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Changing Symbols of Indo-Caribbean Femininity

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Abstract

Cultural differences determine an ethnic group's expectations regarding women's roles, as well as how the group is perceived outside the community. Over time there have emerged archetypes of femininity but these archetypes also undergo modifications with changes in technologies of production and ideas about gender equality. This essay engages some of the seminal ideas and texts that have shaped the symbols of Indo-Caribbean femininity, with specific reference to Trinidad. It examines how, from the earliest concept of the *jehagin* or the sisterhood of the boat which surfaced during the nineteenth century, to the more submissive concept of the *dulahin*, or the caste-centred one of *maharajin*, there emerged a changing set of symbols and ideas such as *matikor* and *bindi* that have currency today and whose meanings have complicated the simple stereotypes and apolitical notions once attached to Indo-Caribbean femininity.

Indian femininity occupies an unfortunate position in Caribbean society. For one thing, while the Indo-Caribbean population is in the majority in both Trinidad and Guyana and is well represented in Suriname, this ethnic group is still viewed as having a "minority" status in the region since it is less visible in Jamaica, St. Lucia, Martinique, Guadeloupe, St. Vincent and Barbados. In addition, Indo-Caribbean femininity is burdened with numerous connotations. It is well established that during the entire period of indenture the number of female migrants recruited never matched the number of male migrants. Those

who were recruited and those who left their villages had abandoned violent or much older husbands, or had fled from poverty, and were adventurous enough to seek their fortunes in another land. Because of the liberties they found in the Caribbean due to the scarcity of their sex among this ethnic group, Indo-Caribbean women were soon viewed as being morally loose or being prostitutes, on the one hand, or they were dismissed by the colonial authorities as childlike and needing the protection of their men. These were the first labels attached to Indo-Trinidadian and Indo-Guyanese femininity in the colonial script. Despite the established record of stridency and agency among Indian women in negotiating their gender, sexual and wage-earning status during indenture and in the post-indenture period, a second set of labels was also attached to Indo-Caribbean femininity wherein this group of women were painted as submissive and passive, non-confrontational, collusive and cowed by an Indian patriarchy.

By the last decades of the twentieth century, when the Caribbean experienced second wave feminism, Indian women were considered largely outside of the mainstream struggle for female equality and equity. In *Diasporic (Dis)locations* (2004), Brinda Mehta draws attention to the different status that Indo-Caribbean women occupied in the region and its diaspora. She proposes a “*kala pani* discourse as an alternative analytic framework, or a way of thinking about Indo-Caribbean women writers and their work in order to reposition this marginalized community and its body of concerns as central to questions of national development.”¹ Mehta argues that the contributions of Indo-Caribbean women have been filtered through an Afro-centric lens rather than assessed via new tropes that move beyond the race equals identity formula that has characterized colonial and postcolonial scholarship. She proposes the image and concept of the *kala pani*—the taboo or pollution of caste that was associated with crossing the large expanses of water to reach the West Indies—as a liberating one, the shedding of a skin to embrace others who have also made that journey, even if through a different route.

The marginality that Mehta addresses has applied not only to Indo-Caribbean female writers and feminist activism, but also to the representations of Indo-Caribbeans in the fiction of the region, barring a few writers. One of the earliest references to the Indian immigrant population to the Caribbean is *Lutchmee and Dilloo: A Study of West Indian Life* by Edward Jenkins (first published in 1877). Jenkins was an Englishman, born in India. The novel is sympathetic to the concerns of the indentured Indian migrants in Guyana and the other colonies. The novel begins in India with Dilloo and Hanooman’s rivalry over Dilloo’s young and beautiful wife Lutchmee. Dilloo ends up in Guyana, Lutchmee follows of her own volition after she has not heard word from Dilloo, and they manage by luck to find themselves bonded on the same estate. The challenges of estate life, with collusions between overseers, planters and magistrates and those like Hanooman who also ends up on the same estate, lead to a tragic end for Dilloo, who is depicted as both a leader of his people and a strong, righteous man. Replete with archetypes of every sort and for every race including whites and blacks, Jenkins, as David Dabydeen writes in the introduction to the version published in 2003, “is not radical enough to give Lutchmee her own voice, her own emotional and intellectual control over

¹ Michelle Ramlagan, Review of *Diasporic (Dis)locations: Indo-Caribbean Women Writers Negotiate the Kala Pani* by Brinda Mehta, *Anthurium*, Vol. 7, Issue 1 of 2, Spring and Fall, 2010.

