



'Diaspora' Diaspora and the Construction of Subjectivity in Ramabai Espinet's *The Swinging Bridge*

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Indo-Caribbean women writers make an interesting, however an under-repressed and an eclipsed cultural group. These prolific writers represent an indomitable Indo-Caribbean sensibility as a result of which they have started receiving thoughtful critical attention, which is an important step towards the deeper study of this minority group and their literature. The richness, vibrancy and the diversity of a racial and a colonial past is apparent in the writings of Indo-Caribbean women writers, and they maintain in their writings, patterns of all linguistic, cultural and communicative linkages of generations of denial and suppression. These writings seek to explore the meanings of the identities of their female protagonists, which are by no means fixed, in fact which are in a state of constant transition. The most common thread that binds Indo-Caribbean writers together is that they share Caribbean origin and heritage and their writings engage Caribbean cultures and visions as their homeland, though they have varied ancestral origins and many of them have now permanently settled in other first-world countries. Indo-Caribbean indentures began in the early 19th century and continued till the early 20th century. It was a neo-slave system developed to take care of the huge sugar and subsequently coffee plantations in the Caribbean islands. The expanse of this indenture period is ridden with deceitful recruitment practices, an authoritarian management and a rigorous discipline, where the values of the indentured laborers

were considered secondary to the production of sugar. While the immigrants seemingly came empty-handed to the islands, they brought with them their “non-material culture – beliefs, values and acumen... they certainly brought memories of their culture and tradition.” (Roopnarine 2007, 5) With such a “symbiotic relationship” (Roopnarine 2007, 5) between India and the Caribbean, Indian immigrants shaped their identities as well as their economic future individually and collectively. However, as Lommarsh Roopnarine points out, these indentured servants manipulated the plantation system under everyday forms of resistance and a new Caribbean was slowly formed, influenced by the servants’ own actions, activities, attitudes and some degree of conformity with the authority.

Women played a pivotal role in the Caribbean civilization even though the ratio of women immigrants was one third to the male population. Back in the country of their origin, women suffered the indignities of an uncivilized, undeveloped society and were seen as inferior to men in strength and skill. They were deprived of their privileges, were ignorant of their basic rights and were sprung to the lowest strata of the society. The position of women in India was raised significantly with British intervention which brought changes to a traditional, patriarchal society, dismantling and reforming some rigid social customs like Sati, child marriage, female infanticide, female education, the devdasis, and widow remarriage. The work of Indian reformers was instrumental in bringing about social change in India and after centuries of marginalization, Indian women found opportunities for self-expression. The historical and social analysis of Hindu women in India before they immigrated to the Caribbean in the 19th century suggests that they were beginning to experience greater freedom. Sociological studies suggest that Indian women emigrated with the principal aim of improving their social and economic position, even if this required severing ties with their homeland, and thus became the real carriers of cultures and rituals in the ebbing Caribbean civilization. Roopnarine states that,

The historical attitude of East Indian women prior to their arrival to the Caribbean was complex and multi-faceted, ranging from defeatism to determination and from resignation to resurgence. (Roopnarine 2007, 87)

On further articulating the position of East Indian women in the Caribbean, Roopnarine argues that, Indo-Caribbean women used the,

Third Space between European imperialist patriarchy at the top and East Indian patriarchy, at the bottom, as a place of agency to articulate and maintain their cultural identity. The Third Space was a place of agency and intervention, and where cultural meaning was located as well as constructed. It was also a place where East Indian indentured women created a sense of identity. Interestingly, it did not create anything new or

anything original; rather, it was a space where culture – especially cultural characteristics – was expressed. (Roopnarine 2007, 105)

