# 5. Dirty Skirts and the Other Body: Ramabai Espinet's *The Swinging Bridge*

*Free as the wind up in the sky / Free as the world that is my home*
*Free anywhere that I might roam [...] / Free in my way with everything.*
*(Espinet 2003: 295)*

*Rover, wanderer, nomad, vagabond / Call me what you will*
*But I'll take my time anywhere / Free to speak my mind anywhere*
*And I'll redefine anywhere / Anywhere I roam, where I lay my head is home.*
*(Metallica "Wherever I May Roam," 1991)*

## 5.1 Introduction

By describing herself as a wanderer and "citizen of the world" (Espinet/Savory 1995: 112), Ramabai Espinet's nomadic subjectivity defies essentialist notions of cultural identity. She was born in Trinidad's second largest city, San Fernando, in 1948, where she grew up in a Presbyterian, middle-class household. Her ancestors came to Trinidad from India in the 1870s in the course of Britain's indentureship scheme. Together with her family, she moved to Canada in the 1960s, where she lived in Montreal, Toronto, and Vancouver. She obtained a PhD in English literature from the University of the West Indies, engaged in creative writing, and, important for her literary career and the feminist impetus of her work, got involved in the women's movements in the Caribbean and North America. Having divided her time between the Caribbean and Canada, Espinet has made her permanent home in Toronto. She teaches English and Caribbean Studies, and pursues community work in order to promote the Indo-Caribbean diaspora heritage in Canada. She is a novelist, short story writer, and author of juvenile fiction. She has published children books, such as *Ninja's Carnival* (1993) and *The Princess of Spadina: A Tale of Toronto* (1992), a collection of poetry, *Nuclear Seasons* (1991), as well as the novel *The Swinging Bridge*

(2003). The performance pieces "Beyond the Kalapani" and "Indian Robber Talk" are two earlier critical attempts by Espinet to give an understanding of the history of the Indian diaspora in the Caribbean to an international audience unfamiliar with this period.[185] Moreover, she is founding member and activist of the Caribbean Association for Feminist Research and Action (CAFRA). Her edited collection *Creation Fire: A CAFRA Anthology of Caribbean Women's Poetry* (1990) features the work of some 120 writers, bringing together as one of the first collections worldwide several poems by Indo-Caribbean women, and actively contributes to the shaping of a "Caribbean feminist poetic" (Espinet 1990: xxi) – a poetic that adds "something distinctively woman-centred to the Caribbean literary canon, and something distinctively Caribbean-centred to the global feminist poetic and to global feminism as a whole" (ibid.: xx).

Literary and feminist scholar Brinda Mehta notes that Espinet's "writings inscribe the negotiations of Indo-Caribbean female subjectivity and exilic identity within a tradition of postcolonial writing in North America and Trinidad to establish an important feminist poetics of literary and cultural representation in Caribbean literature" (Mehta 2006: 19). Espinet criticizes the invisibility of Indo-Caribbean women and their marginalization in society, academia, and arts: "In every quarter of activity, whether in art, literature, public life or otherwise, the Indian woman is underrepresented, and where she is represented she is not seen as an equal participant" (Espinet 1993: 42). In spite of these facts, she does not simply reproduce a discourse of victimhood by evoking common stereotypes, such as the beaten, single Indian woman or the disenfranchised housewife, figures who indeed roam her work; but in order to show that these images are actual circumstances of a particular lived experience, she makes stereotypes visible and ultimately deconstructs them. As a liberationist practice, Espinet suggests the possibility of an alternative development and empowerment for these women from within their subaltern experience. Thus, her work is testimony to the strength, resilience, and creativity of Indian Caribbean women as well as their contribution to the continuing *kala pani* history of displacement and relocation. The *kala pani*, the Hindi term and concept of the 'Black Waters,' separates India from the 'New World.' In Hinduism, crossing the *kala pani*, which for the indentured laborers was an unavoidable journey,

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185 The play "Beyond the Kalapani," the creative output of her work within a women's collective, was staged in Toronto in 1992 at the World of Music, Arts and Dance (WOMAD) festival (cf. Mahabir/Pirbhai 2013: 17). "Indian Robber Talk" was performed at Toronto's Caribana, at Desh Pardesh, a local arts festival, and Rhythms of India in 1993.

implies a cutting off of the bonds to the ancestral land of India and the contamination of caste and religion.[186]

By way of recuperating personal memories and national histories, Espinet's novel investigates the coming-of-age process of a heterosexual woman of Indian Presbyterian upbringing in Trinidad and Canada. The postcolonial textuality of this debut novel, meaning a literary examination of hegemonic (colonial) narratives and a rewriting of the (rather Eurocentric) *Bildungsroman* genre and historical novel, recovers the silenced history of Indian women, who came as contract laborers to the Caribbean. This is achieved through foregrounding the triple experience of Indo-Caribbean-Canadian female subjectivity which I will later on define as the diasporic *kala pani* continuum that engenders fluid identity formations. In the novel, Espinet not only deals with inter-ethnic conflicts, racialized body politics, the inequalities of urban and peasant lifestyles, as well as (ethno-)spatial separation in Trinidad, but also problematizes issues of (racial) identity, assimilation, and belonging of twice migrants as well as everyday forms of racism in Canada from a woman's point of view. Through this perspective, Espinet is able to show the limitations of ethnic and gender ideologies that aim to put Indo-Trinidadian womanhood into place. She breaks taboos surrounding diverse issues such as discrimination, gender normativity, domestic abuse, homosexuality, and aids.

This chapter focuses on the subject formation of a protagonist who, to borrow from the lines of the Metallica song above, is a nomad and wanderer who takes the liberty to speak her mind. Her coming into consciousness is inextricably linked to her brother's death and to the unfolding matrilineal history of indentureship in the Caribbean. In order to locate the novel's settings and historical issues, the chapter first briefly traces the socio-historical development of the Indian diaspora experience in Trinidad and Canada, which Espinet meticulously describes and fictionalizes throughout her work. Furthermore, I reflect on current perspectives of Indo-Caribbean women's writing and build up on Brinda Mehta's literary diaspora concept of the *kala pani* as a feminist poetics which attempts to deconstruct dominant nationalist constructions of Caribbean history and identity. The close reading focuses not only on body politics, sexu-

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186  This is summarized by Brinda Mehta: "According to Hindu belief, the traversing of large expanses of water was associated with contamination and cultural defilement as it led to the dispersal of tradition, family, class, and caste classifications, and to the general loss of a 'purified' Hindu essence. *Kala pani* crossings were initially identified with the expatriation of convicts, low castes, and other undesirable elements of society from the mainland to neighboring territories to rid society of any visible traces of social pollution; those who braved the *kala pani* were automatically compromising their Hinduness" (Mehta 2006: 24).

ality, and Trinidadian respectability inscribed in particular on the female body but also on the process of becoming the 'other' body both in racialized as well as sexual(ized) terms. Also, as in the previous chapter, I situate the novel within a diasporic coming-of-age poetics, in this case set in Canada and Trinidad, in which this particular *narrative* schema is interrupted by the Indian *Ramayana* epic,[187] transgenerational time, and storytelling (cf. Francis 2010; Pirbhai 2013).

## 5.1.1 Creolization and *Douglarization* in Trinidad

The twin islands Trinidad and Tobago, with the capital Port of Spain, ranks among the more prosperous states within the Caribbean.[188] According to the census in 2011, the country has a population of about 1.3 million people (cf. "Trinidad and Tobago 2011 Population and Housing Census"). The heterogeneous ethnic composition of its society with 37.8% East Indian, 36.5% African, 16.2% Mixed-Other, 8.2% Mixed-African/East Indian, as well as Causasian, Chinese, Indigenous, and Syrian/Lebanese testifies the cultural diversity of the whole Caribbean region.[189] It is due to the indentureship period, which the British Empire installed immediately after the abolition of slavery, that Trinidad has such a large East Indian population, similar to Guyana and Suriname. Correspondingly, the major religious groups are Christians, Hindus, and Muslims.

In the course of the first Spanish settlement starting in 1592, the local population of about 30,000 Caribs and Arawaks was almost extinguished.[190] Trinidad

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187 In Trinidad, the ancient Indian epic poem *Ramayana* is "the most popular Hindu religious text" (Singh 2012: 20). The epic contains an idealization of gender and family. Caribbean feminist Patricia Mohammed explains the text's lasting importance for contemporary gender performances: "Rama provides the model on which Indian masculinity is constructed through mythology, Sita embodies femininity, the ideal of female love and devotion and a lesson to all women on how they should behave in their daily lives" (Mohammed 1998: 395).

188 This is especially due to its highly profitable oil and gas industry, which bestowed an economic boom and wealth on Trinidad's society during the 1970s and early 1980s.

189 Whereas Tobago, the smaller of the two islands, has a more homogeneous population with over 85% persons of African descent and accordingly a small Indian minority, Trinidad has a more diverse ethnic population. In addition due to the distinctive political, cultural, socio-historical, and economic distinctiveness of each island, this work focuses on Trinidad. See "Person Variables."