the narrative of her experiences” (20003, 19). Whereas C.L.R. James’ *Minty Alley*, published in 1936, has no reference to the Indian population in Trinidad, interestingly enough, the Guyanese-born Edgar Mittelholzer’s *A Morning at the Office*, first published in 1950, which takes a comedic look at office politics in a small establishment in Trinidad, brings the Indo-Trinidadian into the plot as an equal actor as the characters negotiate sexual attraction and repulsion, comment on colonial rule, and demonstrate the racial tensions in Trinidad at that time. By the 1970s, Merle Hodge’s *Crick Crack Monkey* introduces the closeness of childhood friendships that go beyond race between Tee, the young black protagonist, and Moonie, her young Indian friend. In his 1979 novel, *The Dragon Can’t Dance*, Earl Lovelace introduces the male Indian character Pariag. But as Linden Lewis writes, “Unlike the other central male characters in this novel Pariag, or Boya as he was more familiarly called, seems to be groping simultaneously with the definition of his masculinity and his ethnic identity. Pariag seems to be in search of himself in the world” (Lewis 1998, 177).

It was in the work of Indo-Trinidadian writers such as Samuel Selvon and V.S. Naipaul from the late 1950s, however, that we begin to see Indo-Trinidadian characters who are fleshed out with contradictions, humour, frailties, strengths and desires. Perhaps this delay in the introduction of fully rounded characterization of the Indo-Caribbean in literature was understandable as the system of Indian indenture continued until the second decade of the twentieth century and the incoming and outgoing migration of these labourers then and in relatively more recent history gave an air of transience to this population. Earlier colonization and the system of African slavery brought European and African-descended populations into closer, if more antagonistic, relationships for a period of four hundred years before Asian populations began to figure permanently on the landscape. Thus the primary opposition of peoples, the gender symbols and metaphors in the region tended to be those related to the African- or European-descended population. Characters like *Nennen*, *Ma-Davis* and *Tantie* that Merle Hodge writes about in *Crick Crack Monkey* or the proverbial “white woman” were recognizable archetypes in the mental landscapes of people. Those related to the Indo-Caribbean population retained a less visible or audible presence.

Nonetheless, if one systematically scours the scholarship, fiction and popular songs from the twentieth century, there emerges a distinctive set of terms, stereotypes and characterization that establish the presence of the East Indian population, and in particular, notions of Indo-Trinidadian femininity. It is difficult to identify categorically when and how this evolution occurred. Foreign anthropologists, in particular, tended to pick up some of the earliest nuances. Morton Klass’s *East Indians in Trinidad: A Study in Cultural Persistence*, first published in 1961, is very thorough in its inventory of kinship terms that were specific to the original settled groups. He demonstrates the persistence of these kinship forms of address as late as the fifth decade of the twentieth century. The most dominant form of address internal to the collective ethnic group to describe both the women and men was *jahaji bhai* (male) or *bahin* (female), which was corrupted to *jahaji* and *jahajin*, derived from the Hindi *jahaj*, the latter meaning ship. The transatlantic journey created a bond or a generic brotherhood among those who came on the same boat and who, therefore, crossed the *kala pani* together. The kinship of the boat trumped all other descriptors of family, religion or caste in the earliest settlements of migrants as this

was the primary association of the ethnic family from India that began to populate the new territory. A very interesting experience for me, in 2001, was my encounter with an Indo-Caribbean association of women in Queens, New York, who called themselves *Jahajee Sisters*. This was a double take and reference back to the earliest migration and to their own status as first-generation female migrants in New York. The group included some Trinidadians, although they were primarily Guyanese migrants, some born in the United States, many university-educated and professionals and influenced by feminism. The terms *jehaji*, *jehagin* and *jahajee* as used by the various groups described above, carried and carries at present no pejorative connotations about and among the Indian population, despite the dismissive and inaccurate representation by the colonial authorities who managed to lump all Indian women who had travelled as single females into one category—prostitutes (Reddock 1985; Mohapatra 1995; Mohammed 2002).

