



The University of
the West Indies
Institute for Gender and
Development Studies



CARIBBEAN REVIEW OF GENDER STUDIES

A Journal of Caribbean Perspectives on Gender and Feminism

Issue 6 – 2012

Calypso and Krishna's Flute: The Indo-Caribbean Woman's Moving Body

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Abstract

...She did not wear saris no more.
Calypso she liked and could wine down
with the best of them. She became deaf
to the melody of Krishna's flute.
she chose Manny, not Lord Rama in her
Hindu epic gone wrong. At her wedding
she never once uttered Ganesh's name,
loosened the grasp of Vishnu's
four hands from around her waist.
...She named Granddaddy
Leon, a good European name, like all the other
rootless Negroes.

—Christian Campbell, "Curry Powder"

Caribbean poet Christian Campbell's (2010) account of his Indian great-grandmother Nita's rejection of markers of her culture and religion for a life with his great-grandfather, a so-called "rootless negro", reminds us of the complex relations between communities of Indian and African origins in diasporic space, as well as of the Indian

woman's body being used for the maintenance of inter-community boundaries. Indeed, for every Nita who breached those boundaries, there were other Indian women who accepted them and their role as preservers and transmitters of "Indianness". Yet how intact, really, were those boundaries? Did the movements of calypso and the melody of Krishna's flute never mingle? How does Indo-Caribbean feminism deal with the issues of tradition, pleasure, enjoyment and transgression that this poem signals through "calypso" and "Krishna's flute"?

Introduction

In this essay, I reflect on these questions while foregrounding my own subjectivity as an Indian woman, from India, engaged in thinking about the Indo-Caribbean woman's body. I also want to foreground my somewhat unusual academic entry into the Indo-Caribbean: through the route of dancing to a range of Afro-Caribbean musical traditions from Cuba, the Dominican Republic, Haiti and the French Antilles. This perspective has brought me rather belatedly to scholarship on the Indo-Caribbean woman, and to her historical and contemporary situation in Trinidad. But it has sensitised me to a socio-cultural zone that some scholarship may either bypass or have to negotiate carefully. This zone is sub-verbal: it exists in dropped beats, transplanted melodies, and bodies moving in and out of time to different ancestral rhythms. Language may try to capture its essence; poetry, such as Campbell's, may well come closest in doing so on account of its own lyricism. If I have been able to sift through "Curry Powder" and grasp those of its symbols that take us to music and dance, it is because I come to the Indo-Caribbean through Afro-Caribbean music and dance, even while retaining, in my cultural and muscular memory, the enjoyment of Indian rhythm traditions.

My reflections on the Indo-Caribbean woman's dancing body derives from my own journey: the journey of an Indian, salsa-dancing, academic *woman*, who has consolidated her space in the world through partaking of a very different body culture than that she absorbed as an embourgeoisied Indian girl-turned-Oxbridge academic.. "Hips don't lie": the body does not prevaricate in the way the analysing mind is wont to do. I hope this essay will unfold in the spirit of people dancing together, side by side, face to face, sharing the ephemeral kinetic pleasures that govern the moves and the mood.

Some years ago, I envisaged a research project comparing Latin American and South Asian postcolonialisms. I began learning Spanish, and, as part of that process, resumed listening to some Cuban albums that I had acquired over the years through an interest in "world music". As I tried to sing along to practice my Spanish, I realised that I was unable to predict the music's rhythmic lines. It was dance that would lead me to decipher, with my body, the rhythmic language of the Caribbean and of Latin America. One summer in India, I began salsa lessons, and continued them when I returned to Manchester. This entry into the UK's "salsa scene" inaugurated my journey into the social dance forms of the Afro-Caribbean and their global reception and cultivation. I read voraciously on Afro-Cuban dance and music, on salsa and its antecedents alongside my dance classes. Meanwhile, the social space of the dance floor provoked in me analytical curiosity about gender relationships in couple dances and in constructions of Latinidad and Caribbean-ness; the embodying of slavery and diaspora in song and dance; the conversion of trauma into collective joy; and the biggest conundrum of all: how a

dance form (salsa), intensely rooted in the Caribbean experience, is now enjoyed worldwide, including in India, which has its own pervasive rhythm culture as well as a moral economy of heterosexual contact that is quite at odds with Caribbean-derived dance socialisation. I had found my research project, but I was also finding myself through and in dance.