190 The indigenous population has not been erased entirely. Today, there is an estimated population of Amerindians of about 300, living in the Santa Rosa Carib Commu-

remained an insignificant, undeveloped outpost of Spain's colonial advances for the next two centuries. Under the promise of land grants and the protection by the Spanish government a small number of mostly wealthy (Roman Catholic) French settlers and their slaves from other colonies began to arrive in the colony starting in 1779. Their number steadily increased when foreign immigration was officially accepted under the *Cedula of Population* in 1783. One far-reaching consequence relating to the decree was the transformation of Trinidad into a slave colony. Moreover, in contrast to all the other colonies in the West Indies, the *Cedula* granted land ownership and citizenship rights to the free colored propertied class.[191]

By the end of the eighteenth century, Trinidad had turned into a plantation society, the white French outnumbered the Spanish population, and the group of enslaved persons exceeded the number of all other groups. Historian Bridget Brereton states that "the new post-1783 society was essentially Afro-French [...] [and] the cultural orientation was French West Indian" (1981: 22).[192] As the Spaniards established trading activities with other French and British colonies, the British began dominating the trade and increasingly gained control in Trinidad which turned out to be of geopolitical importance for Britain for the colonization of the Americas (cf. Brereton 1981: 18, 32). When France, Spain, and Britain entered into war in 1796, Trinidad was the first to be attacked by the British naval force, captured in February 1797, and was declared a crown colony in 1802; Tobago came under British rule in 1814.[193]

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nity of Arima in the Central North of Trinidad (cf. Premdas 2007: 28). Bridget Brereton summarizes the fate of the Amerindians under colonial rule and their legacy for Trinidadian culture (cf. 1981: 20-22).

191  Brereton offers a concise discussion of this period and the outcomes of the *Cedula*. Not only did the demographics and size of the population on the double island change drastically, but also the formerly uncultivated land was developed into a wealthy, productive plantation economy (producing cocoa, sugar, and cotton) and slave society (cf. Brereton 1981: 12-27). The loss of landownership among the Spanish settlers as well as the changing occupation by Spaniards, French, and British colonialists led to resentment among the Spaniards and long-term conflicts on the island.

192  Thus, although a Spanish property, the revolution in France and Haiti also engulfed this Caribbean island especially as those escaping the French colonies found 'refuge' there, which contributed to a further increase in the numbers of French and free colored French settlers.

193  Trinidad fell under the personal control of the military governor Thomas Picton, who, according to Brereton, installed a "monstrous tyranny," a "regime of impartial terror [...] virtually free from imperial control" (1981: 33-34), operating with brutal force until 1802.

After slavery was officially abolished and plantation owners found themselves in need of cheap labor, the British crown introduced the system of indentureship in the colonies. Starting in 1838, contract workers from India, especially from the rural areas in the North, such as Uttar Pradesh and Bihar, as well as Chinese, Syrian, or Portuguese laborers came to Trinidad. The indentureship period lasted from 1844 until 1917, with a transitional period of five years. During this period, 143,939 indentured workers were imported from India to Trinidad (cf. Shepherd 2002: 4; Brereton 1981: 103). In the last decades of the nineteenth century during the depression of the sugar market, the indentured laborers sought job opportunities in other areas and instead of repatriating to India, many bought land from the British Crown and "began to recreate Indian villages on these settlements" (Mohammed 2002: 133). For many of them, repatriation had already been out of the question due to religious reasons, amongst others. One particular explanation lies in the Hindu belief that once the *kala pani* was crossed, one had ultimately broken with the mother land. The introduction of the indentureship system had far-reaching consequences for the ethnic composition of the island and led to racist conflicts.

In the nineteenth and twentieth century (until today), the social stratification of the Trinidadian population was primarily based on the factors of "[c]lass, colour, caste and race" (Brereton 1979: 212), with Indians and poor Blacks occupying the lowest position initially, and whites and Creoles the top. The opposition between the African and East Indian ethnic groups was a result partly of the separationist policy of the British colonial authorities, partly mutual contempt among Indians and Blacks based on racist prejudices. The formerly enslaved African population despised the newly arriving plantation laborers from India, whom they perceived as the foreign, exotic 'other,' for undercutting their wages and being allowed to retain Indian (mostly Hindu) customs, culture, and religion. For many Indians, on the other side, African and Creole culture equated with immorality, wanton display of sexuality, idleness, and a dysfunctional family structures (cf. Puri 2004; Mohammed 2002). This ethnic divide was fostered by the white ruling elite and Canadian Presbyterian missionaries who helped to establish an educated middle-class comprised of mainly Indians who had converted to Christianity. The Christian converts, in turn, were disdained by Hindu and Muslim Indians for betraying their culture and soiling what became a constructed notion of essentially pure 'Indianness' (cf. Brereton 1979, 1981).

Especially for women, Joy Mahabir explains, the crossing often created the opportunity "to [re]invent their social and cultural identities" (2013: 152). Interpreting *kala pani* in terms of its emancipatory potential, it enabled Indian

women to redefine their social position within the post-abolitionist plantation society and local community structures, challenging gender roles, family scripts, and their "confinement within Hindu patriarchal structures" (Mehta 2004: 5; cf. also Mohammed 1999). The unequal gender ratio among the contract workers initially put women in a better, more liberal position. They received payment for the work on the plantations, chose their partners more freely and were less likely to endure domestic violence. However, it is recorded that women suffered from violence from overseers or their partners, because "in a situation where women were scarce, the possession of a wife was an important symbol of status and masculinity on the plantation" (Brereton 1979: 182). Women who were widowed or single women who had been raped or engaged in consensual sex were regarded as impure. Violence against women was not uncommon, since the infidelity of women meant the loss of pride and self-esteem among Indian men (cf. Reddock 1998d: 42-45).

Indian, meaning here Hindu, religious practices, traditions, and values, from the beginning, were adapted to a certain degree to the new context and mixed with local, already established African, indigenous, and European forms. Brahmin notions of womanhood, which were retained by many, defined women's role and place in society solely in relation to men who "were deemed to be the masters and providers, while women were the commodity and possession of the male" (Mohammed 1999: 64). Furthermore, the colonial authorities not only restricted Indian women's emancipation by refusing to sell land to single women, they also policed the marital and family unions of the indentured workers by not legalizing marriages that were established under Hindu law. Patriarchal social and family structures, following Indian models, were re-established especially throughout the first half of the twentieth century, which confined Indian women usually to the domestic sphere.

Interestingly enough, it can be attributed to the indentureship period that ties between Trinidad and Canada have developed. Presbyterian missionaries from Canada initiated the conversion of many Indians to Christianity and supported the establishment of a prospering middle class. In this constellation, the family offered a safe space, but also restricted the Indian women's participation in the public sphere by standing guard over their daughters' bodies, sexuality, and purity to avoid creolization. Feminist and sociologist Patricia Mohammed further observes that religious festivals and rituals, the *pujas*, myths, the *Ramayana*, or the screening of Indian films since 1935 informed and conveyed gender identities and performances. These ideals of Indian femininity and masculinity, on the other hand, conflated with other gender systems and changed significantly in the contact with Creole, indigenous, or Western- and African-

derived cultures. Hence, "despite the overwhelming influence which mythology and symbols may have had on the construction of gender, the influences of the new society had its impact on both men and women, thus allowing a negotiation with the lived reality" (Mohammed 1999: 92).[194]

The year 1962 marks a significant turning point in the national history as Trinidad and Tobago gained independence from Britain. The anti- and decolonial movement was led by the first Prime Minister and historian Eric Williams, a nationalist and member of the *People's National Movement* (PNM), founded in 1956, and who governed the island state for twenty-five years. The proclamation of national unity at the time meant first of all socio-economic advancement especially for the Afro-Creole majority. Williams' nationalist, rather Afro-centric policy led to the rise of the Black Power movement in Trinidad but also fueled anti-Indian sentiments among the population (cf. Singh 2012: 64). The permanent political and social unrest was met by sever economic crises in

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194 Scholarly work with a focus in particular on Indian culture in the Caribbean and a feminist scope is, for example, the volume *Matikor: The Politics of Identity for Indo-Caribbean Women* (cf. Kanhai 1999), containing a selection of academic articles and personal narratives. Rosanne Kanhai, the editor, has chosen the term *matikor* for the title to lay open the book's women-centered and Indo-centric approach. The event *matikor* is a Hindu ritual for women and takes place the night before the wedding. It is the sexual initiation of the bride in which the older women share their knowledge about sexuality and oftentimes perform explicit dances using faked phallic forms. Thus, *matikor* offers an alternative space of performed tradition and female empowerment celebrating the woman's body and sexuality temporarily free of both patriarchal and colonial authority. This ritual, nevertheless, follows heteronormative codes of conduct and is not a space of same-sex erotic desire (cf. Mehta 2004). Kanhai's second edited volume *Bindi: The Multifaceted Lives of Indo-Caribbean Women* (2011) brings together scholarly articles with a feminist scope discussing religion, constructions of the self and subjectivity, activism, strategies of survival, and creativity. Again, the *bindi* is symbolic for the Indian presence in the Caribbean, its transformations and adaptation as a fashion accessory stands for the fluidity of culture in general and of 'Indianness' and Hinduism in particular (cf. Kanhai 2011: 2-3). Additionally, selected studies of importance have been done by Patricia Mohammed, a sociologist, feminist scholar and activist, who has published widely on gender relations, women's issues, the creolization of Indian women, and concepts of Indian families. One of her monographs is *Gender Negotiations Among Indians In Trinidad 1917-1947* (2002), an edited collection is *Gender Realities: An Anthology of Essays in Caribbean Feminist Thought* (2006). Historian Verene Shepherd's documentation *Maharani's Misery* (2002) recounts the sexual violation and subsequent death of a woman contract laborer on an emigrant ship. It mirrors the lived experience and personal history of "sexploitation" (Shepherd 2002: xviii) of Indian women during the 'Middle Passage.' In addition, Rhoda Reddock has published extensively on slavery, plantation workers, Indian women and indentureship, for example in *Women, Labour & Politics in Trinidad & Tobago* (1994).

the 1980s which helped a political opposition, the *National Alliance for Reconstruction* (NAR), a coalition of four parties, to come into power for four years.[195] The newly founded *United National Congress* (UNC), which has been the mouthpiece of the Indian population, took over the government after the elections in 1995; for the first time in the national history, with Basdeo Panday, Trinidad and Tobago had an Indian prime minister.[196] Continuing until today, the ethnic division of the Indian- and African-descended majority is reflected in the two party-system and the election results. A racially stratified society, Trinidad is still characterized by discrimination and inequalities in the distribution of property, access to resources, professions, and education.[197]

The political situation as well as economic crises throughout the second half of the twentieth century forced many Trinidadians to emigrate. As this coincided with the relaxation and removal of discriminatory immigration laws in Canada, a country to which Trinidad has long established exchange, many of the migrants have settled down there – among them a significant number of Indo-Trinidadians encouraged by the influence of the Canadian Presbyterian church who helped to facilitate their arrival in Canada. During the time period from 1960 until 1980 about 175,000 persons left Trinidad and Tobago, followed by a large wave again in the 1990s; between 2000 and 2011 more than 15,400 persons left the Caribbean island, with the majority moving to the United States (especially New York City) but also to Canada and the U.K.[198] The Canadian census of 2006 counted a total of 65,540 Trinidadian-born immigrants, of which almost three quarters moved to Canada before 1991, living mainly in the Metropolitan Area of Toronto.[199]

As an ethnic group, persons of Indo-Caribbean descent in Canada occupy a marginalized position in terms of access to economic capital and skilled labor

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195  The early failure of the 'National Alliance' was due to the rivalries between the ethnic groups of the Indian and African and Creole population but also between the two islands Trinidad and Tobago.