Klass's inventory of kinship names is, in fact, supported by my own childhood village memory of the forms of address between and among Indian families. All women of a senior age would be addressed as *didi* out of respect. Hindu and Muslim titles differed. Since Hindus were in the majority, the Hindi/Bhojpuri titles became better known than those that were influenced by Urdu. Klass divides his inventory into first and second ascending generations and a first descending generation with differences based on whether a male or female was doing the calling. These forms of address were adhered to fairly rigidly. A young man would not, for instance, take the liberty of calling his brother's wife or even his elder brother by name and instead would refer to his elder brother as *bhe* or *bhai* (phonetically) and his brother's wife as *bhowji*. Calling someone by their given first name was simply not done, again out of respect. Klass notes, for instance, that "many men say proudly they have never called their wife's name aloud" (1961, 94). Pet or nick names could be applied but speaking someone's proper name was a sign of familiarity which was not sanctioned to ensure that distances were maintained within the close-knit household of an extended family. Affectionate displays were frowned upon so as to diminish the possibilities of intimacy and thus the risk of sexual overtures or too close alliances that could lead to potential divisiveness in the family. Klass points out that at the time of his study of village life in the 1950s, East Indians had been living in Trinidad for almost 100 years and only a few people had very large extended families. The closeness of the *jahajee* relationship and the acknowledgement and claiming of kinship of any degree were still very important to this community. To ensure marriage outside of the close kin group, it was necessary to recognize kin and avoid incest taboos. There was nonetheless a discernible "East Indian capacity for indefinite extension of kinships" (Klass 1961, 103). The boat brother and sister relationship remained so binding that pseudo-kin relationships allowed for the expansion of family networks and thus for a support system that was necessary to a community which depended on its internal resources in the process of early resettlement.

From this early deployment of kinship and a reinvented family or brotherhood of the boat, some of the kinship terms have resurfaced with remarkable frequency. I want to draw attention to these terms as they became common in the marketplace exchange of language and gender symbolism among Indians in Trinidad, as well as among those outside of the ethnic and cultural group. Klass records that among the second ascending generation, either in male or female usage, *nana* (referring to one's maternal father or

maternal father's brother) and *nani* (referring to maternal mother or any second ascending female on one's mother's side) were generally used. For the first descending generation, *beta* and *beti* for son and daughter, respectively, of any sibling or cousin; *dulahin* for a bride and *dolaha* for a bridegroom were generally used by all Indians. This was common practice among both Hindus and Muslims, whether rural or urban.

A lived example comes to mind. In the 1960s, an aged Indian woman moved into a house across the street from us in the small, relatively urban district of Princes Town. She was a Hindu of the Brahmin caste. Every now and then, Mrs. Maharaj or *Nani* as we called her would cry out sonorously and insistently from the top floor of her tall two-storeyed house to ours, "*Dulahin... Dulahheen... Dulahheeeen*", when she wanted to attract my mother's attention. Her voice echoed along the slope of houses downwind to the rest of the street's occupants. It was her right, if you like, to demand this kind of respect. My mother who had by then been married for over 12 years remained a *dulahin* to her as the younger woman in this neighbourly relationship. This construct of *Dulahin* for the young wife and *Nani* for the older woman, the implicit acceptance of the power relations between them, was founded on lines of hierarchy and authority that were clearly drawn in the pre-partition India from which all Indo-Trinidadians were descended. It provided the structure and psychological base for the complex jahajee village and increasingly family relationships based on birth, all of which aimed at ensuring kinship ties and respect for women and for men. The primary signifiers within the ethnic community were age, caste standing and marital status for women, while men had access to additional status markers including their occupations or wealth.

For the non-Indians, in particular, who lived on our street, my mother was Mrs. Mohammed and Mrs. Maharaj was *Nani*. My father called her *Maharajin* in acknowledgement of her caste. In *A House for Mr. Biswas*, V.S. Naipaul describes a scene that underscores the irreverence yet respect between the different religious groups that comprised the Indian population.

Seeing the group of three walking Indian file across the plank over the gutter, F.Z. Ghany got up, spat out the matchstick, and greeted them with good humoured scorn. '*Maharajin, Majorajin, and little boy*'. He made most of his money from Hindus but, as a Muslim, distrusted them (1961, 42).

This mark of respect through kinship and caste names, despite the difference in religion, and in deference to age, was implicitly understood among the Indo-Trinidadian community well into the sixth and seventh decades of the twentieth century, just as Indians also understood and used the term *Tantie* as a form of respect for women in Afro-descended families. And well into the century, young Indian girls were still called *Beti*, and young Indian males *Beta*, almost as a form of affection rather than emphasizing their youthfulness.

By the middle to late twentieth century, a variety of kinship terms came to be understood and appreciated not only within the Indo-Trinidadian community but among the rest of the society. The relationships were clearly laid out—*nani* was one's maternal grandmother; *nana*, maternal grandfather. Even today, the legacy of this hierarchy based

on age and gender may still be observed by many. Elders ranked above juniors, and among people of similar age, males invariably outranked females. How these kinship terms came to be major signifiers of femininity and masculinity and were employed outside the Indian community, and how other metaphors were added concerns the story of an evolving feminism among Indo-Caribbean populations: the need for naming is valuable and a recognition of the etymologies of these terms is vital to understanding their liberatory or controlling potential.