My interest in Afro-Cuban dance cultures led me to the cultures of other Caribbean islands. Dancing salsa socially, it is impossible to avoid the music and dance of the Dominican Republic and Puerto Rico (merengue, bachata, reggaeton); through Francophone dance connections, I became interested in zouk and kompas, the music and dance of the French Antilles and Haiti, respectively. Reading about and listening to these forms, lesser known in the Anglophone world, I had constructed a mental map of the major rhythm systems coursing through the Hispanophone and Francophone Caribbean islands. Ironically for an Anglophone, however, I felt reluctant to extend my interests to the English-speaking Indo-Caribbean. I knew about indentured labour and Indian communities in plantation diasporas, but I took my time to discover their music and dance for myself. My scholarly personality would not allow me to “do the obvious”: that is, explore the Indo-Caribbean simply because I was Indian—I have always been driven by a desire to explore that which is not obvious. Nevertheless, being an Indian woman dancing Afro-Caribbean forms triggered certain social interactions and expectations between me and the Latino, African, Afro-Caribbean, and indeed South Asian men I danced with. I thereby became aware of the tensions between “Indian” and “African” that existed wherever the two groups were made to co-habit under colonial and imperial conditions. Because this awareness came to me through dance, I sensed clearly the kinetic distinctions that have been mobilised, by different parties, to keep the “Indian” apart from the “African” in diasporic space.

By *kinetic*, I signal the dancing body, moving in time to musical rhythm. By *kinetic distinctions*, I refer to the movements that the body executes in time to different rhythm traditions. The kinetics of the body create pleasure, excitement and flamboyant performativity. Precisely for that reason, it is expressive of the relationship between the collective and the individual. These ephemeral but powerful pleasures become signifiers of moral codes and inter-community boundaries, their transgressions and breaching. The signifying role of the kinetic is very strong in South Asian societies, which continue to be policed along caste, class and gender lines. In diaspora, these lines assume erratic and unpredictable trajectories, particularly because of contact with other socio-cultural groups. Colonial power-relations produced forced proximities as well as forced separations; they exaggerated inherited moral and evaluative codes as well as the conditions for their jettisoning. The poem above alludes to these developments: Krishna’s flute vs. the calypso; “rootless negro” vs. the Hindu epic; the wining that loosens Vishnu’s grip around an erstwhile sari-clad waist. Most crucially, it gestures towards a fundamental (if constructed) binary: the Afro(-Caribbean) dances to percussive movements; the Indo(-Caribbean) moves to the melody of devotional songs. For the Indian in the Caribbean, music was an aspect of culture that involved religions with hoary pedigrees and clothes that draped women’s modesty (albeit allowing tantalising glimpses of waist). For the African in the Caribbean, displaced earlier and in circumstances that

impeded the preservation of material culture, “rootlessness” was the only condition—alleviated, nevertheless, by the rhythms and oral traditions carried in the body.

The conditions of colonial modernity made sure that these dichotomies, founded on culture’s kinetic and somatic dimensions, did not go unobserved by parties in India interested in articulating and safeguarding “Indian-ness”. As Tejaswini Niranjana’s research has revealed, late colonial and nationalist constructions of bourgeois Indian womanhood did bring the indentured woman into their discussions. Additionally, transnationalism and globalisation, in the form of viral transmission of music and dance trends through not only the film and music industries but, now, Internet-based technologies, ensure that the homeland’s gaze registers kinetic developments of Indian rhythm culture within older diasporas. Yet, to date, only Niranjana’s book, *Mobilising India: Music and Migration between India and the Caribbean* (2006), and its accompanying film, *Jahaji Music (AKA India in the Caribbean)*, 2007, directed by Surabhi Sharma), articulate substantially the significance of that gaze. Both this silence and the way it is broken by Niranjana and Sharma confirm the necessity of analysing rhythm cultures—how they have travelled through colonial, postcolonial and transnational routes of cultural transmission, how they have mutated and syncretised in places of encounter, and what these embodied histories tell us about the relationship of pleasure, gender and modernity, on both global and local scales. These are the questions that I have formulated in the course of my evolving research project, which now stretches beyond the initial premise of comparing Hispanophone and Anglophone postcolonialisms through their rhythms. Within its new, expanded, remit, a site such as Trinidad reveals itself to be of considerable significance.