196  After six years in office, he was succeeded by Patrick Manning of the PNM. In 2010, again, the UNC took over office and installed Kamla Persad-Bissessar as first female prime minister of Indian descent until 2015.

197  Khan comments: "In Trinidad's origins as a colonial possession, a system of stratification based on a class-race-color hierarchy laid the foundations for a postcolonial society whose hallmark has been ethnic group competition, fostered by class inequalities and state control of certain resources, and couched in terms of racial antipathies between Indo- and Afro-Trinidadians" (Khan 2004: 9).

198  According to the "Trinidad and Tobago 2011 Population and Housing Census", in that time period, more than 9,000 migrants settled down in the U.S. and about 1,800 in Canada (cf. 354, table 22).

199  Having been asked for the ethnic identity, a number of 58,415 indicated as ethnic origin 'Trinidad and Tobago' (cf. "Ethnic Origins, 2006 Counts, for Canada").

(despite their usually high level of professional skills)[200] but also, as sociological research proves, with respect to their ethnic identification and positionality within the Canadian multicultural society. As a matter of fact, until today the census does not provide detailed information on the ethnic composition of the migrants from Trinidad (or Guyana as another case in point). For Caribbean women and men who are of (South Asian) Indian descent, according to Dwaine Plaza, "such views pose problems of invisibility in terms of their birthplace and cultural roots. Indo-Caribbean people living in Canada are often mistakenly classified with East Indians from Sri Lanka, India, or Pakistan based on their physical appearance. Most Indo-Caribbeans themselves, however, do not easily see themselves melding into these East Indian groups" (Plaza 2004: 243-44). The omission of the category, according to Frank Birbalsingh, leads to a statistical invisibility which in turn negatively impacts the ways the community and culture of Indo-Caribbean migrants are perceived. "To be grouped with South Asians whose numbers are much greater, and whose cultures are significantly different, may indeed threaten the survival of Indo-Caribbean Canadians by swallowing their culture into a larger group identity that erases its special features and renders them invisible" (1997: 217).

Since Espinet's novel grapples with the issue of racialized body politics in Trinidad and the diaspora and how it affects a Presbyterian Trinidadian family of Indian descent, this section, rather one-sidedly, privileges this perspective, bearing in mind, however, that as a result of colonialism and partially misled decolonial policies,[201] the conflicting relations were difficult for all ethnic groups involved. For the purpose of this chapter, I refer to Mohammed's and Reddock's definition of Trinidadian Creole identity and creolization (broadly referring to cultural and racial 'mixing'), summarized subsequently.[202] Also, the

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200 "The proportion of skilled and professional people among the immigrants from Trinidad is high. In the period 1967–90, 8 percent of the immigrants were classified in the managerial, professional, or technical category, 12 percent as clerical work-ers, 14 percent as skilled workers, and less than 10 percent as unskilled labourers. The selection process of Canada's immigration program has favoured immigrants who are highly educated and well qualified, but unfortunately a number of varia-bles, including racial discrimination and non-acceptance of out-of-country qualifi-cations, have allowed the human resources of Trinidadian immigrants to remain largely untapped" (Ramcharan 1999: n.p.).

201 This process has been described as "ethnopoliticization" that "consists of the mobi-lization of one or more groups according to their ethnic identity for political ends" (Garner 2008: 99). My thanks to Sinah Kloss for making me aware of the parallel in the politics of ethnic relations in Guyana and Trinidad.

202 'Creole' derives from the Spanish word *criollo*, referring originally to a person born in Latin America and of European, i.e. Spanish, descent. The term was then used to describe processes of acculturation, assimilation, interaction, and exchange between

concept of douglarization and Shalini Puri's notion of the 'dougla' as 'in-between-figure' will be taken into account. Both concepts constitute part of a body politics at the intersection of race, ethnicity, gender, and class as well as affecting modes of living or conviviality in the Caribbean (and diaspora).[203]

The period of decolonization and independence and the nation building processes in the mid-twentieth century engendered a celebration of ethnic pluralism and an accentuation of cultural mixing. Trinidad celebrated itself as a "callaloo society" (Stoddard/Cornwell 1999: 339)[204] or "rainbow country" (Mohammed 2009: 58), in which a Creole national cultural identity has been expressed euphemistically through the motto "Together We Aspire, Together We Achieve." This 'together-ness' and oneness as a reflection of a country-wide creolization suggests a unity where there is none. In Trinidad, the difficulty with Creole and creolization is that it historically refers to the syncretism and intermixture of African and European cultures disregarding the Indian, Asian, and Middle Eastern migrants to the Caribbean and their presence in Trinidad (cf. Brereton 1979: 1).

In her seminal study "The 'Creolisation' of Indian Women in Trinidad" (1988), Mohammed argues that from the perspective of the Indian population, Creole used "to refer to descendants of African slaves to distinguish them from indentured Indian immigrants, 'creolisation' was viewed as synonymous with the absorption of Black culture at the expense of one's own" (Mohammed 2002: 130). The gender discriminatory aspect inherent in this concept manifests itself in the fact that women were disrespected for engaging in creolization more than men. According to Mohammed, referring to an Indian woman as creole was an insult for those "women who mixed or consorted with people of African descent, especially men – Indian women who changed their eating and dress habits and who adopted non-Indian social customs" (Mohammed 2002: 130). The following three-fold definition of 'creole' is provided by Rhoda Reddock as it is used in Trinidad and Tobago:

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Africans and Europeans in plantation societies. The most prominent study on creolization and *créolité* especially in the French Caribbean is provided by Jean Bernabé, Patrick Chamoiseau, and Raphaël Confiant (1989) and for the Anglophone Caribbean by Kamau Brathwaite (1971).

203 See also Roopnarine (2006) on the conceptualizations and the categorization of multiple identities of Indo-Caribbeans or Caribbean East Indians.

204 Aisha Khan (2004) offers a comprehensive study and ethnographic research on Trinidad and South Asian religious and cultural identity. She applies the term "callaloo nation" – callaloo is a Caribbean dish, a stew made up of a variety of vegetable, spices, and sometimes meat – as a symbol for ethnic diversity and the mixing of cultures.

> it is used in three senses: (1) to refer to an amalgam of descendants of Europeans who still dominate the local economy, known locally as French creoles; (2) primarily by Indians to refer to persons of African descent, also referred to by a Hindu derivative 'kirwal' and (3) to refer to cultural artifacts of the dominant culture viz. creole food, creole bacchanal etc. The term 'Creole' therefore for Indians is strongly identified with Afro-creole culture and creolisation is seen by many as a process of cultural domination. (Reddock 1998a: 65)

In general, the Caribbean region's concentration on *créolité* or creolness has caused a devaluation of Indian culture. To this, Mehta adds that

> Creoleness has, to some extent, furthered the divide between blackness and Indianness by often excluding the Hindu experience as a strategy of moving away from Indianness and indigenized Indo-Caribbean customs. This exclusion has, consciously or unconsciously, affirmed the superiority of Creole culture at the expense of the "primitiveness" of "coolie," or indentured, culture. (Mehta 2004: 7)

The quoted passages attest to the marginalized status of Indian, or deprecatingly *coolie*, culture within the dominant Creole culture, although Indian descendants make up almost half of the population today.[205] That interethnic mixing is not desirable from the perspective of many Indians, that Afro-creolization is condemned, is reflected in the Hindi-derived term *dougla* which in its Caribbean translation names the offspring of mixed Indian and African ancestry; the Hindi original pejorative meaning of "dogalaa" is "bastard," "hybrid," or "mongrel" (cf. Allsopp 2003: 200). The *dougla* identity has been rejected by African and Indian descendant groups alike for various reasons.

In *The Caribbean Postcolonial* (2004), Shalini Puri discusses theories of hybridity and cultural identities in relation to nationalist discourses, forms of resistance, and feminism in the Caribbean. She looks at the local racial conflicts between Indo- and Afro-Trinidadians, creolization, and female sexuality as it is dealt with in literature and popular culture, such as calypso or chutney-soca.[206] On a cultural-political level, the tensions between the two major ethnic groups found expression in the so-called "douglarization debate" (Puri 2004: 192) in the

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205  It should be noted that since the 1990s the political participation of the Indian group has increased. The UNC was the governing party from 1995-2001; from 2010-2015, Kamla Persad-Bissessar (UNC), of Indo-Caribbean descent, was the first female prime minister and leader of the governing coalition at the time.

206  Anita Baksh discusses the novels by Lakshmi Persaud, Jan Shinebourne, and Shani Mootoo through a postcolonial and feminist lens arguing that they "disclose the oppression and abuse as well as the struggle and resistance that exist within Indo-Caribbean communities" (Baksh 2011: 208). Baksh highlights the possibilities and limitations of Puri's dougla poetics to "describe hybrid cultural production" (209).