Making meaning

Literature from the 1960s onwards conveys the changing stream of consciousness and accompanying archetypes and tropes that pertained directly to Indo-Caribbeanness. Harold Sonny Ladoo's *No Pain Like this Body* (1972) is a novel about a rice-growing Indian family in Trinidad. Its compelling prose echoes the violence of the relationship between Ma and Pa, demonstrating the failure of the Indo-Caribbean family to enact in real-life circumstances the framework created through its protective kinship structures as documented by Morton Klass. Nonetheless, in Ladoo's novel, the characters of Nana and Nani, Ma's parents, stand out as still inherently the keepers of, and consistently observant of, the older traditions of respect. Nani, in particular, is the female bearer of tradition and knowledge, of skill even: she can beat the drums, she attempts to soothe the boy's pain, and Ma still turns to her in times of trouble. In *A Brighter Sun* by Samuel Selvon, set in the 1950s, ideas have shifted yet again as Tiger and Urmilla are married and have moved to the suburban district of Barataria in their own home, away from the watchful eyes of the extended family. Selvon's subtle grasp of the complexities of Indian masculinity and femininity and its changes are excellent—the young couple not only call each other by name but there is an acknowledgement of love and companionship. Despite their marriage being arranged by their parents, they become friends and partners in this relationship, indicating that Selvon had picked up the subtle changes in the nature of the relations and power that women in the Indo-Trinidadian family possessed.

Unfortunately, none, or perhaps few, of these nuances of kinship, tradition, respect or evolution of gender relations emerges in the earlier song forms in Trinidad folk culture. The earliest calypsos that recognized Indian femininity tended to either romanticize the Indian woman as sexually attractive and attainable or, as Gordon Rohlehr writes, "The Indian woman was generally presented against the background of the Indian feast, and many calypsos in which such women appear are really not about the women at all, but about masked interracial conflict, in which the feast becomes a point of, or arena of, ethnic confrontation" (Rohlehr 1990, 261). The generic Indian woman *Dookhani* was featured in a number of calypsos in the 1930s. Interestingly enough, and perhaps not surprisingly, The Mighty Sparrow's "Marajihn", first sung in 1982, captures the Indian woman in a package that was wrapped with sexual overtones while holding fast to all the stereotypes associated with Indo-Trinidadian women as received from kinship titles and from dress.

*You are the genesis of my happiness
You are the one I always dreamed of
How can I exist without your sweet love
When I see you in your sari or your ohrni*

*I am captured by your innovative beauty
 If it wasn't for your nani or your bhowji
 I would marry you and tek you in the country
 Marahjin, marajihn oh my sweet dulahin
 Saucy marajihn, racy marajihn, all right
 Dulahin dulahin
 Dulahin, hear the sweet music playing*

With the rise of the Mastana Bahar competition in the late 1960s, a competition “that was aimed at encouraging competitors, the majority of whom were Indians, to produce innovative music rather than imitate film songs and the traditional folk songs,”² Sundar Popo’s 1970 song “Nana and Nani” comes out from the belly of Indo-Trinidadian folk culture.

*Nana, Nani ghar se nikle
 Dheere dheere chalte hain
 Madura ke dukaan me
 Dono jaake baithe hai
 Nana peeye puncheon daaru, ...
 Charlie's wine aur Gilby wine,
 Karire meri Nani.
 Aga aga nana chale nani going behind
 Nana drinking white rum
 and nani drinking wine*

Sundar Popo not only linguistically blends the Hindi with English but the introduction of this mixture of types of music, language and content gives rise to the new form marketed as chutney, signifying its origins in Indian culture. As his first and what was to become his most popular song, the characters of Nani and Nana loom large. Unlike the still-sacred space in which Harold Sonny Ladoo holds the male and female ancestral presence, Popo humanizes and locates them squarely in the context of poverty and distorted gender and social relationships that the breakdown of kinship and family structures signified as the society continued to evolve.

With the emergence of the first public female voice in chutney in the 1980s, some of these themes continued—the sauciness of the Indo-Trinidadian male and female population are rendered in Drupatee Ramgoonai’s popular *Roll up the Tassa*, in which Bissessar, the male protagonist in the song, is referred to occasionally as *bayta/beta*, referencing that he is a young male, and there is the ubiquitous reference to the *dulahin*. By this time, the idea of the *nani*—the older, wiser woman to be respected in the family—had lost much of its earliest resonance and even the *nani* is associated with both sexual overtones and raucous behaviour, as in Sundar Popo’s tune.

² From Sharda Patasar’s PhD thesis, “Sounding the Landscape: Indo-Trinidadian musical identities in Trinidad 1935-2011”. Unpublished draft, University of Trinidad and Tobago, 2012.

