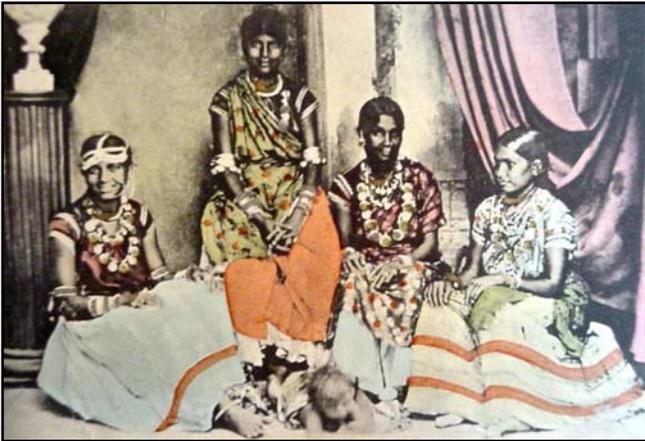
*Boyie do de chutney until he nearly die
Boyie do de chutney until he nearly cry
He showin all dem women
how to de butterfly.*

This calls attention to Boyie Basdeo’s victory as Chutney Monarch with his song ‘Butterfly’. Throughout the verse Boyie eggs on Prabhu from the background, and towards the end jumps in and they sing the chorus together. The next verse concerns Sonny Mann. She notes that “Sonny sing de chutney with a lot of tabanca” and Boyie continues to shout supporting words to both in the background. In the last verse, she acknowledges her role as *the* “Chutney Queen”, and gives tribute to Ras Shorty I and the sponsors, both of whom she considers responsible for the existence and growth of chutney-soca:

*They call me the Chutney Queen
Now I singin Soca
Thanks to Ras Shorty I, the Inaugurator
Chutney Soca becomin bigger and better
Thanks to DuMaurier
our first prize sponsor.*

Men who sing songs of self-affirmation tend to focus on themselves alone and their talent as performers. It seems that Ramraji is self-assured at a much deeper level. She can acknowledge the contributions of others, widen the scope to include those involved in the business besides performers, and also make space in her song to include the voice of another top singer. Her song, rather than pointing to her own insecurities and need for compensation, does the exact opposite.

“Dance Reena, dance Reena, dance all around”: The performer-audience relationship and the influence of ‘party’ soca



19th Century post card , Trinidad, Courtesy Gerry Besson

In the *matikor* space, there was no divide between the performer and the audience as the women sang collectively for each other, with individual women leading in rotation. When chutney evolved into a public art form, it forced a gendered divide between the performer and the audience, with the performer coded as male and the audience as female.



Matikor performance Debe/Peñal Community
Photo: Patricia Mohammed

Soca has impacted on this divide. Lorraine Leu distinguishes ‘party’ soca from conventional soca. She emphasizes the former’s reliance on instructions and body imagery, and links party soca with the tradition of “smutty” calypsos, that “make use of an elliptical sexual language of *double entendres*, which are invariably humorous, as a kind of acceptable emotional response to the airing of such subjects in public.” (2000, 49)

Party soca departs from smutty calypsos in two important ways. First, singers dispense with the suggestive language in favour of “the language of explicit sexual desire and the raw, physical terms of male/female encounters.” (Leu, 2000: 49). Secondly, the singer “instructs the crowd to execute a particular action (“Jump and wave,” “Wave yuh hand in the air,” “Jump up on one foot”) in unison, so that the singer and the crowd together

become performers in a huge show, closing the traditional distance between the calypsonian on stage and the performer below” (Leu, 2000: 49).

Soca’s influence on chutney, then, aids in simultaneously closing the gap between audience and performer through the use of instruction, and deepening the gendered nature of this relationship by directing certain commands at women and relying on visceral images of women, like the ‘winer girl’.¹¹

Debates about the role of women in the public space, whether they are performers or audience members, extend to who has the right to be in the public eye, to be the

creator and the giver. The male performer, alone and therefore the centre of attention, plays the active role of the provider, while the female audience, in a group, are portrayed as passive receivers, whose bodies become registers for the man’s musical abilities. Nowhere is this relationship more explicit than in Rooplal G’s “*Tassa Man*” (2001):

*woman lose control
when he start to roll
and they start to dance around him
like maypole.*

Rooplal G’s ability to make women wine and rock their bodies enhances and reinforces his sexuality and his masculinity. The notion of the male entertainer and his power to move female dancers is mythologized in the figure of the Hindu god Krishna, who is often depicted with a flute playing to a dancing crowd of cowgirls. Rikki Jai, painted blue and dressed like Krishna, sang about this theme in a song titled “*Kanhaiya*” (2001).

In the *matikor* space, women alone were defining male and female sexuality; in the public sphere of chutney-soca, men can have a stab at it as well. This is not to say that there are no songs where women urge the audience to dance in soca style. When women do perform however, they often sing songs written by men directed at women. One such example is Asha Kamachee’s “*Rool It*” (1998), written by Kenneth Suratt, in which she urges the *beti* to roll it. A notable exception to this trend is Drupatee Ramgoonai’s “*Sweet Tassa Man*” (1996), in which the male performer becomes the subject. Drupatee commented on the song, “I wrote ‘*Sweet Tassa Man*’ myself, with a little help from my husband, Jay... So many artistes sing about *bhowji* and girlfriend wining up their waist and breaking down the place. I want to sing about the men who provide the rhythm for women to get on bad” (*Sunday Punch* 21 January 1996).