1990s. The debate as such has turned into a public discussion on racial purity, hybridity, the modernity/tradition dichotomy, as well as cultural and ethnic contamination. It divided not only the African and Indian population, but also the Indian community itself into the more progressive and more conservative leagues. The latter in particular promoted femininity, the female body, and Indian women's virtue as guardians of the "Mother Culture" (Puri 2004: 190). A feminization of Indian culture as victim discourse depicted African and Creole culture as violator feeding into common stereotypes of Black's hypersexuality, single motherhood, and irresponsibility on the one side, and Indian, Brahmanic tradition, purity, and family values on the other (cf. Puri 2004: 195). Both terms, creole and dougla, thus include a highly racialized rhetoric of social and cultural belonging and inclusion, but also of assimilation, exclusion, and, consequently, stigmatization of the respective 'other.'

Despite its negative connotation and cultural devaluation, Creole national culture is increasingly embraced by Indo-Trinidadians for a possible inclusion into the multi-ethnic society of Trinidad in the twenty-first century. However, partial refusal of creolization cannot be denied:

> [T]he constantly emerging space of creoleness in the region is as much Indian as it is European or African at this time. Yet there is an Asian resistance to becoming subsumed into a politics of blackness. It can be argued that to associate with blackness is to side with the losing rather than the winning team, where whiteness has already attained superior class status even without political power. (Mohammed 2009: 67)[207]

As such, the Creole space, it seems, is now more affirmative of Indian culture, supporting the reality of Trinidad's ethnic composition. A revaluation of the interethnic relations can also be observed in the census of 2011 offering in the category of ethnic composition the option of "Mixed-African and East Indian" ("Trinidad and Tobago 2011 Population and Housing Census": 15); that way the government at least legally recognizes the existence of persons of mixed parentage, but at the same time avoids the terms *dougla* and Creole as form of identification. Nevertheless, the still strong interconnectedness of Creole with African-derived culture in the racialized environment of Trinidad keeps parts

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207  Patricia Mohammed uses "*Asian* as a collective identity for all the ethnic and racial groups who were introduced to the Caribbean from the Asian continent and subcontinent" (2009: 60).

of the Indian population averse to creolization, either turning to white 'Western' culture or emphasizing their 'Indianness.'[208]

## 5.1.2 *Kala Pani* Continuum: Indo-Caribbean Women's Writing

Caribbean women writers of Indian descent, for a long time, have been subjected to a discursive silencing and invisibility both on the literary market and in research. As a matter of fact, the increased publication of their works, whether in the region or the diaspora, is a rather recent development only since the 1990s.[209] In addition, twentieth-century Caribbean fiction has often reproduced essentialist representations of Indian womanhood.[210] Reasons for this long and notable silence are manifold. Generally, there was social exclusion and stigmatization of the Indian population and "society refused to acknowledge their presence as co-workers and fellow citizens" (Mehta 2009: 22). Access to education was limited for girls and women who were oftentimes bound to 'traditional' gender roles and the domestic sphere. Publication opportunities and public interest in their work used to be scarce.[211] Not surprisingly, Mehta finds "a serious pedagogical and scholarly flaw in the field of Caribbean studies by exposing a wide theoretical and literary gap in the analysis of Indian construc-

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208 Several studies reveal the extent to which creolization intersects with modernization, being either embraced selectively or rejected by Indo-Trinidadian men and women (cf. Mohammed 2002; Hosein 2012). Creolization and modernization are defined as being "gender differential" (Hosein 2012). This indicates that men and women and those who identify outside this gender binary are affected differently by it.

209 Notably, a category of Indo-Caribbean writing came into existence outside of the region with Guyanese writer Rooplall Motilal Monar's *Backdam People* published by England-based Peepal Tree Press in 1985. The earlier generation of writers like V. S. Naipaul and Samuel Selvon are considered exile writers who are concerned less with local issues and the East Indian history in the Caribbean than with migrant life in England. Guyanese Jan Shinebourne's *Timepiece* published in 1986 is usually referred to as marking Indo-Caribbean women writers' coming to voice.

210 The stereotypes of Indo-Caribbean femininity alternate between overly chaste, passive, religious, and tradition-bound, basically objectified into silent victimhood, or, on the other side, promiscuous and sexually wanton. The marginal position of "Indo-Caribbean female writers and feminist activism" applies, according to Mohammed, "also to the representation of Indo-Caribbeans in the fiction of the region" (Mohammed 2012: 2).

211 Poynting (1989) and Ramchand (1996) also discuss major reasons for the long absence of Indo-Caribbean women's writing pointing out disadvantageous "economic and domestic arrangements" (Poynting 1989: 244).

tions of female identity in Guyana and Trinidad and its determining impact on issues of race, class, gender and nationhood" (Mehta 2004: 3).[212]

The by now regular publications of Indo-Caribbean women's writing are accompanied by an increased output of scholarly literature. For instance, the collection of essays *Critical Perspectives on Indo-Caribbean Women's Literature* (Mahabir/Pirbhai 2013) introduces new and already established writers and discusses current trends in this field of literature with a thematic focus on Indo-Caribbean identities and politics, feminist poetics, subjectivity, and diaspora spaces. The anthology is a further step towards the canonization and genre definition of Indo-Caribbean writing, contributing to its visibility in Caribbean literary and cultural studies.[213]

In the light of a general discursive dominance of African Caribbean and Creole culture, literary scholar Brinda Mehta's focus on the Indo-Caribbean perspectives as well as her idea of the "*kala pani* discursivity" suggest an alternative approach that is more inclusive of diverse, other and 'othered' ethnicities. It makes explicit reference to the East Indian migrant experience in the Caribbean and the trauma of assimilation as a minority culture.[214] Her seminal

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212  A further impediment has been the Afrocentricity of Caribbean nationalist politics, cultural identity, and postcolonial theory until well into the 1980s. First, the cultural, philosophical concept of *négritude* gained prominence for Caribbean identity in the context of Black liberationist movements throughout the Caribbean, later influenced by the Harlem Renaissance and Black Power politics in the United States. Then, creolization, which for a long time has epitomized Caribbean identity (cf. Brathwaite 2001: 114), dominated Caribbean literary, cultural, and feminist discourses. For an in-depth discussion on "négritude" and "negrismo" as signifier of Afro-Caribbean cultural identity as formulated by, most notably, Aimé Césaire from Martinique, Léon-Gontran Damas from French Guiana, and Senegalese Léopold Senghor, see Mamadou Badiane (2010). Jamaican Marcus Garvey advocated the emerging Black consciousness and pride in the Caribbean manifested in his idea of a transnational pan-Africanism in the first decades of the twentieth century. During the 1960s and 1970s, Guyanese Walter Rodney, activist and Marxist scholar, was most influential in the Black power movement both intellectually and politically. Yet, it is especially due to the rise of Black Caribbean feminism and women's movement as well the focus on creolization in Caribbean cultural studies that the works and research by and about Indian women from the Caribbean are also emerging.

213  An earlier publication is Krishna Sarbadhikary's *Surviving the Fracture* (2007) which features the writing of several Caribbean writers of Indian descent in the diaspora in Canada such as Cyril Dabydeen, Neil Bissoondath, Ramabai Espinet, and Shani Mootoo; to the younger generation of diaspora writers belong, for instance, David Dabydeen, Neil Bissoondath, Kevin Baldeosingh, Arnold Itwaru, and Sasenarine Persaud (cf. Torres-Saillant 2013a: 328).

214  In a public lecture held in Heidelberg on the 5th December 2012, Brinda Mehta elaborated on the term "*kala pani* discursivity" in connection with the representa-

*Diasporic (Dis)locations* (2004) is one of the most extensive monographs on Indo-Caribbean women authors, paying attention to the construction and literary representation of Indianness and femininity, and has encouraged much academic work in the field of Indo-Caribbean literature. She locates the *kala pani* as a distinct Indo-Caribbean feminist discourse within postcolonial thought, literary studies, and transnational feminism. Such a theorizing, she argues,

> advances our ability to interrogate the positioning of Indo-Caribbean female identity at several levels simultaneously – most notably, the relationships between patriarchal strictures in the homeland and in the diaspora, between domesticity and cultural or intellectual formation, between women's sexuality and Brahmanical moral codes or epics such as the *Ramayana*, and between Negritude, 'coolie-tude', creolization and douglarization. (Mehta 2004: 10)

Thus, her approach of the *kala pani* as a discursive space articulates feminist, interethnic solidarity as well as women's resistance to patriarchy, domesticity, and Afrocentric creolization. Of significance here is her understanding of a *kala pani* poetics.[215]

> The *kala pani* is a discourse of rupture that initiates transgressive boundary crossings through creative (self-)assertion in literary production. [...] [It is an] act of naming a culturally specific woman-centred Indo-Caribbean experience through the discursive claiming of literary and cultural space. (Mehta 2004: 4)

*Kala pani* is introduced not only as an alternative concept to creolization, but also as a more inclusive, transnational feminist framework to theorize diaspora literatures which brings into focus Indo-Caribbean women's writing, and aims to reach out to other communities of People of Color and the Indian diaspora globally (cf. Mehta 2004: 15-16).

Mehta suggests a "*kala pani* poetics [as] a gendered discourse of exilic beginnings that simultaneously reclaims and contests otherness by highlighting the traditional invisibility of female historical subjectivity in androcentric colonial and nationalist narratives" (24). Poetics, in Mehta's formulation, can indeed be understood as a fictional act of 'world making'; it may be less concerned

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tion and identity politics of "Indo-Caribbean-ness" in Anglo- and Francophone Caribbean writing. The book-length study published in 2004 builds the ground-work of her thesis.