Indo-Caribbean women's fiction is a distinct sub-genre of the Indo-Caribbean studies that spans approximately two decades and is a rapidly emerging field on the horizon of the contemporary ethnic studies. Novel is the main Caribbean narrative genre and Indo-Caribbean women writers are able to envision myriad shades of perspectives and experiences through this enriched form. With a comprehensive sense of diaspora literature, whose roots lay in a physically and psychologically fragmented experiences of migration and indenture ship, Indo-Caribbean women writers provide a fresh perspective in Caribbean literature, ranging from their unique representations of plantation history, diasporic identities, third-world feminism, ethnicity and race, hybridity or the contemporary Caribbean culture. Indo-Caribbean writers despite their similar pasts, differ widely in their explorations of the Caribbean context, expressing sentiments of nostalgia, ambivalence and antipathy, where the Caribbean, rather than being a stable site, figures as an ever-changing factor as individuals shape their life stories. Caribbean literature, usually conceptualized in regional, thematic and post-colonial ideological terms, is a multi-faceted factor in itself, where the multiplicity springs from its colonial and ethnic past. Caribbean literature predominantly mirrors the tensions that emerge between the self and the cultural forces that surround it, including not only the immediate ethnic community but also the expectations and assumptions of a larger national and international community. Indo-Caribbean literary representations are fundamentally rooted in the memory of traumatic historical experiences of uprooting and indenture ship. Violence and displacement suffered by the wave of indentured laborers has been consciously and subconsciously passed from generations to generations as a painful legacy and has immortalized into literature. The multiplicity of self-expression that is a perfect amalgam of the public and personal elements of an individual life becomes the typical Indo-Caribbean sensibility to create intricate identities that utilize the multi-dimensional backdrop of the Caribbean culture. It is this essential search for multiculturalism that Indo-Caribbean women writers seek for the comprehensive overview of a distinct Indo-Caribbean sensibility in their fiction. Indo-Caribbean women writers in their creolized identities and cultural expressions address and at times question the binaries of pure and mixed, good and bad. Such issues are not only central in their literary expressions but also become a part of absorbing multiple, cultural identities that surround them – identities that are based on Hindu ethnicity, Christianity, Caribbean and Afro-Caribbean cultural traditions. Like their identities, their sexualities as revealed in the novels are constantly renegotiated with the changing cultural and social frames that range from Indian tradition to the Western tradition. In this sense, their commentaries on the

repressive forces of the society and their attempts to negotiate both sexuality and nationalism as allegories of each other, become significant personal yet political dimensions of their creativity. Further, their writings can also be considered as subjective yet valid records of the lived experiences of the Indo-Caribbean women that also become the sources of the Indo-Caribbean cultural history and the attempts to redeem Indo-Caribbean women from the burden of cultural and ethnic stereotyping.

Diaspora

The concept of Diaspora refers to movements and migrations, voluntary and forced, resulting from the shifting of global power structures, also referring to the transnational nature of identity formation. While colonialism, imperialism, slavery and indentured labor systems are reminders of violent forms of diaspora, the term also garners the implications of “sense of sowing and growth” (Huttunen, Valovirta, 2008, xii). Migration and diaspora constantly transform existing cultural systems giving birth to new traditions, cultural conventions, languages, forms of art and strategies arising from situations of encounter and dislocation. Also homelessness in diasporic literature is often at the same time characterized as dislocation and displacement: a condition which does not seem to belong or be situated in a fixed place.

The term ‘Diaspora’ diaspora indicates a plurality of belonging identity and community of double or multiple dislocations. Indo-Caribbean women writers and women writers of Indo-Caribbean origin represent this group of individuals. The term also indicates the possibility of viewing diasporas as dynamic configurations that are constantly reconstructed and redefined. Such a view of diaspora focuses attention on the variety of narrative identities and processes through which the diaspora is manifested. Ramabai Espinet occupies this cultural space of diaspora and her works adequately exemplify both the notions of Third space and ‘Diaspora’ diaspora.

Ramabai Espinet is a significant voice in Indo-Caribbean literature. Her novel *The Swinging Bridge* focuses on the seemingly dispossessed and marginalized Indo-Caribbean female subjects, besides dealing with issues such as diaspora, emigration and dislocation. While the novel is an interesting document of Indo-Caribbean culture, Espinet’s writing is crystal clear, definite and multi-dimensional at the same time. An immensely moving family story of Mona, whose great-grandmother Gainer moves to the Caribbean to escape a mercenary marriage with an older man, takes root in the reader’s psyche and swings between the banks of self-consciousness and solidarity. *The Swinging Bridge* becomes the fusion of cultures and worlds that are thoughtfully explored through Mona, a film researcher whose identity is defined by double dislocation. Espinet deftly explores the sensibility and

the psyche of a shy, thoughtful, somewhat introverted yet rebellious Mona and also scrutinizes her subjectivity in the process of experiencing the realities of 'diaspora' diaspora.

While carefully analyzing the intricate relation of the protagonist Mona with her family, Brinda Mehta says, girls of Hindu origin specifically had to renegotiate themselves from two different levels of virtual bondages – family and school. They are thus forced to combat a double alienation that results from an anticipatory clash of cultures - Hinduism at home and Christianity in the school. Displacement begins at the roots where both the systems bear varying degrees of foreignness.