When Sita and Parbati
Start a song now in Hindi
But meh nani get on baad
She get the old man stick all hard

While I have only briefly touched on the emergence of popular discourse on Indo-Trinidadian femininity through music, it is to contemporary literature that we must turn for fracturing the archetypes. In novels like Lakshmi Persaud's *Butterfly in the Wind* (1990), Shani Mootoo's *Cereus Blooms at Night* (1996) and *Valmiki's Daughter* (2009), and Ramabai Espinet's *The Swinging Bridge* (2003), the characters are modern, nuanced, liberated, more complex in both their sexuality and their needs and desires. In all of these novels, Indo-Trinidadian femininity is central, confrontational even, and certainly not the shy retiring stereotypes dictated by early rules of kinship and gender or inscribed in religion. In Persaud's *Butterfly in the Wind*, clearly autobiographical, the character Kamla is a feisty and challenging young woman who will not accept homegrown truths or religious preachings without questioning their relevance to the current condition of women. In her subsequent novels, including *Sastra* and *Daughters of Empire*, we see a recurrent tendency to establish the potency of female power and to write this into the script, often challenging previous ones like the female characters in the *Ramayana* that depict more submissive models. The female and male archetypes inscribed in sacred texts like Sita and Draupadi are constantly being invoked as the role models for Indo-Caribbean women, even though conditions and realities have undergone major transformations.

Mootoo's novels are very layered and disturbing, meant to diffuse the archetypes of heterosexuality or normativity as had been signified in the post-indentureship discourse on the Indo-Caribbean family structure. Espinet problematizes the Indian family farther afield. The metaphor of the swinging bridge captures the unsettled nature of the first migrant experience in Trinidad and the persistent tragedies that will follow the family upon its second migration to Toronto, a place where many Indo-Caribbean populations have settled. Mona, the story's narrator, maintains the calm at the centre of her family's storm which has emerged from their turbulent past and a tortuous history of indenture and poverty in south Trinidad. Her female characters are central to the resolution of the plot and by no means extras in a patriarchal play.

What has this more visible and audible presence of Indo-Caribbean women meant for the understanding of Indo-Caribbean femininities? It has created the space for homogeneity of character and the claiming of an "emotional and intellectual control over their own narratives" (Dabydeen, in Jenkins 2003), but, in my view, the Indo-Caribbean literature has yet to fashion the compelling tropes that allow us a fundamental grasp of the multiple, complex and diverse ways in which Indo-Caribbean women have forged their gender and feminist identities on Caribbean soil. A few examples come to mind for the situation of Afro-Caribbean peoples: the character of Caliban who allows a rereading of the enslaved man from many disciplines; or we can think of the concept of limbo invoked by Wilson Harris, the state of inbetweenity from European mythology recast as the loss of the African limb of culture, and so on. The contemporary English female character cannot now be comprehended without a host of writers and novels which have allowed

for insights, drawn from history and cultural precepts that determined English women's sphere for manoeuvring. The novels of Jane Austen in the late eighteenth century and the Bronte sisters in the early nineteenth century have given us tropes for appreciation and for building composite mental pictures of English womanhood. The mythopoetics of the Indo-Caribbean experience remain submerged in the literary novels which, though eloquent, depict Indian women via almost personal narratives of self and exile. One exception that suggests such a mythopoetics of Indian femininity might be the Jamaican writer Olive Senior's "Arrival of the Snake-Woman". "Everything about the Snake-Woman was magical from the start, even the way she arrived without our seeing, though we were all looking," writes Senior. She continues her tale and we are drawn into the web of mystery and romance which she invests in the coolie woman.

Any thoughts I might have had that she was not a true Heathen vanished when I heard this, for Parson Bedlow had been very explicit about one thing and it was the Heathen's sinful lust for gold—"Their tinkling ornaments about their feet . . . The chains, and the bracelets . . . the ornaments of their legs. . . the rings, the nose jewels"—exactly as it was in the Bible! And yet, I didn't care. I was already half in love with the snake woman, with her nose ring and tinkling ornaments and her outrageous, barbaric ways; I could hardly wait for Cephas and Son Son to go with Moses to the Bay and bring her back to the hills (Senior 1989).

Invigorating feminist tropes

In the light of a body of literature still in its infancy, the symbolic rites and rituals of religion and adornment, the meanings invested in kinship titles, and the originary narratives of the first migration over the *kala pani* have provided metaphors and inspiration for a discourse that demonstrates the soul of Indo-Caribbean feminism. Some of these ideas about womanhood have been implicit in the scholarship that focusses on this population, which has itself been visible from the 1990s onwards³. Sherry Ann Singh's *The Ramayana Tradition and Socio-Religious Change in Trinidad 1917-1990*, for example, though not focussed on femininity, examines the ubiquitous Sita who presents loyalty, support and devotion, in the face of very taxing tests of her virtue.