215 Mehta juggles with three concepts of the *kala pani* either referencing the discursive, theoretical dimension, the socio-cultural, or the literary level. These are: *kala pani* discursivity, *kala pani* hybridity, and *kala pani* poetics (cf. Mehta 2004, 2006).

with certain rules or principles of structure and form, however it references ways of representation and identity constructions. Her literary diaspora concept counters this invisibility as it focuses on women's agency and their lived experience of Indian indentureship on the one hand, and, on the other, the ethnic diversity and difference in the region. Adding to her definition, Puri's *dougla* poetics, referred to above, "could provide a vocabulary for disallowed, delegitimized racial identities" and it may constitute a "rich symbolic resource for interracial unity" (Puri 2004: 220-221). It is an approach to ultimately recover the term *dougla* from its pejorative meaning. Implying resistance, it subverts and transgresses fixed ethnic and gender inscriptions on a literary, aesthetic, or popular cultural level in that it focuses on the creative potential of the *dougla's* 'in-between' position or liminality.[216] Although the term poetics itself may not be the most appropriate,[217] both the *kala pani* and *dougla* poetics, in a strict feminist usage, focus on Indian women's history and their marginalization in the Caribbean. The concepts evoke bonds of solidarity based on a shared experience of migration and displacement (both voluntary and involuntary), which marks a frequent point of reference in Caribbean literary and cultural production. They foreground the visibility of the Indian female body and its supposed threat to Indian patriarchal and Creole nationalist narratives. Thus, both concepts, in a minority context, make visible subaltern lived experience understood as a means of empowerment.[218]

However, the *kala pani* poetics neglects several aspects. In many instances it is a one-sided celebration of the prospects offered to women by indentureship as well as women's initial new found liberty in the Caribbean. That women dared to cross the 'black waters' because they sought liberation and escape from Hindu patriarchy may be correct, but it was also the period of famine that

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216 As Kamala Kempadoo affirms from her own positionality, "'Dogla' becomes merely a vehicle for breaking open existing categories, a basis for resistance to hegemonic racist ideologies and practices, a relational as opposed to a fixed essential sense of self. From my place, it stands for a re-examination of categories of 'race', provides me with a basis for a multicultural perspective, and enables a connection with peoples of various cultural histories, as well as with the contemporary dynamic of cross-cultural fusions and international migrations" (Kempadoo 1999b: 109).

217 Here, too, the literary and artistic representations of interracial identities or inter-ethnic identification that Puri refers to are, I claim, the predominant motives in the respective works rather than a poetics in a narrow sense.

218 However, its scope is limited to a focus on the Trinidadian context and the mixing of African and Indian culture. It does not include experiences of migration and processes of transculturation in the diaspora situation, for instance, in North America. The implementation of the term has not been successful neither in theory nor in practice, certainly due to its negative connotation and assimilationist meaning.

drove them away. Furthermore, it is not all-inclusive of other ethnicities in the Caribbean as Mehta claims. We may question whether it is really transferrable to other contexts of migration and applicable to Indian experiences of indentureship in other countries such as Mauritius, Fiji, or South Africa, where there existed similar indentureship schemes but different colonial conditions and ethnic compositions. The proposition of it as an alternative concept to creolization to include both African and Indian cultures and ancestries poses the linguistic problem that Mehta, and Puri too, have actually been trying to solve in the first place. Just like creolization is usually interconnected with the history of slavery, the African presence in the Caribbean, the mixing of the black and white population, as well as cultural and socio-political practices of resistance, the Hindi origin of the terms *kala pani* and douglarization evoke notions of purity and impurity, loss of Indian homeland, and is inevitably linked to the Indian presence in the Caribbean. Finally, the rather strict heteronormative focus of the approach despite its feminist, emancipatory concerns does not offer a concrete space to address and theorize same-sex desire, homosexual or transgender identities. This becomes clear in one of the chapters of Mehta's publication, "Sexuality, Violence and the Female Body Erotic" (2004), and her discussion of Shani Mootoo's novel *Cereus Blooms at Night* where her focus is on the female character Mala and the violation inflicted on her by her father. Certainly, each study necessarily has a limited scope, but it is a shortcoming of her work not to discuss the queer and transgender aspects of the novel, as given in the characters Tyler and Otoh. Likewise, her study on Espinet's novel is ignorant of the fact that the protagonist's brother is homosexual (cf. Mehta 2006).

Moving beyond these limitations but remaining within Mehta's terminological choice, novels like Ramabai Espinet's *The Swinging Bridge* are part of what I refer to as the *kala pani* continuum –meaning 'a continuous body or thing' – which is "expressive of particular cultural and historical moments and [...] moments of transition [and disruptions]" (Khan 2007: 659). The concept's aim is to be a descriptive tool of a constant process of moving and arriving, as well as dynamic cultural, gender, and sexual identities conscious of a specific lived experience, but trying to avoid being overly essentialist or claiming universality. The *Oxford English Dictionary* defines continuum as "a continuous series of elements passing into each other." These elements may resemble also different stages in individual and collective development. In this respect, the continuum interconnects with the generic form of the coming-of-age novel in its depiction of human transition into adulthood and bodily transformation. Thinking such a continuum in its spatial, temporal, and corporeal dimensions, the novel situates

female subjectivity in relation to certain socio-historical, cultural, geographic contexts of indentureship and migration. Hence, a further aspect of the concept is the continuing and repetitious sense of rupture and displacements caused by boundary or border crossings and journeys, entailing loss, alienation, and trauma; on the other hand, such an aesthetic reproduction of migration experiences create the possibility for a new start and reconnections. Regarding this as a unifying feature in diaspora writing (or an aspect of a diaspora poetics) it is reminiscent of Boyce Davies migratory subjectivities, as elaborated on in the introductory chapter. The *kala pani* continuum does not seek to be all-inclusive of myriad forms of diaspora identities or experiences in and outside of the Caribbean, but rather suggests a literary meeting point.

Furthermore, the *Merriam-Webster Dictionary* defines continuum as "a range or series of things that are slightly different from each other and that exist between two different possibilities; a compact set which cannot be separated into two sets neither of which contains a limit point of the other." In this regard and in terms of an imagined ethnic, cultural identification with India, Trinidad, or Canada, subject positions need to be regarded as fluid, the degree of identification (or identity performance) may shift, drifting sometimes more to the one end and, at other times, more to the other; this is the case with the protagonist Mona, who experiences "a prevailing sense of in-betweenity, of constantly negotiating what it means to be Caribbean [or Indo-Trinidadian for this matter] in another place, as well as constantly attempting to reshape the migrant space" (Page 2011a: 15). Taking into account social stratification – which in Trinidad is mostly based on ethnic belonging – and the simultaneous existence of inequalities, the *kala pani* continuum is conscious of the interdependent axes of societal factors such as race and hybridity, ethnicity and creolization, class, gender, religion, sexuality, and age. The continuum offers space of existence not just for female sexual agency, but, too, for myriad transgressions, queer bodies, and homosexuality, regarded, too, as boundary crossings and largely ignored in the approaches by Mehta and Puri. I prefer to think of hegemonic bodies, whose existence I cannot argue away, as placed within the continuum in relation to and co-existence with marginalized, non-hegemonic bodies, rather than in a hierarchy of power relations.

Reading the continuum along with diasporic Indo-Caribbean women's writing in general and with Ramabai Espinet's novel specifically, the *kala pani* continuum renders possible the literary construction of identities and a Trinidadian diaspora history that privileges Indian marginality. It includes migration from India, experiences of indentureship and dislocation, Indian cultural heritage, Indo-Trinidadianness, as well as twice migration to North America and

circular movements between the various geographical spaces – in *The Swinging Bridge* these are actual for Mona and imagined for her brother, Kello. As a typical feature of diaspora thinking, it does not describe a final arrival, limited to a one-way journey from India to the Caribbean, but also opens the possibility of multi-linear movements from the diaspora location in North America, for instance, to the Caribbean or even India. These experiences are reconstructed in the course of the novel, the *kala pani* continuum evokes "a multilocational diaspora Consciousness" (Solbiac 2013: 231). A repeated sense of dislocation and of being the "Asian *Other*," to borrow from Mohammed (cf. 2009), in Trinidad is reproduced in Canada, thus the body continues to be centered in its ethnic dimension, which becomes apparent in particular in the characters Mona and Mackie Singh, her father. As will become clear in the following close reading of the novel, the *kala pani* continuum is mirrored both in the formal aesthetics of the text, as it draws a continuous moving (in-)between histories, geographies, and identities, as well as in its content, as the novel's title already suggests. These aspects are embodied in Mona, who describes herself as a "wandering nowarian self" and whose arrival may never actually be accomplished. A further question the continuum deals with is of how racial and ethnic prejudice and heterosexism, framed by constructed notions of Indianness, modernization, tradition, and creolization, fix the adolescent female body and the homosexual male body within a prescribed matrix of power.