Mehta considers Indo-Caribbean women's cultural and social locations as margins of marginality. And she believes that within the Caribbean creole cultural paradigm, Indo-Caribbean women were always occluded by the black majority and white colonizers. She talks about the dialectical imbalance that generates a subtle Chioscuro of colour lines of brownness that characterizes the Indo-Caribbean presence and citizenship. Mehta further states that 20th century Caribbean writing contests the trope of exile "by providing a valuable basis on which to comprehend the complexities of the post-colonial Caribbean exilic predicament that has been shaped by the disenfranchising forces of colonialism and mass migration, racism, sexism and class stratifications." (Mehta 2004, 26) She also says that, Indo-Caribbean women writers "explore the complexities of exile from the vantage point of disenfranchised Indian women who have had to negotiate the physical, sociocultural and psychologically (self-) imposed levels of exile both at home and abroad." (Mehta 2004, 26) The extra sensitive consciousness of these women allows them to assert their rights of authorship through an "effective claiming of exile space" (Mehta 2004, 26)

Mehta also says that spatial negotiations by women in diaspora have transformative value in terms of gender ideologies, simultaneously creating discord with the patriarchal and colonial power in the issues of women's alienations and exilic dispositions. The complexities of postcolonial Caribbean predicament of mutual exiles can be comprehended by this trope of exile which has been shaped by the binding forces of colonialism, mass migration, and racism and class stratifications.

The crossing of the *kala pani* by the first immigrants symbolizes the fundamental initiation into exile for Indo-Caribbean communities who faced the tensions of an uprooted system. Even though the immigrant Indians retained the primary elements of culture, given that the bonds with their homelands were so tenacious, their sociocultural transplantation into the unknown lands of Caribbean plummeted them into a historical vacuum where the obscuring of their historical past as a structuring agent condemned them to a state of physical and symbolic exile confronting the Indian dilemma of preserving ethnic identity in the face of

Creolization. Such ruthless severing of historical ties to “firmly moor floating insecurities of exiled origins leads to the formation of nomadic identities that are in transit between the disruption of forced and voluntary arrivals and departure. (Mehta 2004, 156)

Espinete evokes the experiences of Indo-Trinidadians such as Mona Singh to navigate the readers into different cultural and temporal locations such as the *kala pani* and Canada. The spatial shifts in this narrative corresponds to transgressive sexualities, thereby taking the character beyond the confines of both *kala pani* and normativity. The rebellions of Mona cross and blur identities of race, gender and sexuality and provide her an agential subjectivity to combat the lack of freedom with transgressive potential.

The title of the novel with the emphasis on the adjective ‘swinging’ implicates the third space that the protagonist occupies. It is also indicative of the margins of the marginality which women like Gainder and Mona occupy and convert into new frames of identity. The ‘bridge’ of the title haunts Mona’s memories of childhood in Trinidad. The swinging bridge over a river also reminds her of a spider’s web. This multivalent title announces the coral identity of Mona which will be reshaped and redefined throughout the novel. Changing frames of nationality, sexuality and gender are the factors that help her to redefine her identity. Water symbolized by the bridge is that conspicuous element which represents the fluidity and journeys which further implicate border-crossing, survival and tradition.

Mona gets relocated to Montreal, Canada, making a case for ‘diaspora’ diaspora with a contingent identity. “Kello and I had been two drifters searching for the same rainbow’s end – and one of us had reached it” (*The Swinging Bridge* 2003, 49). Being in the Caribbean, she understands her identity in terms of social and familial prohibitions symbolized by *kala pani*, while in Canada her identity is shaped by mobility and freedom. Mona’s brother Kello, after taking divorce from his Canadian wife, makes clear his queer desires. His transgressive relation is allegorical of the space and identity explored by Mona.

Mona and her friend Bess are involved in archival excavation and exhibition of artefacts of indenture. Rajesh, Bess’ Rastafarian boyfriend constructs a mosaic of Gainder’s songs which represents both the third space and creolization. The mosaic is described as,

...a huge wooden slab divided into small asymmetrical shapes. In each of these “tiles” Rajesh was inscribing a miniature portrait of Trinidad – he had got the idea, he said, from the miniatures done in India on grains of rice. The tiny scenes were intricate, marked by a sense of collision, fruit and vegetables, people of all races clashing in miniscule spaces. (Espinete, 291)

Rajesh as a Dougla, represents creolized identity and crossing of racial borders. His identity as a half-bred is allegorical of the third space – a cultural location wherein meanings are constantly reconstructed. Mona realizes how much Bess has invented herself in her relationship with Rajesh. Bess-Rajesh relationship is a partnership of mixedness and it provides a model for Mona to move beyond boundaries.

Mona describes Nowarian – a nowhere-ian whose identity is defined by her unbelonging rather than her belongingness. It is this nowarianism which becomes the philosophy and culture of Espinet's narrative. As a nowarian, Mona is able to destabilize the components of identity such as nationality, gender, race and sexuality. Her interactions with the cultural outsiders such as Kello and Rajesh enrich her personality. The bridge which initially represents fragile cobweb, gradually transforms into a crazy swinging one which takes her to a complex, nuanced exploration of past, identity and eventually Indo-Caribbean culture. She understands that like the bridge, her identity as an Indo-Caribbean immigrant in Canada is suspended between two places, two identities and many cultures.

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