The gendered nature of the performer-audience relationship remains intact if one listens to the song outside of the context of the competition. In the actual stage performance,

¹¹ The influence of soca on chutney, in terms of giving the crowd instructions, has been met with disapproval by some judges and audience members who are interested in preserving a more ‘traditional’ sound. After the judging process in 1997, one judge suggested that artistes who did not place had over-emphasized soca characteristics and compromised the chutney sound: “They strayed away from the chutney flavor and urged the crowd to wave something, move to the left and right and things like that, which is not synonymous with chutney” (*Sunday Express* 2/9/97)

Drupatee subverted this notion by using a male dancer, dressed as a female, to represent the ‘sweet tassa man’. The crowd expressed its disapproval by booing the cross-dresser

“*Ala Bala Reena*” (2003) by Devanand Gattoo firmly establishes the gendered expectations of the performer-audience relationship. The singer, objectifying the woman, tells her how to move for his viewing pleasure:

*Jumble up yuh body
and chunkay all around
show me the slow wine
and go down to de ground.*

Then using flattery, “Of all the other dancers, yuh boomin it up yes”, he coaxes her to dance for the rest of the (male) audience:

*Everybody watchin with one thing in mind
Turn around baby and show dem from behind*

The singer almost takes on the role of the pimp, displaying the dancer for the pleasure of the crowd.

“*Guyanese Beti*” (1998) explores themes introduced in the previous songs in a more explicit manner, while at the same time touching on the subject of self-affirmation. The main character in the song, Sweet Teresa, who wines “like she don’t give a damn,” is similar to the *dulahin* in *Dance Doula* with her fervour for the chutney dance. She is also like the *beti* in “*Rool It*”, in that she drinks rum to get into the spirit of the show: “A bottle ah rum and ah glass in she hand/Teresa jump on de stage and say she in command”. So far we’ve already encountered a familiar figure – the rum-drinking, wining Indian girl who dances freely for her own pleasure rather than that of others. This song is also similar to “*Rool It*”, in that it brings in the extended family, and indicates that the chutney show is still a family affair as much as it is a party scene. Teresa can wine and drink, both previously taboos for Indian women, and is still on good terms with her family, as they also participate in the fete and ‘make bacchanal’:

*She introduce me to she aja and aji
fetin on de other side was mousa and mousie
Aja’s on the organ, aji’s by the dhantal
Mousie and meh mousa well they makin bacchanal*

The song ends with a self-affirmation, though it originates from the singer’s dancing girl, Teresa:

*Yuh does amaze people how yuh blind and yuh could sing
Gypsy take 25 years before he come a king (x3)
Take this little advice, take it from Teresa
one day you go become chutney king of de future*

The dancing, drinking girl is also a prophetess and a wise woman who can provide counsel on the singer’s future in his career.

Heeralal Rampartap in “Dularie Y2K Party” (2000) introduces the image of the simple, country girl whose talents, he assumes, are limited to household duties. Chutney is often seen as “coming from inside of, and appreciated by, the poor, rural and unselfconscious Indian community thirsty for entertainment” (*TnT Mirror* 19 January 1996). Places like Penal and Barrackpore in south Trinidad are considered chutney strongholds and most people would expect to find the show grounds filled with poor girls like Dularie. Curiously, we find that Rampartap’s Dularie is so removed that she has never been to a chutney show. Chutney becomes a modernizing force and Dularie’s ability to do her Y2K dance surprises the singer since he assumes that:

*Cookin in a chulha
Washin by de river
dat is all ah feel this girl could do.
She born in de country
come from a poor family
and never take de time out to go and party.*

Her ability to dance makes her “Y2K ready for the 21st century.” Chutney music also makes her bold and she jumps up on the stage to show off her new dance for the men, who reach out to touch her body and dance with her. Although Dularie is modernized, her talents are limited to her body, rather than her mind.

Rooplal G in “*Tassa Man*” (2001) (discussed above) also modernizes Indian art forms by including them in Carnival and brings them up to date, by stretching them from the sugar belt in central Trinidad to the urban centers in the north:

*Everybody sweatin under de soca
feelin happy dancin to de tassa.
Colours of Carnival
Caroni to Maraval
Mix up in de festival
A true Trini bacchanal.*

“Underneath de Bamboo Tent”: *Dulahins, Dulahas and Marriage*

The image of the ideal wife, as portrayed in the figure of the *dulahin*, has several functions. It provides comfort in a time of rapid change. The *dulahin* evokes images of a mythic past with women portrayed as domestic angels, existing solely to love and serve their husbands. In this nostalgic view of the past, gender roles were clearly defined: women did the housework, nurtured the children and passed on the culture; men earned the money and provided protection. Of course, in real life, women have never been simply domestic guardians nor has the division of labour always been so neatly defined. This reality is addressed in songs detailing the crisis of finding ‘decent’ wives in the modern world. In the songs, men find wives who seem to match the ideal, only to discover their faults soon after marriage. Other singers totally ignore the realities and continue to indulge in fantasies of chaste, modest wives. These *dulahin* songs become a

means to reconcile the messy realities of everyday life with the idealized notions of marriage present in folklore and religion. Regardless of whether they face the realities or ignore them, the division of labour between husband and wife remains intact. Mohammed writes about the process of challenging symbolic meanings and creating new ones, and the resulting tension between new understandings and old foundations:

While new symbolic understandings of masculinity and femininity emerge from the cumulated and collective challenges of individuals in the group, and from other forms of mythmaking, that begin to legitimize new behaviours deemed acceptable for men and women in any culture, the old foundations are perpetuated, allowing an arena for the continuous negotiations between men and women. (2002,174).

Songs like Rooplal G's "*Dulahin*" can be seen to perpetuate these old ideals derived from myths like Ram and Sita, while those such as Clint Thomas' "*Baje Basuriya*" indicate modifications of those ideals to suit present circumstances. So far, the perspective of women has been missing. It is striking that there are only two songs concerning *dulahas*. Rather than painting images of ideal husbands, one is a playful, nonsensical number by Phulmatie Ramjattan about 'bouncing up' her *dulaha*, and the other, "*Meh Dulaha*" by Marcia Miranda (discussed above), is a contract to ensure respect in the marriage.