Similar to Black women's or 'Third World' writing that emphasizes a political agenda of reclaiming agency, the literature by Indo-Caribbean women "privilege[s] first-person or female-centered narratives that point to a politics of self-representation as well as the urgency to explore discursive gaps and historical exclusions" (Mahabir/Pirbhai 2013: 5). Espinet's novel fits these paradigms by rewriting and reconstructing a colonial and postcolonial history via the adult-narrated coming-of-age genre. Notably, the coming-of-age narrative constitutes a popular form among these writers and their quests for identity, possibly because it mirrors their own subject formation and coming of age as independent women.[219]

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219 The protagonist's coming of age in Lakshmi Persaud's *Butterfly in the Wind* (1990) parallels a nation's coming into being. Persaud's *Daughters of Empire* (2012) is a family saga and collective novel that evokes the colonial ties between 'motherland' and the colonies. Shani Mootoo's *Cereus Blooms at Night* (1996) and *He Drown She in the Sea* (2005) intertwine several coming-of-age plots. *Buxton Spice* (1998) by Oonya Kempadoo tells the coming-of-age story and sexual awakening of Lula, a Guyanese girl at the age of ten. Laure Moutoussamy's *Passerelle de vie* (2000) and Elizabeth Nunez' *Bruised Hibiscus* (2000) likewise offer a coming-of-age narrative. Joy Mahabir's *Jouvert* (2006) fits the genre of the diasporic coming-of-age narrative

## 5.2 *The Swinging Bridge*: Nomadic Bodies and Routed Existence

Set in Trinidad and Canada in the second half of the twentieth century, Ramabai Espinet's debut novel recounts retrospectively the coming of age of Mona Singh, a Trinidadian woman in her forties who lives in Montreal from where she sets out on a journey of self-discovery. The reader learns that she left Trinidad with her parents and her two younger siblings in 1970, moving from San Fernando to Toronto. The older brother Kello had already left the island several years earlier, after an irreconcilable dispute with his father, and moved to England. Mona, too, once in Toronto, leaves the parental home to study and become a film maker in Montreal.

The novel opens with a diary entry by the date of January 15, 1995: "I live in the eye of a storm. My whole life arches backwards and forwards according to the speed of the gust around me" (5). Here, the protagonist ponders on the confusion that characterizes her life, thereby evoking the title imagery of the swinging bridge. The plot reveals that Mona, who is now hiding in the metropolitan anonymity of Montreal and struggling with a documentary on Haitian migrant life in the city, is running away from her Indian-Caribbean Presbyterian upbringing in a respectable middle-class community in San Fernando after independence. Her adolescent life there is dominated not only by postcolonial ethnic relations but also by prescribed gender roles and her authoritative father, who is frustrated with Trinidad's Creole national politics and, driven by his contradictory perception of modernity, sells the family's property and moves his family to Canada. However, instead of the hoped-for economic uplift, what they encounter is disempowerment and marginalization as immigrants, similar to the discrimination against East Indians they experienced on the Caribbean island under the government of Dr. Hector James, who is reminiscent of then-Prime Minister Eric Williams.

A call from her mother (who informs Mona about Kello's illness) suddenly brings back unwanted memories (cf. 6). Mona relocates to Toronto, finds out about the truth of her brother's sickness, and, in what becomes a key scene of remembrance, starts to clear out the attic of her parents' home, where she finds letters, notebooks, and photographs. Now involuntarily and fragmentary closing in on her are a traumatic past of abuse and the awareness of her own vul-

and *kala pani* continuum in that it describes the journey of a woman from Trinidad to the U.S. and Canada. Andrea Gunraj's *The Sudden Disappearance of Seetha* (2009) is a family story that takes on the form of a multiple coming-of-age story.

nerability. When Kello's HIV-infection is at a final stage and his death immediate, he asks Mona to return to Trinidad and buy back the family's property in order to reclaim a stake in their natal land and a piece of their identity.[220] This trip will unravel the family secrets of love and betrayal surrounding Mona's cousin Bess, her grandmother Lily, and her great-grandmother Gainder Beharry, who arrived from Calcutta in 1879 and who embodies the family's Indian heritage. This mission leads her to recollect the family's history of indentureship and migration, but also helps Mona to reconstruct the lives of the women in her family and eventually reconcile her with herself and her past.

The novel knits a complex web of different subplots and interweaves the voices of four generations (focusing on the family's female members), filtered by Mona's perception. All of the novel's three main parts begin with a prelude entitled "*Kala Pani*," highlighted in italic script, and frame and connect the different strands of the plot. Read together, the preludes narrate the life stories of both Mona's great-grandmother Gainder, her widowhood and solitary crossing of the dark waters, as well as her grandmother Lily, who was forced into marriage and publicly shamed for a forbidden love interest (cf. 261). Thus, *The Swinging Bridge* portrays the migratory subjectivity of Indian contract workers and the maternal lineage, or the roots and routes, of Indo-Caribbean existence along with conflicting images of womanhood that oscillate between Brahmanic morality, Christian or 'westernized' ideals, as well as Caribbean creole and respectable notions of femininity. The protagonist's narration reveals that the *kala pani* crossing the foremothers undertook continue to affect the following generations. The loss of reference points and a "trauma of dislocation" (Mehta 2006: 30) lead to psychological insecurities and an unstable psyche, as it can be observed in Mona and her nomadic self.

Of further significance is the novel's concern with memory and forms of commemorating a women-centered history of the Indo-Caribbean, on the one side, and of Caribbean immigrant life in Canada on the other. During Mona's visit in Trinidad, her cousin Bess curates an exhibition on the Indian cultural heritage in Trinidad for which the museum needs to be built and the exhibit items need to be collected in the first place. This project reveals two things: First, the absence of Indian culture from the collective memory, its not being part of Trinidadian culture, is unmistakably made clear. The absence of this site of remembrance seems symptomatic for a larger erasure of Indo-Caribbean

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220 In the colonial and postcolonial Caribbean, landownership for the working-class Blacks and Asian indentured laborers signifies resistance to their disenfranchisement by the colonial authorities and the predominantly white or white-creole elite (for Trinidad, cf. Brereton 1979, 1981).

history. Second, although she is one of the initiators of the museum project, Bess' name is subsequently erased from the information sheet (cf. 301), which is emblematic for women's subordination in the public sphere and their exclusion from official, professional positions. In addition, the documentary Mona produces constitutes another medium to acknowledge and remember Caribbean women's place in society. The film documents immigrant life in Canada by showing the hardships of Haitian women in Montreal. Mona feels guilty about the removal of Cecile Fatiman, an important figure in the Haitian Revolution, from the script. This erasure, in turn, becomes a driving force for Mona to produce her own film on Gainder and close a gaping void, i.e. the absence of the single Indo-Caribbean woman, or the *rand*,[221] from the historical record. To fill this obvious gap becomes the driving force behind Mona's own coming into being and attempt to make sense of her life.

Of the four selected novels, *The Swinging Bridge* probably interlinks most profoundly the process of coming of age with notions of diaspora identity (Hall) and migratory subjectivity (Boyce Davies). Mona's father's striving for social mobility, modernization, and respectable mores, the Indian community's repudiation of creolization, as well as further alienation in Canada have a tremendous impact on Mona's upbringing, her individuation, and self-perception. The first break in her individuation caused by displacement occurs at the age of seven. Before moving to the city of Fernando, Mona lives in a village in a rural area during the 1950s and 60s, a time she remembers fondly. "The night sky over Manahambre Road was clear for miles around. Nothing but the stars high above and the moon sailing cleanly over the celamen tree. [...] I was a happy child. I lived in this magical world until I was seven" (98). In this retrospective view, the world of her childhood becomes nostalgically idealized and is depict-

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221 *Rand* is a Hindi word for widow but also used as "a term of abuse in addressing women, a slut" (864). Espinet takes issue with this outcast figure, her disempowerment, and the social stigmatization of emancipated women who are regarded as threat to the social order. Mona and her cousin discuss the gender politics behind a museum's exhibition displaying certain aspects of Indo-Trinidadian history while leaving others out. "[T]he grand picture is still what everybody wants. The righteous Indian family, intact, coming across the *kala pani* together. Like the way migration is presented today. Not this story. Not a journey of young widows looking for a new life. Wife-murder? Beatings? [...] The rand, casting her vivid shadow upon the face of indenture, obscured for more than one century, [...] own-way women who had tasted freedom and refused to bargain for less." Meanwhile the men, the *jahaji bhais*, the ship brothers, are "boiling with anger and shame at having to settle for other men's leavings, having to take for their wives rands" feeling forced to invent "new codes that would force women down in their knees, back into countless acts of self-immolation" (297). Mehta's reading (2006) offers a more in-depth discussion of this subject.

ed as a safe space. Whereas the urban environment is described in less enticing, less positive ways, the cleanness and clarity of village life stands out; but she is pulled out of her cocoon and moved to the city. With their ancestors' uprooting from India a century earlier, the family Singh's migration to Canada means a double displacement, leaving Mona disoriented and full of uncertainties which leads to her "emotional underdevelopment" (Morgan 2011: 226). The protagonist, comments on her perception of her uprooted family life which she links to Indian (diaspora) identity in the Caribbean:

> If you happen to be born into an Indian family, an Indian family from the Caribbean, migratory, never certain of the terrain, that's how life falls down around you. It's close and thick and sheltering, its ugly and violent secrets locked inside the family walls. The outside encroaches, but the ramparts are strong, and once you leave it you have no shelter and no ready skills for finding a different one. I found that out after years of trying. (15)

What is striking here, is the contrast between the unsteadiness and uncertainty that Mona describes as characteristic for the Indo-Caribbean lived experience and the 'groundedness' as well as the seeming stability and security provided by the family and indicated by the walls and ramparts.

The protagonist's development – in the quote above, Mona refers to her coming-of-age as a learning process during the "years of trying" – is exemplary for the Indo-Trinidadian history of the *kala pani*, the crossing from India to the Caribbean, that Mona continues in her nomadic journeys between Canada and Trinidad but also though imaginary – through the history of her ancestors – India. Especially through the character Mona, the novel takes issue with the narrative representation of an unstable sense of self or, in more positive terms, of an identity in flux. While the constant movement and circularity evoked by the narrative pattern are implicit of this fluidity, the protagonist herself is quite explicit about her sentiment of restlessness and the desire to roam around. As a child, she and her cousin invent a game that they call the "*nowarian* game" (152). Mona plays the role of the traveler, a "road-weary wanderer" looking for a room for the night, moving on the following day. The idea of "becoming a nowarian" (ibid.), the up-rooted body being at home nowhere, that Mona has even as an adult emphasizes routes as subjective reference point but also indicates a nomadic life style. The idea of nomadism in the Caribbean context can be found in Glissant's *Poetics of Relation*. In reference to Deleuze and Guattari, who "extol nomadism, which supposedly liberates Being, in contrast, perhaps, to a settled way of life, with its law based upon the intolerant root" (Glissant 2010: 11), Glissant then asks if "[r]ather than the enjoyment of freedom, is no-

madism not a form of obedience to contingencies that are restrictive […] driven by some specific need to move" (ibid.: 12). What is of significance is the obvious urge of the Caribbean subject to remain in movement (swinging) which does not seem to happen by choice but by circumstance and external force.