Notwithstanding the similarities imposed by Caribbean space, each Caribbean island is unique in its mix of culture, history and demography. In the case of Trinidad, its nearly equal demographic ratios of African- and Indian-heritage populations, its equally prominent Afro-Trinidadian and Indo-Trinidadian music and dance traditions, and the tensions between these traditions in the spaces of its public cultures, all make it ideal for my explorations into transoceanic and transplanted rhythm cultures. From my analytical perspective, the way Trinidadian music and dance is discussed in scholarship illustrates the anxieties of Indian-ness that diasporic rhythm cultures present to the Indian from India. Through this realisation, I have located fault-lines in the liberal discourse emanating from Indian scholars and intellectuals, which discovery in turn fosters a self-interrogation of my own assumptions. A rich topic for such double analysis has been Niranjana’s and Sharma’s responses to the East Indian woman’s wining body. This focus may appear a novel entry-point into the dialogue between homeland and diaspora subjectivities, and into the differences and similarities that this dialogue captures. However, the conjunction of gender with rhythm reveals hegemonic and resistive movements within diaspora communities and how these movements relate to transgressive pleasures and anxieties of belonging. This conjunction enables me to re-insert the dancing body into the study of the Indian diaspora; it has also allowed me to converse with Indo-Caribbean feminists who are complexly situated within the ideologically fraught landscape of their kinetic heritage.

I saw *Jahaji Music* during the Rajasthan International Folk Festival, held in October 2010 at the Mehrangarh Fort, Jodhpur. The audience included Surabhi Sharma and her four-year-old daughter. A number of young men, part of the domestic tourist crowd, pressed their bodies through the door to peer at the film. Word had got around the Fort that a rather saucy film was being screened, and many visitors did not want to miss out on this bonus. Their gaze, as they looked at the women wining on screen, mirrored that of the Indian men from India—academics, film crew, pop musician—who had accompanied Sharma and Niranjana on their Caribbean tour, and who, in Niranjana’s words, spent their time in Trinidad “trying to figure out what impossible combinations of pelvic movements wining consisted of” (205). Clearly, Sharma, too, had been fascinated by these movements. Her camera focuses on women in Jamaica and Trinidad, African and Indian, moving their booty with agility and verve. On being asked by me about her response to these dance styles, Sharma said that her six months of preparing for the journey by listening to chutney, calypso and soca had left her unprepared for the visual impact of watching women dance to the music. I suggested that it was initially hard for Indians to move in that way, but—as my own experience from dancing Afro-Cuban styles has taught me—it is not impossible. She disagreed: “We women from the city (of Bombay) would never be able to dance like that. In the villages, maybe yes.” But Bombay was the home of Bollywood dance and its eclectic repertoire, I pressed. “Maybe, but such dance focuses on hand movements and upper torso,” she clarified. “My daughter spent the first few years of her life exposed to the material I had filmed in the Caribbean. She picked up the dance moves—people were scandalised to see her move like that!”

These responses reveal the India Indian’s fascination with the female body’s kinetic transformation in diasporic space, and the conversion of that transformation into a moral commentary (however much the India Indian may not want to do so because of her liberal politics). This is a discomfort similar to that which Remo Fernandes, the Goan music star Niranjana brought along with her to the Caribbean, also exuded in *Jahaji Music*, and in his musical response to Denise Belfon’s song, “I’m looking for an Indian man”: “I don’t know how to wine/only how to drink it/you be my guru/ I’ll be your pupil”. Fernandes tellingly aligns himself to signifiers of high culture, both local (the Sanskritic guru-pupil relationship) and global (connoisseurship of wine). This class-based distancing is also evident in Niranjana’s account of her journey through the Indo-Caribbean, which systematically separates the Indian, bourgeois, female self from what the Caribbean seems to allow: the public expression of sexuality that she interprets wining as embodying, and the Western clothing and African rhythm on adult, Indian, female bodies. Her honest recounting of an initial bewilderment at Drupatee Ramgoonai’s stage clothes voices a reluctance to appreciate the Indian diaspora’s aesthetics of “sequinisation” rather than the high culture aesthetic of woven textile (86-87). Technologies of the weave signal ancientness and value that accrue from labour and inherited skill; the superficial glitter of sequined fabric, which marks diasporic fashion, suggests a cheaper, transplanted version of Indianness that is less Byzantine—dare we even say, less Brahminical—to read and appreciate.