In Rikki Jai's "*Dulahin*" (My mother only quarrelin') (1998), we find that his mother is pressuring him to get married because she is tired of cooking and washing and wants a replacement. The process of finding a *dulahin* is somewhat like Goldilocks and the Three Bears, with one being too fat, the other too thin, and the third one just right. Seeing that he is only "limin" and "fetin" the whole day, the mother goes to the country and finds him a *dulahin* herself. The first one she finds is fat, which is unacceptable to Rikki. He responds rather violently towards the *dulahin*: "I kick she in the kitchen and *bailay* she flat." Seeing that it won't work out, the mother goes back to the country and finds the opposite – a thin *dulahin*. The thin one also won't do because Rikki is doubtful whether she will be able to perform in the kitchen and in the bedroom.

Chutney Singer

Photo Courtesy Noor Kumar Mahabir

So he tests her: "I carry she in de house to see how she wukkin". At this point in the song there is a break and he starts talking to the audience. He advises the men in the audience to listen their mothers, to obey their every command. Not wanting to disappoint his mother, he specifies what he wants in a *dulahin*: "I say Mami, I want a *dulahin* lookin nice and neat". She finds him a "real sweet" *dulahin* and he responds by bowing on the

ground and touching his mother's feet. The *dulahin* takes over the household duties and Rikki stops his "limin and fetin". The chipper melody and Rikki Jai's lilting voice normalize the violence in the song and reinforce narrow standards of beauty. The fact that he won the crown in 1998 with this song validates its propriety. In the following years, Jai wrote two more songs on his *dulahin* to create a trilogy. His ideal *dulahin* turned out not to be so perfect. In 1999, he lamented that she couldn't cook and in 2000, she horned (cheated on) him.

Shammi Salickram faces a similar crisis of being unable to find the right girl in "Stress" (2000). His concern is not so much their looks – he finds all the girls pretty – but their behaviour:

*I went all over de world
check all dem different girls
they cyar cook and wash
dem girl and dem too posh*

At first, he wonders if there is something wrong with him and reflects on his assets. His mother tells him he is good-looking and he has passed all eight subjects in school, so physique and intelligence are not the issue. It must be the women then. He proceeds to tell us their shortcomings. The first is a Pakistani girl he meets in New York and brings back to Trinidad. She tells him she loves him for who he is but when she "see me bank book empty, the woman disappear!" The second is a "Chinee girl" that he finds in Chinatown. She has long hair, "does look real tough" and knows karate, but she can also be abusive: "But when she ketch she temper/she does put real licks on me!" Disappointed, he decides to give it one more try. This time, he travels far, to Africa, "deep in the jungle about 100 miles." He meets an "African gyul livin in a tribe," only to find that she has ten children. The women's shortcomings are all embedded with racial stereotypes: the Indian girl is money-hungry; the Chinese girl is exotic and does karate; the African girl is over-sexed, evident in her prolific reproduction. While the song plays with the idea of interracial dating, in the end it reinforces racial stereotypes and a gendered division of labour.

The years 2000 and 2001 yielded a crop of songs about *dulahins*, marriage and ideal women. Rooplal G's "Dulahin" (2000) combines self-affirmation with patriarchal notions of marriage. He starts out by telling us about "yay *sundar larki*" from "deep in de country", who wants to marry him and "all she want to do is to make meh real happy". She is willing to put his happiness and needs before hers. She has all the qualities of a "*larki* with good ways": she is modest because "she like to wear she *sari* and she *ohrni*/ she eh want no mini up above she knee", she "don't smoke and drink" and best of all, "meh parents say they like she." In the end, it is clear what is expected of her as a daughter-in-law and wife: "All dey want from she/ is to treat meh like a king." There is no mention of what he will do for her. Underlying "Dulahin" is the notion of *patideva*, the worship of one's husband. In addition, while the practice of wearing the *ohrni* has declined, Rooplal G revives it symbolically to outline particular notions of Indian femininity, such as modesty and respect for elders and men. By cultivating those qualities, he can ensure that no other man can win her attention and affection.

Clint Thomas' "*Baje Basuriya*" (2000) is equally explicit in setting up the division of labour in marriage and the household. He also starts out with a girl who desires him:

*Everytime ah see you in de parties gyul
yuh ask me to sing a chutney
so I compose this song with a sweet melody
so let meh see you jump up and chumkay yuh body.*

After declaring his intention to marry her, he gives her a snapshot of their married life: "you go make mi *roti* and *bodi kay dhal*/ I go buy you motor car and gie you house and land." He is, however, aware that he must do more than simply provide for her materially:

*I go buy a katiya for two ah we to sleep
I go hug you tight gyul under de sheet.
Two ah we go dream sundar sapana
While we huggin up and jammin de chutney soca.*

In a way, while he does support the gendered division of labour in the marriage, he is also willing to compensate for it by taking her out and trying to fulfil her emotional and sexual needs. This is a first step in becoming the thoughtful and caring man that Rasika Dindial yearns for in "Lazy Man". In contrast to Rooplal G's *dulaha*, he seems progressive in his outlook on marriage. This could be due to his self-identification as the "Chutney Dougla", and seeing himself in-between two cultures. He can let go of notions such as *patidevrata*, without losing a sense of masculinity.

'She eh easy': demanding Women

Indian women have excelled in education and made significant inroads into various professions, which, in many instances, have raised their status in the home. This has given them the confidence to demand better treatment from their spouses in terms of respect and fidelity. Gender roles within the family are organized around the notion of respect, which is deeply embedded in Indian thought, as observed by Mohammed:

All the rules regarding the expected behaviour of women to their husband were embodied in the word 'respect', an offshoot of the '*pativrata*' concept of obedience and subservience. The idea of maintaining various forms of respect is a crucial one in Indian philosophy and drummed into the Indian sensibility (2002, 250).

Historically, this notion of respect has been aimed more at women than men. In the first half of the 20th century, some women used to show this respect by walking five paces behind their husbands and never addressing him by name. This is precisely what makes songs by women demanding respect from Indian men somewhat bold. The men, in turn, have not been able to easily acquiesce to those demands, unless they are sexual ones. More than anything, as illustrated by the grievance songs, men seem to be perpetually confused and bewildered by women's behaviour, and ignorant of women's motivations and needs. No longer fitting into the mould of the passive, obedient wife who observes the rules of *pativrata*, women are much more unpredictable in their behaviour, which

appears somewhat mysterious. It is interesting that the songs by women demanding respect from Indian men come from non-Indian women. Indian men who voice demands by Indian women, make women seem somewhat ridiculous and over-emotional. When Indian women do make demands in song, they come off as complaints or advice to men.

