



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

‘Habitable Identities’— A Review of *Bindi: The Multifaceted Lives of Indo-Caribbean Women*

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Our understanding of the complex journeys of women of Indian ancestry through several centuries in the Caribbean and its diasporas is expanded in valuable ways by Rosanne Kanhai’s 2011 collection *Bindi: The Multifaceted Lives of Indo-Caribbean Women*. In a collection commendable for its multidisciplinary nature, we learn of the particularities of Indo-Caribbean women’s agency in areas as varied as literature, art, beauty/cultural pageants, rural domestic work, religious performances, traditional healing, and their coping with the conditions of contemporary life. There is an unevenness to the collection as it moves across this disparate terrain, but in the strongest of the pieces, which include the work of Shaheeda Hosein, Gabrielle Hosein, Anita Baksh, and Paula Morgan, we depart from essentialized notions of what constitutes an Indo-Caribbean female subject to complex discussions of the multiple positionings that Indian women utilize in their engagement with concepts of femininity, Indianness, citizenship, individuality, and communal belonging.

One of the most striking aspects of the collection and one that makes a key intervention in the thinking about forms of feminism is the extent to which the contributors reread venues of action that seem to be associated with tradition, continuity, and conservatism and find the nuanced ways in which Indian women transgress norms and clear space for the achievement of individual desires. In her essay “Unlikely Matriarchs,” for example, Shaheeda Hosein redirects potential thinking about feminist goals from a focus on the quest for individual liberation to that of the self-sacrificing actions of older rural women who had set their eyes on opening up possibilities for the next generation. In so doing,

Hosein and the other contributors push back against the stereotypes of docility and passivity that are imposed on Indian women from both within and without their communities and offer, as Anita Baksh puts it, examples of “resistance [that are] enacted in forms that evolve within their own culture” (209).

Essays in the collection dealing with religious identity like those of Sherry Ann Singh and Halima Kassim are also useful in questioning some of our common assumptions about sites of female empowerment, suggesting as they do that, for the Caribbean, notions of feminism do not go hand in hand with secularism. Once again, subtle cues are found for women’s empowerment as when Singh notes in “Women in the *Ramayana* Tradition in Trinidad” that, in local Trinidadian Hindu culture, more aggressive and independent models of femininity such as Lakshmi, Durga, and Kali were admired rather than the long-suffering and virtuous Sita (35-6). In a Caribbean context in which Indian women’s empowerment is often read as a loss of cultural integrity, it is particularly suggestive that these essays show the ways in which women attempt to work within certain cultural forms rather than discarding them altogether. The essays also reveal, however, the extent to which Indo-Caribbean feminisms are marked by hybridity and transnational considerations and often reference other forms of identity in which Indian women can frame themselves. In Valerie Youssef’s piece on self-conceptions of Indo-Trinidadian female students, for example, we find an Indo-Muslim woman comparing her situation to that of women in Saudi Arabia, thereby complicating assumptions that Caribbean Indians are primarily oriented towards the subcontinent when it comes to understandings of identity.

The interviews that pervade the collection ensure that we hear a wide variety of female voices from various generational, religious, educational, class, and regional positionings. With its unique blend of autobiography and analysis, Gabrielle Hosein’s extremely self-aware narrative about being Miss Mastana Bahar 2000 stands out in particular for its insights about the contradictions of Indo-Caribbean subjectivity. Her emphasis on the way Indian women “transgress as well as reproduce hegemonic meanings simultaneously” (141) serves as a reminder of the unpredictable terrain upon which womanhood and girlhood are shaped in the Caribbean. Her focus on the way Indian women tend to perform different identities in different spaces provides us not with an understanding of what it means to be a young Indian woman in Trinidad, which she rightly challenges as too generalizing a perspective, but rather highlights the paradoxes involved in the various negotiations of Indian women between public and private spaces, individual desires versus community ones and ever present middle-class expectations of respectability.

Anita Baksh’s and Paula Morgan’s considerations of the nuances of Indo-Caribbean women’s literary production both from within and outside of the region are particularly strong in emphasizing the diverse and provocative ways in which writers depict personal and historical traumas and crises of belonging and how they challenge the particular burdens of ethnic representation that are placed upon women. Their work and Brenda Gopeesingh’s interview of the Guyanese artist Bernadette Persaud reveal how women’s creative work insists on recognition of the heterogeneity of Indo-Caribbean women’s experiences and attempts to forge alliances across differences.

Kanhai presents *Bindi* as a follow-up to her influential collection, *Matikor: The Politics of Identity for Indo-Caribbean Women*, published over a decade earlier and, indeed, in it we find evidence of the development of the field of Indo-Caribbean studies, with the contributors engaging with the work of other scholars and writers who helped carve out spaces for thinking about this community and their contributions to the intellectual and cultural life of the region. This very development of the field to ever more nuanced understanding of the diversity of interests within this community, marked by both inclusion and exclusion, is partly what makes me uncomfortable with Kanhai's use of the bindi as the overarching symbol for this collection and with the emphasis she places on it as a universal icon belonging to all women. As we see in the Caribbean and in the diasporic spaces that Indo-Caribbean women inhabit, the wearing of a bindi is usually tied up with specific performances of belonging and religious and cultural positioning. Descriptions such as “[T]he bindi rejects no one. Just as fashion cannot be owned by any one cultural group, the eternal female, represented in the earth goddess Kali, is beyond culture” (2) and “the intergenerational continuous female self” (12) belie the complexity contained within the essays themselves, which for the most part reject notions of universal womanhood in favor of the culturally specific and contested manifestations of femininity and arguments about femininity that we find in the context of the Indian Caribbean. A different symbol would have served this worthy collection better than one Kanhai problematically describes as “an eternal and universal facial marking of femininity” (5).

Kanhai acknowledges the limitations of her collection in assessing conditions across the Indo-Caribbean geography given the lack of contributions from Guyana and the Francophone Caribbean and other areas with smaller Indo-Caribbean populations. This is a limitation shared with this Special Issue and, along with her, we reiterate our desire to see more work on the lives of women in the lesser known sites of the Indian diaspora in the Caribbean. In the meantime, the collection significantly furthers our understanding of what Paula Morgan calls the “habitable identities” that Indo-Caribbean women imagine and create for themselves and use to push back against the stereotypes about them.