The title imagery of the swinging bridge serves several functions and is referred to in various instances throughout the novel. It is a metaphor for the different poles, two ends of a continuum. Mona, who repeatedly describes herself as the wanderer, shifts or swings between these ends, even worlds as the following quote indicates. Here, the bridge furthermore serves as a connecting element: "Underneath the mask of everyday life lies the swirling sea of memory and desire, of dreams and mythmaking. In the separation of these two worlds we perish. The bridge between them arches high above a raging river, held in place by silken ropes, ropes strong as gossamer" (304). If water defines Caribbean identity still today, the symbolism of water, especially in the "sea of memory," evokes the transatlantic crossing during slavery, the dark waters during indentureship, as, for instance, in *kala pani*, but also contemporary migration. The sea not only bears witness to but also archives a history of displacement and relocation – not least because of the drowned, sunken bodies on the grounds of the Black Atlantic (cf. Shields 2014: 24-28).

## 5.3 Dirty Skirts: Adolescence, Female Honor, and Respectability

*The Swinging Bridge* illustrates how social and community structures along with gender and ethnic inscriptions establish normative codes of shame and honour and constrain the protagonist's subject formation. When Mona visits her brother in the hospice, she muses about her life and the passivity she always and unwantedly finds herself in:

> I was never free to do what I really wanted. Something always got in my way, somebody else's agenda, some course of action that had to be taken, some call of duty. […] 'But you are free, Mona. You can do anything you want to. Just do it […].' I said nothing, thinking about how I had always insisted on my freedom to do whatever I chose and had ended up doing so little. What was my explanation? What was the hidden obstacle that I simply could not get beyond? (200-201)

The conversation between Mona and Kello discloses the dimension of her inner conflict and insecurities. It also reveals the extent to which the wish for liberation and self-fulfilment stands in contradiction to outside forces or social demands. The hidden obstacles Mona mentions refer to the incompatibility of the interior and exterior reality on the one hand,[222] but also (and again) hint at the concealed stories of her foremothers.

In this context, the image of the swinging bridge is further symbolically charged referring to the limitations imposed on girls.[223] When Mona as a young girl visits her cousin Sonia during her school holidays, they may experience "incomparable freedom" (85), the advice, "'Roam freely but remember not to go further than the swingbridge'" (85), given to Mona by her aunt, however, is a warning sign. Auntie Alice indeed alerts about the torrential river, but the bridge in this instance also marks the boundaries of the subjective space of movement along gendered codes of conduct. The swinging bridge itself stands in for Mona's own unsteady path over what she perceives to be the abyss of domestic, married life and respectability, into which she under no circumstance wishes to fall ("The one thing I did not want was domestic life" (39)). Treading on it can be dangerous, because she can 'fall from' or 'into' expected behavior. That Mona does go further across the bridge to rebel against gender conformity and to prove herself is shown in the challenge to cross the bridge she is put to by a boy from the area, who is "keen to put [her] in [her] place" (85-86) – the place of a "country girl" (85). Although the boys swing the bridge with vehemence, she manages to traverse from one end to the other. Yet, she never gets the chance for revenge or to enjoy her victory and is left with her rage about "his little manish attitude, as if he was sure that he was better than I was and would always be" (87). At an early age, Mona develops a feminist understanding of what she experiences as unfair treatment of women and girls. She constantly questions the social constructions of gender and propriety that assign women to domesticity, "early marriage and a life bound to a washtub, scrubbing dirty clothes and smelly diapers" (135). The wish to assert control over her own life, the refusal to be caught within the "eternal domestic trappings" (181), on the one side, and, on the other, her confusion caused by the need to fit in enrages her but also freezes her to passive immobility.

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222 See Hurrelmann's definition on socialization to which I refer in chapter 2 (cf. Hurrelmann 2002).

223 In another instance, the movement of swinging is synonymous with liberation and escape: "Careless is being on the swing at school, [...] flying free of all the little rules and laws that entrap. Swinging at the top of the world, past the treetops; swinging and never falling" (137).

One day, Mona experiences a situation of complete helplessness and exposure. Her mother sends her to town with the warning not to talk to strangers and to beware of taxi drivers. In front of the shop an "ordinary working man" (42) comes up and speaks to her pretending he owes Mona's mother money which he presumably needs to retrieve from his home first. Mona follows him to a taxi. They stop at an open field, he grabs her arm and tries to wrench her to the coppice of a cocoa tree with the intention to rape her.

> *I* stood still. More cars passed but none stopped. A bullying red-eyed man, probably *the girl*'s father or uncle, was trying to make *her* do something. The girl's legs were curved inwards at the knees, a sign of *her* unwillingness. Something in the scene must have seemed odd to the Muslim man who had craned his head around for a second look. (44; emphasis added)

It is in this instance that the narrative switches from first to third person narration and the mode of focalization uses a camera perspective, depicting the scene as an eye witnesses may have observed it. Mona, too, becomes witness to her own violation. The young man only stares, so does a maid who steps out of a house nearby. In retrospect, the adult Mona directs the focus of the reader: "The eye of the world was on that scene" (44), like the lens of a camera through which she as a researcher and document film maker would also look. This further manifests itself in the way she describes sequences of the past in her personal account: "A montage of images [...] bisects my life at odd moments. Sometimes the memories slough off all colour and become precise black-and-white shots" (102). In order to increase the accuracy and validity of her memories, to translate these images into coherent text, she adds specific dates, historical facts, letters, and diary entries to the narrative. This, in turn, bridges the multiple points on the continuum and adds to a perceived 'authentic' historical script. At a first reading, this kind of stage direction seems slightly over-determined to make sure the intentional twist in the narrative technique does not go unnoticed. Yet, for Mona, due to her profession, it seems only natural to record incidents that way, it helps her to memorize precisely what should not be forgotten, it strengthens her position as a reliable narrator. The distance the adult Mona creates to her young self and the violent experience is a strategy of self-protection. Implied here, furthermore, is a critique of the cowardice of bystanders who remain passive in the face of the girl's immediate danger, a position which readers are made complicit with due to the voyeuristic gaze of the camera.

Mona returns home late and recounts the details of what has happened. Her mother is worried, but instead of consoling her, she shakes and scolds her,

afraid of that her daughter has been touched and soiled by the man. "It too disgraceful. […] Nobody will believe you didn't go with that man under that bush. […] You is such a fool" (46). That she seems to be more concerned about the family's reputation and of what people will think, telling her daughter to keep quiet about the incident, discloses a double standard and the sexual vulnerability of girls. The family, too, fails to offer a safe space and protection for the adolescent girl. The silence enforced on Mona's experience and the fact that Mona's mother needs to lie to her husband about it, because "nobody in our family ever said anything about anything" (38), shows the hypocrisy not only among the Singhs but in the Indo-Trinidadian middle-class community. This hypocrisy, interlinked with gender relations and body control, is framed by notions of respectability against which Mona and her friends are going to rebel when they found the "Dirty Skirts Club" (141).

In the previous chapter, I already discussed the intersection of intimacy, homosexuality, and respectability in Jamaican communities. In the Anglophone Caribbean, respectability as a socio-cultural script of behavior includes education, social mobility, thrift, religion (meaning Christianity), marriage, and family commitment, and is directed at a heterosexually normed middle-class culture, which corresponds to the ways the novel reconstructs respectable social identity. What respectability means and entails in the Trinidadian context is important here. Especially since the late nineteenth century, Trinidad's society was divided along ethno-racial lines but also into those who were respectable and those who were not (cf. Brereton 1979: 211). Respectability was essentially modelled after European culture and life style. Whereas white (meaning European) and lighter-skinned persons were regarded as more respectable on the basis of their skin color, "[w]ith non-whites, on the other hand, and notably with blacks and East Indians, the onus was on them to prove their respectability […] by their education, attainments, occupation, and style of life" (Brereton 1979: 211). Accordingly, the value complex has been selective, excluding Black urban, working-class and poor Indian working-class culture. Hinduism, in addition, practiced especially in the more rural areas, was seen as backward, whereas the modern, progressive life style in the city was desirable. Among the growing Indian middle-class, respectability was widely propagated by Presbyterian churches and schools. Creolization was regarded as a threat by Indian families, because it allegedly entailed miscegenation and moral degeneration especially of the girls. Sexual and moral double standards were widely accepted placing women at a disadvantage in terms of a gendered, raced, and classed morality. Moreover, as Gabrielle Hosein argues, "[j]udgments about masculinity among males relied on control of female sexuality. Thus, from childhood,

Indo-Trinidadian girls' bodies and desires were implicated in an explicitly gendered framework of individual respectability and reputation, and community honour and shame" (Hosein 2012: 4). A discussion on respectable performances of gender as well as notions of citizenship and family structures inevitably foregrounds the female body and sexuality.