Respect is the main theme in Denyse Plummer's "Carnival Ki Rani" (1998). A white Trinidadian, Plummer had a long history of breaking boundaries in calypso. In this chutney soca song, she demands fidelity from her lover, and provides a practical reason for it:

*For de Jouvay, Las lap Tuesday
I'm your baby, I'm your baby
There's no other, I'm your lover
I'm your lady, sexy lady
Well I'm not sharing with nobody
not me, doh want de confusion baby*

Throughout the song she warns her lover to keep his distance from other women and refrain from dancing with anybody else. She asserts control over his body and behaviour, and places herself at the centre of his attention. Plummer commented on the content of the song, which was written by Calypso Rose:

I am not saying that I want to be Carnival Queen in this song... I am telling men to be faithful to their one partner; and to make that one partner the Carnival Queen at every Carnival event they attend. I am telling men that their girlfriend/wife/woman should be their only Carnival Queen (Sunday Guardian, February 1998).

This song is more than one woman's statement against promiscuity. It strikes at the deeply entrenched tradition of 'horning', which is widespread in Trinidad, and by extension the institution of the 'deputy', or the mistress.

Four years later, Anil Bissambhar would echo these sentiments from a male perspective in "Eh Taking Horn" (2002). Bissambhar laments how women have changed and are tolerating less misbehaviour from their men. He describes three different situations in which men horning their wives are discovered and subsequently beaten for their infidelity. For the wives, violence is the immediate response and the only solution to their anger and frustration at their husband's behaviour. Women have no voice in the song and Bissambhar portrays them as impulsive beings at the mercy of their raging emotions. The song is an observation of new attitudes in women and also a warning to men: either to stop their horning or devise better methods of covering their tracks. While the song is humorous in its portrayal of women beating up men, it takes the situation of domestic violence and turns it on its head. The only response granted to men is to "hold yuh head and bawl", much like in Devanand Gattoo's "Koochoor Koochoor."

The woman is not much more vocal in Videsh Sookhoo's "Dhal Belly" (2003), which is about a man who thinks he knows what the woman wants:

*She don't want no skinny man
who cyar take the heat*

*Is a dhal belly man
she want with plenty plenty meat.*

Even though he thinks he knows what the woman wants, in the end the woman confounds him:

*She say my belly too big
and I cannot wine
But she leave me for a man
Who belly bigger than min.e*

She is either lying or confused, or both. Sookhoo responds with violence to this independent-thinking woman who can articulate her desires. The violence is masked and trivialized, however, by a sense of playfulness:

*She from Barrackpore, boy
And I from Princes Town [interjects 'Proud to be from Princes Town']
I hit she with my belly
And she fall down on de ground.*

The song attempts to bring rural Trinidad and dhal belly men, both considered outside the parameters of 'cool', into the mainstream. Sookhoo commented on what led him to write the song:

I have been seeing men recoil in shame when their belly get bigger. I recall hearing a man hailing out to his friend as Dhal Belly Indian and I thought that was a good tag line for a song...Big Belly Men are humans and have feelings too (2003).

It signals the slow transition that is occurring for Indian men from undesirable to desirable. Articulating the desires of Indian women become a means to undermine the stereotype of Indian men as incompetent lovers when compared with 'virile' black men.

When women sing about demands, they do so in a very rational manner. They state their reasons and delineate the situation clearly. In the male psyche, these demands are overwhelming and make the woman seem neurotic or pushy, as in Ravi Bissambhar's "Leggo Meh Hand" (2002). In the song, the man's wish to "be a lover boy to run down woman" does not match up with the *pagal larki's* (crazy girl) yearning to be his *dulahin*. She is crazy because she:

*followin me anywhere I singin chutney
And if I talk to ah woman
This girl want to beat me.*

This jealous stalker is especially a nuisance because they are not even in a relationship. She goes as far as to quarrel with any girl who dances with him, thereby embarrassing him in front of his friends and preventing him from being a 'player'. The player in the boy's mind is the ultimate male – he has plenty women with no strings attached. Singers like Ravi are bringing a youthful male energy and mentality to chutney. In the 1980s and early 1990s, chutney was dominated by older men, who often sang about marriage, and

professed their love to fictitious women with ideal qualities. With new, up and coming singers like the Ramnarine brothers, the Salickrams and the Bissambhars, we are hearing the voices of young Indian men trying to establish their masculinity, which must be defined as they encounter black male sexuality in the arena of chutney-soca. To avoid being labelled 'soft', they would rather denigrate women than acquiesce to their demands. Ironically, they depend on the attention of these very same women to enhance their masculine image. It seems, however, that men do fulfil women's demands when it is convenient and if they have something, such as sexual pleasure, to gain by it. In Rikki Jai's "Hammock" (2002), his wife is insatiable to a fault and aggressive in her demands. Being the dutiful husband, he does everything in his power to oblige her.

Men customize gender

In the Chutney Soca Monarch crop of songs, a noticeable trend is the fluidity of gender roles evident in the songs where men and women exhibit behaviour that is traditional for the opposite sex. In the private space of the *matikor*, role reversal was the norm. Women assumed male personas and enacted sexual scenes to entertain other women, diffuse tension surrounding the marriage, and provide education for the young bride. By simply singing chutney, men are already entering women's domain. In the songs that follow, however, men also take on other roles, such as providing sexual education. This is not surprising, considering that the public face of chutney is male. Men also take stereotypically male roles and behaviours and impose them on women. When chutney becomes public, it provides men with the opportunity to widen the scope of masculinity. One negative consequence of this is that women's sexuality comes under male control more, and in some cases, even pathologised.