I focus here on three main tropes—*jahajee*, *matikor* and *bindi*—that have emerged consistently over the last two decades like a rhythmic drumbeat, and consider how and why the writers or drivers of these have absorbed them into their treasury of concepts that can be transmuted and altered to suit the varied architecture required of differently housed audiences.

Jehajin - Jahajee

The invocation of the term *jahajee* by the Queens, New York, group Jahajee Sisters, comprising Indian women who themselves were migrants from the Caribbean to the US or whose parents were, signals both a continuity and transformation of the concept of sisterhood of the boat. Here the migration stream being recognized is a second one, the

³ See, for example, references by Indo-Caribbean scholars such as Neesha Haniff, Gabrielle Hosein, Shaheeda Hosein, Halima Kassim, among many others.

growth of a diaspora, another crossing of the water from the Caribbean farther north. The group describes its origins in the publication *Bolo Bahen! Speak Sister!* which was edited by Taij Kumari Moteelall, Sasha Kamini Parmasad and Purvi Shah and published by the blog Jahajee Sisters: Empowering Indo-Caribbean Women—Sakhi for South Asian Women in 2009. The goal of the activist group is the empowerment of Indian women, in particular the Indo-Caribbean community in Queens. The activity which brought the women together was an interactive series of workshops held from January to April 2009 in Queens under the Arts & Empowerment (A&E) Program of New York City. The workshops focused on the issue of domestic violence, which was explored through the media of poetry, prose, film and dialogue and, like the earlier second wave consciousness-raising groups, the programme sought to harness and develop the voices and the power of women and girls by encouraging them to share their thoughts, emotions, experiences and, crucially, their visions for change. I was invited as a keynote speaker in 2010 to one of their annual events. Upon meeting the group of women, I was impressed by their level of commitment—these were educated, professional women who were striving for personal freedoms as women while being equally concerned with the conditions of their populations, such as the plight of the aged in their communities.

The trope of *jahajee* clearly builds on and is derived from the earliest meanings applied to the term, that of support among the first boat people, and in this case especially women supporting each other. This is confirmed in one of the poems in *Bolo Bahen*, expressing the continuity of this journey from India to the Caribbean to New York, interpreted as another crossing of the *kala pani* or black waters—this time the Caribbean Sea.

My Jahajee Sisters

Pardesi, Pardesi... I feel you looking for me!

“Don’t fret, Coolie Woman, dry your tears”

Riding on the wings of my Jahajee sisters, mothers, grandmas

Gliding over the Indian Ocean, the Atlantic, Kala Pani

Standing firm on their shoulders

Leaning on the strength of my Jahajee Sisters

Leaning on the strength of my Jahajee Sisters

...We were once caterpillars

emerging from cocoons

now butterflies with iron wings

soaring to new heights.

The concept of the voyage is transformed, not unlike in Isaac Teale’s *Ode to the Sable Venus* (1765) and Thomas Stothard’s visual depiction of the ode in *The Voyage of the Sable Venus* (1794), in which women’s beauty and strength are privileged over the horrors of the journey and the dehumanizing of their femininity. Uniting the soft and hard edges of this voyage with images of iron wings and silky cocoons, the Jahajee Sisters envision a world in which sisterhood is so strong, it erases patriarchy, ends violence against women and restores balance. Their achievement of justice is dependent on collective power. They have deployed the concepts of brotherhood and sisterhood of the boat, of a shared experience of trauma if you like, its echoes uniting not only

generations but Indo-Caribbean populations across geographical borders. While practical in their intent and outputs, the group uses art, music, public support for other causes, and progressive ideas on education and health to empower both themselves and their communities. In this rendition of the jahajee, the sisterhood of the boat, the Jahajee Sisters have responded to the call by Brinda Mehta to engage with the *kala pani* discourse. The journey, first across the black water from India to the Caribbean and now from the Caribbean to New York, further dispenses with caste and status differences, allowing endless possibilities for the evolution of Indo-Caribbean femininity.