“There are no zenanas in Trinidad” declares a colonial commentator from 1868, whom Niranjana quotes (p. 58). This comment encapsulates the roots of Niranjana’s discomfort which spring from the loosening of caste-based patriarchal practices in diaspora space.

Freed from the constrictions of the *zenana*, the Indian women who arrived, often solo, in the Caribbean, stared at the camera with an unusual (but pleasing) self-confidence, as the photographs reproduced in Peter Jaillal's recent poetry anthology celebrate. In contrast, caste and class have mutually reinforced each other in postcolonial India, although there are constant challenges to this entrenched reinforcement of upper-caste/ class by new vernacular constituencies bearing novel forms of cultural and economic capital. These tensions and challenges are enacted on the female body while it expresses itself in public space. Dancing of any kind, even that performed in ring-fenced urban spaces such as nightclubs, is tightly policed: Who dances with whom? Who moves which parts of the body, and how? Such policing was reflected in the Rajasthan International Folk Festival itself: Sharma's internalised divisions between city and village dancing bodies, a displaced version of a caste division, was reproduced in my experience there at large. The Tamil-British singer Susheela Raman, whose philosophy is, allegedly, "to sing from the vagina", moved like a dervish on stage, while the ladies of the royal family of Jodhpur sat in the front row, the pallu of their chiffon saris lightly covering their heads, politely clapping. Raman's example confirms that diasporic dislocations can potentially free the South Asian woman's body from caste/class proscriptions, or at least from expectations generated by these proscriptions that are duly internalised by us, Indian women in India. I nuance this observation further by focusing on one specific part of her moving body: the posterior.

What exactly is wining? Niranjana is coy about describing or analysing it. She calls up "the body in the voice" (106) but evaporates its materiality via Barthesian theory; she "wonder[s] how much my own feeling of strangeness and difference in relation to the East Indian woman has to do with the unfamiliarity of bodies and tongues", (122) but she goes on to talk about tongues (Tamil, Hindi, Bhojpuri) rather than the body. Such displacement is endemic to postcolonial writing, which symptomatically textualises and metaphorises rhythm and the body moving to rhythm: see no less a foundational text than Homi Bhabha's *The Location of Culture* (1994) with its emphasis on the time lag. We also sense a fastidiousness—again, let us call it Brahminical—in the reluctance to name the most taboo part of the woman's body in South Asian cultures, the *derriere*, whose movements are proscribed even in Bollywood's publicly sanctioned displays of erotica. Female sexuality is expressed through the *jhatka* and the *matka*—the jutting outwards of the hip in time to the beat of the *taala*, or rhythm cycle. But it is the pelvis that is moved in isolation of the rest of the body, in order to circle the buttocks, while moving up and down vertically or diagonally in time to the music (as well as out of time and in between beats), which signifies the most transgressive challenges to the moral economy of South Asian kinetics. This is a challenge that continues to be answered by a moral critique that emerges from the displacement of caste to class: it is noteworthy how often "wining" is ascribed to "lower class Hindu women" by Indo-Caribbean commentators, both those who praise the phenomenon as liberating, and those who proscribe it as immoral or, at the very least, undignified.

For me, most noteworthy about these techniques of isolation are the affiliations they perform between the wining Indo-Caribbean woman and Afro-Caribbean dance repertoires. Afro-Caribbean dance styles demand an aesthetic-kinetic focus on the isolation of the buttocks through co-ordinated manipulation of the hips and pelvis. Salsa