Sung by Edward Ramdass, who calls himself the "Chutney Soca Boss", the song "D Bailna" (1999) reverses the situation of domestic violence. The stereotype of the wife-beating, controlling Indian male is still alive today and this is what Ramdass imposes on wives. The *bailna*, often invoked as a phallic symbol, now becomes "the husband tamer", a weapon for the woman to brandish on her husband and keep him in check. He advises women how to rein in their

Enactment of a Matikor night, Photo: Patricia Mohammed

husbands who are "playing bad and want to go and lime": "take out de *bailna* and he bound to change his mind." The threat of the *bailna* keeps husbands in constant fear, impinging on their good time:

*All we husband want to do
is have a good time
But when we drinkin daru
is bailna on we mind.*

In the rest of the song, Ramdass mischievously tells women to *bailay* their husbands flat and thereby take control. The accompanying stage performance sent out mixed messages, however. To illustrate his wife's power over him, he came out on stage with his wife sitting on his shoulders. That same year, Rikki Jai also had a song about the *bailna* and the two performers tried to outdo each other with gigantic balloon replicas of *bailnas*. Thus Ramdass assigned the *bailna* contradictory symbolic meanings – it was a symbol of women's power and of the male phallus. A woman could not have sung this song with the same effect because despite its humour, it would have been seen as a symbolic assault on men. It might have provoked a series of 'lashback songs' and perhaps started a disturbing trend of songs with subtexts of male-on-female violence.

Unlike Edward Ramdass, Madain Ramdass directs most of his advice to men in "Pukhanie" (2000). In the song he assumes women's traditional role of providing sexual advice. His suggestive lyrics and kitchen-based metaphors are hallmarks of traditional chutney. Using *pukhanie* as a euphemism for the phallus, he advises men on what is good for the sexual palate:

*Food from de chulha
does taste very good
But cook with hard wood
soft wood nah good.*

He then tells men what to do to get the fire going: "*Chook de chaila in de chulha and blow de pukhanie.*" His next concern is hygiene and he addresses women for the first and only time in the song:

*Take care of your chulha, that is a must
always keep it clean and lepay
always keep it clean and lepay
don't let it gather dust.¹²*

For the men, Ramdass advises:

*Make sure de hole in de pukhanie eh block
if dat should happen
if dat should happen
de pukhanie wouldn't wuk.*

His advice is simple and direct. After these crucial words of wisdom, he goes on to address possible problems during a speaking interlude in the song:

¹² I was startled when a female chutney singer gave me the same advice after an interview, when she began advising me on how to keep a man happy and maintain a stable relationship. She said, "I'm telling you this as a daughter. This is what I told my own daughter."

Now there is a right way and there is a wrong way to *chook chaila*. I go show yuh the right way, okay? Watch meh good now: chook one dis side, chook one dat side, chook one in de centre. Chook one dis side, chook one dat side, chook one in de centre and if the fire still eh want to light, move it around!

Claiming to know the “right way” gives him an air of authority, which serves to establish his masculinity in the midst of playing a traditionally female role. This interlude also becomes an opportunity to add a soca flavour to his traditional chutney sound.

In the same year as “Pukhanie”, Lall Bharat also appropriated the role of sexual educator with “Rosie Gyul” and restored the *bailna* as a metaphor for the phallus. In the song, his partner Rikki Jai invites him to sing “hot hot chutney” for his girlfriend, Rosie. Apparently, Rosie is in need of sexual education: “He pull meh in de kitchen/and he make meh sing for she.” We find that the education, which centres on pleasuring the male, begins promptly and is quite direct:

*Oh Rosie tell meh what yuh
cookin for dinner
Leh meh show yuh
how to hold de bailna.*

If we read into the double meaning, it is clear that in the first two lines he is quizzing Rosie about her sexual knowledge, and in the last two he is showing her how to handle the man. Apparently, Rosie, in her innocence, wants the entire family to be witness to this lesson, but Bharat makes it clear that he “want she to learn to cook for Rikki” alone. In the end, he can assure Rikki that he has done his job well:

*I tell meh partner Rikki Jai not to worry
When we in the kitchen she does bailna good roti
Rosie no more lazy but she hard hard wukin.*

The song reinforces two qualities for women that are also stressed in Hindu mythology – fidelity and a potent sexuality that can be expressed robustly, yet managed within the confines of marriage. She must be faithful and focus her attention on one man alone, like Sita did for Ram, which endowed her with virtue. Within the union, she must put aside all notions of sexual modesty and use her reservoir of sexual desire to please her husband. Mohammed writes about this duality in Hindu philosophy:

The female consists of *shakti* (energy/power, the energizing principle of the universe) and *prakti* (nature, the undifferentiated matter of the universe). The latter is uncultured and therefore dangerous, sustaining the idea that women are impure, easily polluting, and themselves polluted. In metaphorical terms, this has meant that the female, as uncultured nature, must be controlled by the male (2002: 147).

Rennie Ramnarine of the ‘Revolution Squad’ put this principle into song and gave it a name with “Shanti” (2000). Playing on the religious chant “Om Shanti Om”, he chants “No Shanti No, Shanti Shanti No” to tell her that her behaviour is inappropriate, especially since he is married. Shanti’s libido is out of control and her aggressive pursuit

of Rennie threatens the sanctity of his marriage. She first assaults him at a cooking night, and then begins stalking him:

*Shanti very harden, she cyar leave meh alone
Anytime ah go to work, she calling on the phone
After work one day, man she jump inside meh van
Shanti start to squeeze meh boy, so ah push away she hand.*

Of course it is not the attention he minds so much, but the fact that his wife might find out and lose her temper, which makes him reluctant to act on any desires he has for Shanti. The second half of the chorus goes:

*Doh squeeze meh dey Shanti,
doh squeeze meh dey.
If meh wife find out,
well then is thunder for meh.*

Shanti is oblivious to his fear and her pursuit continues, until Rennie decides to put a stop to it once and for all. He takes her to the beach and gives her exactly what she wants:

When ah start to squeeze she,
the gyul get *bazodee*.
Shanti drop down on de sand
and start to beg for mercy.