Matikor

The trope of *matikor*, perhaps the most dominant and potentially useful one for defining an Indo-Caribbean femininity, is derived from the popular ritual of the maticore ceremony which was held the night before a wedding ceremony. Here, in a primarily female space, the young bride would be introduced to the pleasures and vagaries she must expect of married life, amidst much ribaldry and teasing in the form of song. In this gathering of women, young and old, stories were also shared, experiences passed on through humour, and solidarities built between generations of women. The songs that were acted out, which were both sensually and sexually expressive, became known as chutney songs. By titling one of the first edited volumes dedicated to Indian women *Matikor: The Politics of Identity for Indo-Caribbean Women*, in 1999, Rosanne Kanhai signalled in feminist consciousness and literature a construct that has increasingly attained significance for a characterization of Indo-Caribbean femininity. Drupatee Ramgoonai, the popular female Indo-Trinidadian singer, drew heavily on this imagery both consciously and unconsciously to establish a public stage personality. Kanhai's introduction situates the current and future potential of *matikor* as a valuable symbol:

Matikor provided a rare opportunity for plantation and post-plantation women to claim a space of celebration and articulation. Adorning themselves with their best clothing, face decorations, and jewellery—brought from India or acquired during indentureship—women could give themselves the beauty and dignity denied to them in the rigours of daily life. They shared gossip and jokes and sang traditional songs, and performed dances that were celebratory and sexually suggestive. Matikor was a place of healing where women could act out their resistance against degradation and depersonalization imposed on them by a ruling class...Matikor exists today, its endurance and transformative capacity providing a lens through which the identity of Indo-Caribbean women can be explored (1999, xi).

Kanhai notes in this introduction that *matikor* remains a closed, ethnic space against the backdrop of the Afro-Caribbean majority and a reminder of the spiritual strength founded in community and tradition as Indian women continue to enter the wider Caribbean and global mainstreams. Like the concept of *jahajee* above, *matikor* is presented as a primarily Indian ethnic space, an affirmation of the creative energy and liberatory possibilities that might be derived from the original maticore ceremonies, although its public presentation through chutney performances offers other creative possibilities outside of a closed ethnic and gender spectrum. In the volume edited by Kanhai, a Guyanese and Trinidadian network of women scholars,

activists and writers were encouraged to become a part of this new expression of the *maticore* space—another exclusively female Indo-Caribbean space created for sharing stories and confidences, insights and challenges across time and space with the aim of empowering each other and successive generations. Parallel in some ways to the abstract space created by the recasted concept of *jahajee*, this new *matikor* does not replace the ritual performance of *maticore* that continues to survive in attenuated form in Indo-Caribbean family weddings. This joyous ritual and the performances around the bride and groom the night before the knot is tied seem universal to all groups. The *maticore* is the Hindu or Indian bridal shower. When marriages were arranged between very young women who had just entered puberty, sometimes to young men who were equally inexperienced, the *maticore* was devised as a means of sexual instruction. Currently, when brides are no longer assumed to be naive about sexuality, the ritual plays another function, that of support and celebration, and, as an offshoot, the site for the creation of new chutney songs.

Kanhai, and increasingly other writers, have begun to use *maticore* or *matikor* to signify shared cultural histories and sisterhood among Indo-Caribbean women. The trope contains possibilities for a recognized concept that might define the unique nature of Indo-Caribbean women's struggles against an Indo-Caribbean patriarchy. It might and should be extended to other arenas of feminist struggles. A longer span of history and their demographic and cultural dominance in the region has given European- and African-descended women a longer period of incubation for their struggles. There was an implicit assumption in the rise of the second wave feminist movement that all women shared similar histories of patriarchal control and social repression, so that considerations of the varied experiences of class or ethnicity did not surface until well into the late 1990s⁴. The rise of post-structuralism and deconstruction, and the admission of postcolonial thought that there were many narratives to be told, has allowed a space for different groups, including Indo-Caribbean women, to articulate the differences within community or by religion even, and to locate the metaphorical and empirical components that speak to these differences.

Bindi

In *Bindi*, Rosanne Kanhai again summons up another icon for Indian femininity—one that is premised not on a ceremonial event but on a decorative tradition that marks status. Derived from the Sanskrit *bindu*, meaning a drop, Kanhai writes that the “traditional *bindi* is a round dot pasted on a Hindu woman's forehead just above and between the eyebrows” (2011, i). The colour and material of the drop signified age and gendered roles—sandalwood for young girls, vermilion for married women and ash for widows. While the origins are shrouded, it is thought that the vermilion for married women signified the menstrual flow that signalled the capacity for childbearing, especially as during the marriage ceremony this was applied as a stripe of vermilion powder along the centre parting of the woman's hair, leading to the dot or drop on the forehead. Kanhai notes that in contemporary times, the *bindi* has become a fashion statement, highly

⁴ See, for instance, Rawwida Baksh-Soodeen's “Issues of Difference in Contemporary Caribbean Feminism” in *Rethinking Caribbean Difference, Feminist Review* 59, ed. Patricia Mohammed, 1998.

decorative and multi-coloured, and has possibly lost the original intent of defining the stages of womanhood and what was allowed, or not, at each stage. While the *maticore* was a secretive, separate and highly sexualized space, bindi as a decorative and now less exclusive practice allows for another metaphor of Indo-Caribbean femininity to continue its emergence in a Western context, perhaps literally “bringing Indo-Caribbean womanhood to the fore”. Perhaps what is most fascinating about the metaphoric possibilities of bindi is that a decorative device on the body that once signified and controlled women has been appropriated for ornamental use. In its loss of inherent originary meanings, the decorative device has been transformed into a thing of power from that of submissiveness to strict gender definitions of female status.