song lyrics call attention to the *nalgas*, *caderas* and *cintura* of the *mulata buena*, which are also appreciated through reference to the woman's seductive walk (Aparicio 1998; Benitez-Rojo 1996). Feminist approaches to salsa find "this visual erotic fixation on the hip and pelvic movements of the mulata woman" a problematic phallogentric gaze that both racialises the mulata and trivialises the historical injustices perpetrated on her body; yet such approaches admit that the Afro-Caribbean/ Latina woman's enjoyment of her body's expressive capacities through dance complicates feminist critique. The politics of pleasure subvert the male gaze and reclaim rhythm for female self-expression; as an Indian woman dancing to Afro-Cuban rhythms, I have felt this reclamation through my body. The critical paradigms that have developed around "female butts and feminist rebuttals" in Afro-Caribbean-Latino culture can help us explicate gender dynamics around the wining woman's body as well as re-situate the Indo-Caribbean wining woman within a Caribbean and, indeed, a hemispheric cultural history. I was excited to discover a number of Indo-Caribbean feminists revelling in the messages of the freed female body that the wining posterior emits, as well as finding Afro-Caribbean spaces and expressive traditions inspirational for an Indo-Caribbean body culture seeking to celebrate femininity through dance rather than repress it through the collusion between patriarchy and cultural preservation.

However, using rhythm to understand modernity is to explicate the entanglement of vectors local and global, regional and transnational. The Indo-Caribbean woman also inherited the unlocked pelvic movements of the Bhojpuri region and its music's focus on the off-beat. These are features of a regional rhythm culture that flourishes under the radar of high cultural traditions. They enter the national and transnational sphere through Bollywood's intermittent showcasing of the Bhojpuri inheritance. Like the aesthetics of sequinisation, they gain new life in diasporic space. The women's *matikor* ceremony in Trinidad was where these Bhojpuri dance moves took on new life—in fusion, I would speculate, with African forms that were being practised in contiguous spaces on and off the plantation (Kanhai 1999). The diaspora's signature rhythm is the *dhantal's*, an instrument hardly played any more in India; in the Indo-Caribbean, it takes up the off-beat with a sound louder than the "proper" beats of the *taala*, proclaiming an insouciant irreverence for the latter's hegemony. The dancing body fills the gaps between beats with the dropping of the pelvis (as seen in Afro-Caribbean dance forms) as well as its jutting forward in conjunction with raised and alternating palms in the manner of Bhojpuri "little traditions". In the transnational era, these "mutated" forms return to the homeland together with parallel expressive traditions from contiguous regions of the world. Thus, Indian popular culture now incorporates the globalised dance moves of Shakira, even as Bollywood choreographers use new combinations of lower body movements to convey the dissonances of globalisation and revernacularisation. These are all processes in rhythmic dialogue with diasporas old and new. Their broader significance may be captured by an extension, to them, of Shalini Puri's call for a liberatory "douglapoeitics" (Puri 2004).

I would like to conclude this essay with some personal reflections on my first visit to Trinidad, on the occasion of a conference at which I presented an initial version of this paper. Moving from Port-of-Spain to the St Augustine Campus of the University of the West Indies, driving through the old sugar plantations on a tour of "Hindu Trinidad",

eating food with names (such as dhalpuri) resonant from my life in Calcutta, whose hinterland is the Bhojpuri region, with tastes both familiar and different, seeing kitchen tools such as the daalghotni (swizzle-stick) which we use in our Calcutta kitchen and still call daalghotni, listening to transplanted melodies through the chutney-soca playing everywhere, and also recognising the Afro-Caribbean rhythms underlying that music—my week in Trinidad was a learning experience that included but stretched beyond the conference. Above all, my paper gained from what I observed of Indo-Trinidadian women’s body culture in the public spaces of the island, as well as its reception at the conference. While an elderly Indo-Guyanese male audience member commended me for re-telling a story about Indian and African sharing of rhythms that his grandparents’ generation recognised, a younger, Indian male academic based in the US could not understand how I, clearly a sensible woman, could find wining anything but “pornographic”. It remained difficult for me to explicate to him how a woman, especially an Indian woman anywhere, can find liberation from body-based constrictions by moving her booty in whichever direction she pleases; but I know, from my reading of Rosanne Kanhai’s edited volumes and my subsequent conversations, virtual and real, with Indo-Trinidadian feminists, that this apparent paradox is not inexplicable to them. It is in the body that we find our points of political contact despite the other divergences that diaspora has necessarily produced. This paper has foregrounded these points of contact by focusing on a site of pleasure and resistance that is both universal and intensely particularised within different rhythm cultures. In its ability to speak to both the calypso and Krishna’s flute, the kinetics of the female posterior can reveal more about the politics and history of diaspora, its antecedents and its prospects, than perhaps first meets the eye.

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