In the next verse, we discover that Shanti is also married and she fears the consequences if her husband were to discover her illicit liaison. In the end, she cannot handle what she pursued so earnestly. Rennie overpowers her, and makes her remember her moral obligations to her husband. This act functions somewhat as a purification rite for her polluted and polluting nature. The seaside is a sacred place for Hindus in Trinidad to offer sacrifices and enact rituals. At this site he purges Shanti of her dangerous desire. He also stops her from defiling both their marriages, thereby holding it up as a sacred institution.

By making Rennie the one that is acted upon by Shanti, Ramnarine touches on another aspect of the male-female relationship described by Mohammed: “At the same time, the alliance between male and female is presented through mythology as a complementary one. The male godhead is passive, abstract and powerless unless activated by the power of the goddess” (2002, 147). Anil Bheem’s “Honeymoon” (1999) portrays a clueless bachelor whose sexual awakening occurs due to the efforts of his mother and bride. His parents (his mother in particular) force him to get married despite his protests. They send him on the honeymoon and he has no idea what to do. He laments that all he knows how to do is play his music and sing his song, but “about this honeymoon really I eh know a ting.” Beseeking his father for help is useless as his mother informs him: “ay *beta*, what yuh askin your *papoo*/ is 30 years he married and still he eh know.” Her advice is simple – to drink some seamoss with egg. Now that he has done his part, his knowledgeable bride takes care of the rest:

*My dulahin say baby I know this thing is new
just hold on to my hand I go show you what to do
My dulahin say baby I know this thing is new
just come inside de bedroom I go show you what to do
I didn't want to married, but now I glad I do
she carry meh in the bedroom and she show meh what to do*

Roy Rampersad also comes off as being passive in “Cock a Doodle Doo” (2001), but his lusty Lynette is portrayed as being somewhat neurotic, which is in keeping with the dual nature of women. Although men may seem helpless and bewildered when confronted with women’s sexuality, especially when they acquiesce to her demands, they are able to regain control by overpowering women with their sexual prowess (see “Shanti” above). Rampersad outlines the situation in the first verse:

*Every mornin when the cock start to crow
She would come over and beg meh fuh so
And she shout and she shout ‘Cock cock cock cock a doodle doo
Doh worry Roy, I want de murga from you.*

The only thing keeping him from fulfilling those demands is her mother, who would raise hell if she discovers that Roy has touched her daughter. Lynette’s persistent demands eventually lands him in trouble with her mother:

*Well I want to tell yuh why I move away
Everytime the cock crow this gyul go bother meh
So I give she what she wanted yuh see
Thats why she mami come lookin fuh me.*

Eventually, Roy comes back to Trinidad, thinking that he has dispensed with Lynette. But her obsession takes a more sinister turn – she becomes a stalker. At a party, he finds her in a corner looking at him. Women’s sexuality is pathologized in this last verse. The implicit message is that if their sexuality is not controlled, either by marriage or by a man, then it provokes them to go over the edge and lose all sense and reason.

Violent Love: Men sing about domestic violence

The issue of domestic violence has an uneasy place in chutney-soca, since it is a fête and dance genre. The dissonance between the genre and the topic leads to trivialization, which occurs in two ways. If the song has a subtext of violence, it is masked by humour, usually of the slapstick kind, as in the case with Rikki Jai’s “Dulahin”, Videsh Sookhoo’s “Dhal Belly” or Edward Ramdass’ “Bailna”. If violence is the main theme, then the juxtaposition of abuse with cheery melodies and lilting rhythms serves to undermine the gravity of the issue, as we shall see below. Sometimes, both these elements are present simultaneously. Drupatee Ramgoonai, recognizing this tendency in chutney-soca, sang “Doh Beat Yuh Wife” (2002) in a slower tempo to avoid losing the power of the lyrics. She commented:

I didn't want it to be like a real Chutney Soca because it has a message I wanted to bring across, so it has a slower tempo. If I didn't do the song this year, it would have had to

wait till next year. But with the amount of violence in the country, I felt I had to do it
(*Trinidad Express* 29 January 2002).

Her song was not included on the CD containing finalists, but Ramgoonai was aware of its potential in a large well-attended forum like the Chutney Soca Monarch finals and enacted a visually captivating scenario on stage. A background skit portrayed the brutal reality of domestic violence and to symbolize peace between men and women, she released a white dove towards the end. She noted that the finals were a “perfect place” for her message due to the size of the crowd and the consequent publicity. Yet, perhaps anticipating a backlash from men, she felt the need to explain her position: “It’s not that I think all men are batterers, but I’m a woman and if I’m going to sing I will sing for women” (*Trinidad Express* 29 January 2002). Ramgoonai’s songs have often focussed on oppressive marriages and she usually takes on the persona of the victimized wife complaining to her husband. Songs by men tend to address the husband, telling him to curb his behaviour and treat his wife more humanely. With the exception of Ramgoonai’s song in 2001, which advised women to leave abusive relationship, few songs are directed at women. Most songs about domestic violence are sung by men for men. Even Drupatee’s song, written by the versatile songwriter Kenneth Supersad, is for a male audience. Men’s opinions on the topic embody the entire spectrum from normalizing domestic violence by conveying a humorous situation or speaking out against it by condemning abusive men.

While in 1998 we found Rikki Jai beating his fat wife flat, in 1999 we find Prakash Jaglalsingh advising men to respect their wives in “Praises to Dulahin”. In a sense, he seems to be admonishing Rikki:

*We bailnaa we dulahin, well but that is not de norm
[Yuh stupid, yuh really stupid. Hear dis]
We bailnaa we dulahin, well but that is not de norm
If yuh have a fat dulahin she can keep yuh nice and warm.*

In the verse, he pathologizes violence against women, condemns perpetrators as ‘stupid’ and decries weight as an accurate measure of attractiveness. As the song progresses, he admits that men can’t survive without women:

*We say dem girls too bothersome but we can’t do without them
The way we does hang on is like mango on a stem.*

The men come off as being somewhat pathetic in their dependence. The melody suddenly changes to a nursery rhyme. He sings joyfully:

*we must respect our dulahin anywhere we go
we must respect our dulahin anywhere we go
respect our dulahin anywhere we go
To domestic violence leh we say no.*

The song ends with Jaglalsingh reminding men that marriage is not a licence for abuse.