A discursive space for symbols of Indo-Caribbean feminist identity

Why has it become necessary for a naming of the Indo-Caribbean female experience that defines both Indo-Caribbean femininity and Indo-Caribbean feminism? The emergence of second wave feminism in the last decades of the twentieth century took for granted a collective notion that we were all sisters under the skin, whether this skin was white or black or brown. The evolution of literature, scholarship, activism and practices has revealed that historical, cultural, class and geographical differences cannot be dismissed. They lead to different accesses to power, to privilege, to being visible or invisible, to having the confidence of a voice, or having that voice dismissed, or worse, given no credence. All of the latter are antithetical to the larger feminist goals of empowerment.

The three major tropes *jahajee*, *matikor* and *bindi* selected above for scrutiny are linked but are not exclusive to Hinduism. The early Indo-Islamic population was in the minority compared to the dominant Hindu group and, thus, the ideas pertaining to an Indo-Islamic presence has been more subdued. I have attempted to connect to symbols of Islamic women (having been born into an Islamic family) in a paper entitled “Daughters of Khadija” (2001) in which I viewed the Prophet Muhammed’s wife Khadija’s greater age and financial resources, since she owned the household business, as key in providing her with relative independence and autonomy as a woman. Thus was she able to influence the Prophet’s thinking and teachings as the religion of Islam developed. The idea of the highly controlled or submissive Islamic woman, therefore, is not grounded in the origins of this religion. I also found one concept in Islam that seems to parallel the ideas of womanhood under Hinduism and applies to most cultures that have sought to contain female sexuality. The concept of *fitna*, which derived from an Arabic word meaning to seduce, tempt or lure away, was implicitly employed by both the colonial authorities and the male patriarchy in reference to Islamic women to control their sexuality and display of seductive femininity. It is parallel in some ways to the concept of *prakti* in Hinduism.

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 (Mohammed 2002, 147).

The Indo-Caribbean population was drawn from pre-partition India in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries and there were far more commonalities in its members' practices and ideas of gender despite religious differences, many of which did not resurface with clarity until both religions became reconstituted in Caribbean villages and communities. Thus, the employment of tropes that derive specifically from Hindu practices does not separate Hindu and Islamic Indo-Caribbean feminism. They relate to more universal ideas of femininity and to the control of women, despite religious difference. There are other symbolic markers in Islam which have emerged in more contemporary times—those of the *hijab* and the *burkha*. The wearing of these crosses ethnic lines, as many African women also currently cover their heads or faces and bodies when in public. What this signals to us is that newly emerging measures of female control need to be scrutinized, even while the older ones such as *bindi* and *matikor* spaces have been opened up by women themselves, over centuries of whittling away at their meanings.

Inviting a range of concepts and ideas, of practices and rituals into one arena for investigation, rather than isolating them, presents a potentially fruitful area for expanding our understanding of the complexity of gender and feminist theory and practice. I have underscored two primary sites where these differences have emerged in the definition of Indo-Caribbean femininity. The first is the burgeoning literary space, the second is the conceptual scholarly space. I see the need for more dialogue between these two spaces and for practitioners of both to dig deeper into the unconscious as well as magical and mythical elements of Indo-Caribbean cultural heritage past and present. In order to capture the wider public imagination and idiomatic use among feminist and popular writers and artists, perhaps the concept of *matikor* which seems most promising needs to be mined for its submerged potential. Why did this ritual emerge? What specific purposes did it serve? What unintended purposes resulted from this ritual of a separate women's space? How has the ritual been transformed and why has it persisted in the ceremonies of Indians? All of these meanings must be deconstructed and reinvented by new generations of women who take the concept and the ritual outside of its original site—before nuptials—and into the open, and place it under the scrutiny of a male and a wider non-Indian female gaze. In inviting us to engage with the concepts of *jahajee*, *matikor* and *bindi*, *Jahajee Sisters* and *Rosanne Kanhai* have already begun this task. What surfaces from this review is that a collective Indo-Caribbean feminist project has been ongoing over at least two full decades. What remains on the agenda is for those ideas to further crystallize and to become part of a wider dialogue with all feminisms, with the insights shared for the collective good, rather than being viewed as divisive of the feminist struggle.

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