In the same year, Nirmal “Massive” Gosein also issued a statement on domestic violence with “Respect Women” (1999). Perhaps it was fashionable to sing about spousal violence

as people reflected on the coming millennium. Maybe Rasika Dindial's hit "Lazy Man" galvanized men into turning their gaze inward at their own behaviour. Gosein prides himself on singing 'conscious chutney', yet his CD cover that year had him posed in the centre with two blonde women leaning on him on either side, dressed in bikinis and pumps. Gosein's message is not only undermined for the reasons mentioned above, but also because he has a reputation for singing 'smutty' songs that objectify women, making it difficult to take his message seriously. In fact, in the middle of "Respect Women", Gosein breaks away, starts rapping with nonsensical syllables meant to sound like Hindi, and instructs girls "to wine and go down". Despite the immense flaws of his repertoire, Gosein brings to attention how marriage changes men. Whereas before tying the knot they behave like perfect gentleman, after the wedding bells have rung, their true nature emerges and they become abusive and mean. The stepfather in Gosein's song is abusive to both the narrator's sister and mother. He criticizes the sister, telling her she "cyar wash a pot" and cheats on the mother. The stepson reminds him throughout the song how he used to behave before:

*When she was my mami she cookin for we
I hear yuh tellin she she does make de best roti.*

After marriage, the stepfather's calculating nature emerges:

*When yuh get in trouble,
you leanin by she.
When they throw yuh in jail,
is she to take yuh bail.*

In the end, it's the mother who gets the short end of the stick. Not only does she not have the pleasure and comfort of a good husband, but she is also penniless: "Now she poor, she is a *chamar!*"

While it is heartening to hear some men singing on this topic in an effort to encourage better behaviour from their brothers, it does not necessarily equate to a growing consciousness among men in general about domestic violence. Often in chutney and chutney-soca, if a song on a particular topic becomes popular, it inspires a spate in the same vein. For example, in 1999 and 2001, there was a cluster of songs about domestic violence. Singer Asha Kamachee commented:

But I really believe that people would work harder long ago to write a chutney song. Because you find now that one person would sing on one topic and three or four of them want to follow that same topic... Like for example the year I sang about rum, *daru*, we had nobody really sing about it as such, but now everybody want to sing. If somebody want to sing a song, they want to find a fault you know, they want to find a fault or something. (Personal interview, April 2004).

Kamachee believes that artistes sing about certain topics in an effort to outdo each other. Kumar Mahabir, a representative of the Indo-Caribbean Cultural Council, is also cynical about the domestic violence issue. Unlike Kamachee, he does not question so much the motive and consciousness of the artistes, but the actual prevalence of violence in the community.

The chutney items portrayed Indian men in these kinds of disputes as rum drinkers, wife beaters and Gramoxone ingesters. The portrayal begs the question: is domestic violence and murder-suicides prevalent in the Indian community? If this is so, then it is certainly not reflected in the location of counselling/referral/support services in these communities, and the ethnicity of the officers hired in the Domestic Violence Unit under former UNC Minister Daphne Phillips (*Trinidad Guardian*, 14 February 2001).

By focusing on ethnicity and geographical location, Mahabir attempts to shift the attention away from the actual problem of domestic violence to the purportedly racist agenda of the government. However, this argument, while revealing his own biases, also suggests a sense of uneasiness and denial when dealing with difficult issues that require impartial scrutiny of one's own community. Kenny J, author of the song "Baboolal" (discussed above), seems to disagree with Mahabir. He claimed that the song was based on the real-life situation of his friend and is representative of many families in the Barrackpore area. Describing the situation, he said when "Baboolal comes home from work in a drunken state, he does believe he getting horn and he behave bad. Reports were made to the Community Police against 'Baboolal' about domestic violence and we are desperately trying to assist him" (*Trinidad Express*, February 2001).

Mothers: Static images

Songs about mothers, and mothers-in-law especially, are most telling of the persistence of gender ideologies and the difficulties in changing them. Few married couples live with their in-laws today so there is less daily interaction. The power that mothers wield over their daughters-in-law. Yet mothers-in-law, who are stereotypically possessive and mean-spirited, continue to surface in chutney soca. It is somewhat ironic that male songwriters, adopting the voice of a distressed daughter-in-law, wrote both the mother-in-law songs that appear in the Chutney Soca Monarch collection. There seems to be some disagreement, however, about how salient this issue really is today. Indian cultural activist, Kumar Mahabir, seems to think that insidious mothers-in-law are relics of the past. (Personal communication, 4 April 2004). Carlene Wells, however, who performed *Mother-in-Law Pressure* in 2003 reported that after every performance, women would crowd the backstage, confess their problems with their mothers-in-law and state that the "song was a representation of the truth to them" (2003).

The first song concerning mothers to appear on the CDs is Rikki Jai's "Dulahin", discussed above. While his mother was demanding, her efforts landed him a 'real sweet *dulahin*'. In Nigel Salickram's *Aloo Pie* (2000), the mother comes off not only as demanding but also irrational and monstrous. On writing the song, he said:

The lyrics carry a positive message. When I decided to compose a song for the CSM, I wanted a distinct change from traditional chutney songs; in particular the stereotyped songs now flooding the airwaves. I wanted to get away from raunchy lyrics, the focus of women as sex objects, the wine and jam, jump and wave fever that is now propagated as chutney soca (*Trinidad Guardian*. 12 February 2000).

Unfortunately, *Aloo Pie* in the images of his mother and the vendor Suzy, reinforces many of the same stereotypes Salickram sought to avoid. The mother has a sudden

craving for Indian delicacies and sends her son down to Debe to get some. The vendor, Suzy, sells him everything except the *aloo* pie. When he realizes that, he decides he might as well stay in Debe because his mother “will surely kill” him. He goes back to Suzy and begs her to make him some *aloo* pie, but she asks for a chutney song first. Lost in the music, she forgets to make the pie. In the background we hear Nigel’s mother calling angrily and hear him wailing in fear. Salickram admits that he did the song just to have something original. The originality is evident more in the music itself rather than the themes or images. Salickram fused elements of hip hop and pop with chutney melodies and soca rhythms.

Asha Kamachee’s *Mother-in-Law* (1999), written by Kenneth Suratt, portrays a woman who is not only controlling but a nuisance. Her sole purpose is to make the daughter-in-law’s life miserable. In the song the mother-in-law finds fault with her ability to do basic housework, and interferes with the entire pregnancy, including the naming of the child. She ‘bad talks’ her daughter-in-law and denies her all power in the marriage. On top of that, her husband is a *mamaguy*, who will not protest against his mother’s treatment of his wife and allows her to have full control of the couple’s finances. For her part, the daughter-in-law also finds multiple faults with the mother-in-law’s behaviour: she is totally self-absorbed and indulgent. When she is not giving the new wife a hard time, she is watching soap operas, reading tabloids or doing her nails.

Carlene Wells offered up a similar song some years later with *Mother-in-Law Pressure* (2003), written by Ramdeen Falko Maharaj. The punch line is the same, with a mother-in-law who deliberately makes the daughter-in-law’s life difficult and finds fault with everything she does. She makes her cook on a wood stove and wash the laundry by hand, even though she has a gas cooker and washing machine. This mother-in-law also has nothing better to do than to spread rumours about her daughter-in-law. She tells the neighbours that she can’t make *roti*, comes from a *chamar* family, and is unable to have children. Throughout the song Wells appeals to the elder women in her family for advice, confessing her fears of losing her husband. In the end, her fears come close to being realized when she discovers the mother-in-law telling her son “how it have a real good girl down by Gopeesingh”. In addition, the mother-in-law has kept herself close to her son’s heart by cooking for him every day.

Conclusion

A number of changes occurred as chutney spilled over from the wedding tent onto the stage of the chutney fete. English became the primary language, artistes began incorporating soca beats and other elements, and male artistes came to dominate the scene. In the private space of the Hindu wedding, chutney enabled women to express their ideas on a range of topics from sexuality, to husbands, to marriage. In the public sphere of chutney, the participation of men made it an important area in which Indian men and women could renegotiate gendered identities. As chutney evolved into chutney-soca, this process of negotiation was influenced by Black and North American sex/gender belief systems. In this paper, I have chosen to focus on gender negotiations in lyrics because these are the most accessible, and they lend themselves to the kind of scrutiny

required for this discussion. However, it is important to recognize that negotiations occur both on and off the stage in every performance. They occur in song and dance, and through physical, verbal and spatial interactions between individuals, whether it is one audience member with another, artiste with producer, or DJ with dancer. As I identified the different areas and levels of negotiation, it became clear that in chutney-soca, at least within the framework of the competition, the clamour of male voices often drown out female ones.¹³ The focus on lyrics may also be the reason why the voices of women are not as prominent as men's. A closer look at the dance floor and audience members or the home and working lives of chutney artistes might very well bring the perspectives of women to the fore.

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¹³ I explore the reasons for low rates of female participation in another paper titled 'Gender in Competition'.

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Glossary

- Aji/Aja – paternal grandmother/grandfather
- Aloo Pie – potato pie
- Bacchanal – confusion
- Bailay – to roll roti with a bailna
- Bailna – rolling pin used to make roti
- Barahi – ritual celebration on the 12th day after a baby's birth
- Bazodee – giddy or light-headed. Totally confused
- Beti/beta – terms of endearment for daughter/son
- Bhowji – older brother's wife
- Bodi – string beans
- Chailaa – firewood
- Chamar – person of low-caste
- Chinee – Chinese
- Chook – to sick or puncture something
- Chulha – heat
- Chunkay – to pour boiling oil in which garlic has been browned
- Chutney – a preparation of green mangoes and various spices
- Cyar – can't
- Daru – rum
- 'Deputy' – the other woman or man in a ménage-a-trois
- Dhal – dish made with lentils or split peas
- Dhal belly – a stomach made large by overeating dhal
- Dhantal – East Indian percussion instrument consisting of a length of iron rod and a U-shaped metal striker
- Divali – Hindu festival of lights
- Dulahin/Dulaha – bride/groom
- Getting horned – being cheated on
- Gie – give

Jam and wine – big, noisy party with local dance movements
 Jammin’ – big , noisy party
 Jupanie – rough house built with mud and straw
 Larka/Larki – girl/boy
 Leepay – to apply a mud plastering made with cow’s dung onto the floor or wall
 Mama man – a man who exhibits ‘female’ qualities; is controlled by his wife
 Mami – older brother’s wife
 Mastana Bahar – joyous spring
 Matikor – ritual celebration held on the Friday night before a wedding
 Mehendi – Henna
 Mousie/Mousa – maternal aunt/uncle
 Murga – male hen.
 Nani/Nana – maternal grandmother/grandfather
 Neemackharam – ungrateful
 Ohrni – veil worn by women to convey respect and modesty
 Pagal – crazy; imbecile
 Papoo –
 Patideva – guru
 Pativrata – period of time where devotion is done
 Pelau – Creole dish with rice, peas and chicken.
 Pukhanie/pukani – hollow tube for blowing fire.
 Rani – queen
 Roti – flat bread usually accompanied by curried meats and vegetables.
 Soca – a musica blend of soul/calypso indigenous to Trinidad an Tobago.
 Sundar larki – pretty girl
 Sundar sapana – pretty dream
 Steel pan – musical instrument indigenous to Trinidad and Tobago. Tempered oil drum cut to a certain length with grooved sections that are cut to play notes according to scale.
 Tabanca – feeling of sadness caused by the end of a love affair
 Talkarie – cooked vegetables
 Wuk - work
 Wukkin’ - working