In order to acquire a respectable status as an Indian family in Trinidad, one possibility is to obtain a 'proper' education. Since the Singhs belong to the lower middle-class, living now in the prospering urban center of San Fernando, this is easier than if they were of working-class status. Mona, like all the women in her family, spends her high school years at La Pastora, a Presbyterian girls' school in San Fernando. This is the time of her formative years, when Mona is supposed to be educated in appropriate feminine behavior. The school enforces a certain standard of education along with a desired ideal of appropriate femininity among its pupils: "Good women were trained to serve; even our school motto reinforced this" (143). Girls who want to become respectable young ladies need to display propriety, act according to certain gender roles, and follow a strict code of morality and sexual behavior.[224] Mona remembers "what false steps not to make because you could lose everything, thinking how not to shame everybody [...]. Tiptoeing through life, frightened, following rules and laws that hold down your skirt, your hair, your mind" (137). The strictness of the school's education is mirrored in the disciplining measures of the body. Thus, the girls are taught to walk straight adopting an "erect posture" which, however, "must look natural" (165). The upright body posture is underlined by the rule to wear a school uniform, which Mona describes as uncomfortable (cf. 136). "They were made of navy blue woolen serge straight from the mills of England" (141). The British-styled school uniforms make obvious the persistence of the colonial influence on Trinidad's education system and the continuing authority of the British Empire over the former colony. It may also be read as an imperial 'containment' of the body.

At the same time, the years Mona spends at La Pastora are also the period of her youthful rebellion, well aware that "[o]ne false move could cost everything – my whole life. No time for carelessness, for slackness [...], doing the thing" (139). Placed under scrutiny, the adolescent female body is cause for worry and becomes a source of anxiety; sexuality apparently needs to be con-

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224 Mona finds a parallel to her grandmother's life, her confinement and rebellion. "Lily, my Grandma Lil, yearning to rise over rooftops and kitchens and dirty washtubs, rising in rebellion against the marriage they would make for her [...], rising to meet a desire no one before or since would ever know, desire for a boy with no world to live in" (261).

trolled. To counteract this confinement and the surveillance, Mona and a few of her schoolmates found a bond of sisterhood, the "Dirty Skirts Club" – a direct reference to the constraining uniform. "How precarious our lives were – Rosanna, Susie, and the other Dirty Skirts, brave and bold, wanting it all, recklessly inventing our own world. It wasn't so long ago that they would have married us off before we reached the age of danger" (146). In this quote, in the change from narrating I to a collective us, Mona shifts the focus away from singular subjectivity to a unifying childhood experience of the girls. Reputation and respectability (which apparently can only be achieved in marital unions), shame and honor are regulating forces which have a strong impact on women's embodied being and sexual expression, especially of Indian girls in Trinidad as the novel emphasizes later on.

The "Dirty Skirts Club" creates a space of personal empowerment and agency where a group of pubescent girls are free to discuss issues pertaining to their sexually maturing bodies. The girls meet outside of their home, but within the confinements of their school, talking after lunch about romance and other "Hot Things" (142). In contrast, the explanations regarding their bodies and sexuality offered "in a clinical way" (140) by their mothers are seen as useless information ("A map of the body's inside organs could not tell us how to find our way through the minefield" (141)). A comparison of such spaces of sexual and self-discovery in the four novels under consideration here reveals how important these spaces outside of home are for the adolescent girls' sexual initiation. Among their peers they are able to develop a more wholesome sexuality. For Molly it is the tree house in which she and her friend Petal hide for their first erotic encounter; for Soledad it is the rooftop of her family home which constitutes a liberating surrounding to meet with her lover. Both spaces offer a perspective from elevated positions. In *Breath, Eyes, Memory*, the protagonist Sophie, in contrast, has none of this, which is only one of the reasons for her conflicting relation to her body.

The attempted resistance enacted by Mona and her friends is directed "against the politics of respectability and the rigid policing of their bodies" (Hamilton 2013: 76). The rigidity manifests itself in the school uniform the girls are supposed to wear. They decide to show their protest against the daily inspection of their attire by soiling their skirts, also in opposition to the "neater girls [whose] skirts remained *immaculate* all day long" (141; emphasis added) – the adjective may be read as a reference to the Immaculate Conception to accentuate the religiosity and purity promoted by the school. The dirty skirt implies a symbolic soiling of womanhood and rejection of domestic life. No matter how hard the girls try to soil and knitter their skirts, they would not show

any stains, any sign of their rebellion; "these were not ordinary skirts and they stood up to our punishment without flinching" (141). De Ferrari, who underlines the inseparability of skin, clothing, and identity, contends that "dirt may not just ruin someone's clothes, but ruin an image of the self as well" (112). Cleanliness, in contrast, as a marker of class identity, is a sign for decency and respectability; it goes with the requirement to look representable at any time. However, the "guerilla efforts" (142) the girls undertake on their skirts to overthrow a gender system that renders them powerless and to protest against the rigid rules that define womanhood are not rewarded with success.

The novel makes clear that respectability not only is negotiated along the lines of gender and sexuality but also intersects with ethnicity and racist prejudices. The discrimination Mona and her 'Dirty Skirt friends' experience because of their ethnic, meaning Indian, background takes place within the confinements of the school and its promotion of a respectable body politics. Their teacher catches the girls reading secretly U.S.-American love comics – a kind of "slackness" that supposedly "is not for girls like [Mona]" (143). Miss Camilla Lee, the young and "very religious" form teacher, who is described as "a 'red' girl of mixed African/Chinese ancestry" (143), lectures and reports the girls. She exposes them in front of the class, all of them "were Indian" (144). Looking back on this incident, the protagonist finds an explanation for her teacher's reaction ascribing it to the prejudices against the East Indian population which clearly intersect with the social factor of gender.

> I realized later [...] that racial differences probably led Miss Lee to view our behaviour as predictable and deplorable. There was talk how Indian girls were hot hot from small—no wonder they had to marry them off as children, and no wonder wife beating and chopping was so common among those people. They were not civilized or 'creolized' enough. They did not reach the approved standard of proper Trinidad society. We were hot coolie girls [sic.] who had to be brought in line. (144-145)

Despite the national credo, "all ah we is one" (144) that the school has also adopted and which apparently advocates unity and sameness but covers up the existence of inequalities based on difference, racist stereotypes are firmly in place and continue to define ethnic and personal relations. The quoted passage takes up an orientalist motif that depicts the Indian woman either as chaste, submissive or as 'hot' and voluptuous.[225] This hegemonic discourse as a form of cultural imperialism constructs the (colonized) Indian body as an abject other.

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225 This motif is a commonality in European travel literature on India of the 18th and 19th centuries especially in the context of *sati*, the funeral ritual of widow-burning.

Not only "hot hot" Mona also evokes the image of the 'fallen woman.' Tellingly, her parents name her after their favorite U.S.-American song "Ramona." While this may seem like an affectionate gesture at first, Mona clarifies that the song, in fact, "told the sentimental tale of an American Indian girl's seduction. Fancy naming me after this girl, destroyed and abandoned!" (29). One may ask whether the precarious, marginalized status of the indigenous population in the U.S. to which Ramona's American Indian identity alludes to is meant as a parallel to the likewise precarious situation of the Indian population as ethnic minority and, likewise, Mona's unbelonging.

While respectability is a way to achieve social standing and a certain degree of self-realization and power in the postcolonial society of Trinidad, such a socio-cultural division into those who are respectable and those who are not, however, does not leave much room for alternative forms of self-expression and bodily self-control. A body politics based on such a differentiation renders adolescent girls more vulnerable to judgmental looks. For the girls, their dirty skirts seem to be a possibility to enact a gendered form of resistance against sexual control. But, in addition to the rigidity of the school, Mona receives further disciplining from her father, which negatively influences her emergence as a self-confident woman. Thus, it takes her years to find out that it is "okay to be like me too, the young Mona, her tough hairy forearms ready for anything" (147).

The disciplining measures Mona is put to and that perpetuate patriarchal dominance are recounted in three 'scenes of subjection.' Francis analyses the 'scenes of subjection' in Danticat's novel *Breath, Eyes, Memory*, adopting this conceptual framework from Saidiya Hartman "to mark incidents in the novel where a woman's body is subjected to violence – whether it is sexual, physical or psychological assaults" (Francis 2004: 77). These scenes in Espinet's novel are framed or connected not by a skirt but a short, 'unruly' dress that functions as symbol of indecency and a double standard. For the annual school bazaar, Mona's aunt sews a "nice cool dress for a nice cool girl of sixteen" (170), which especially her father considers as dirty and overly sexual due to its inappropriate shortness. The dress underlines the need to look presentable and, like the skirts the girls are supposed to wear at La Pastora, should indicate propriety and respectability. "The bazaar was a fashion parade for old and young, and schoolboys and young men gathered to gape and admire" (171).The bazaar transforms into a fashion show in the context of which the female body is exposed to the gaze of male spectators. Mona's wearing the short dress against

See also chapter 3 where I elaborate briefly on Mohanty's criticism of the Western construction of the "Third World woman."

the will of her father is an attempt of resistance to that gaze and the patriarchal control of her body, expressing, too, her desire to break out of the stronghold of women's sexuality. The punishment she later has to endure for her transgression leads her to make the decision to leave home, just like her brother Kello did before. Mona refuses to embody the stereotype of the submissive, passive victim.

The day when the bazaar is taking place, no one in the family wants to go, so Mona is allowed to attend by herself, proudly wearing her new dress. Her mother, again, strictly advises her to take only a taxi with other passengers inside. On the way back, Mona takes the seat in the front, and as the driver is complaining about the degenerated state of Indian girlhood, girls' alleged preference for "Creole boy" and their wanton display of sexuality, she receives his harsh looks: "'Nowadays all de girls going in for Creole boy. Watch dem nuh, in dey tight tight skirt and tight pants, looking for Creole boy. Indian boy eh good enough for dem. Indian boy go see real trouble […]'" (172). The driver reproaches Mona, who in this instance takes on the "gendered burden of shame" (Hosein 2012: 10). This shame pertains to the sexual female body, but is furthermore juxtaposed with racialized notions of (Indian) masculinity and male sexuality. The other passengers seem to agree with him that it is Indian boys who suffer from rejection and emasculation by a virile Creole sexuality. Meanwhile, Mona's discomfort increases and "while he raged against the fallen state of young Indian girls and the resulting deprivation of Indian boys, I felt almost naked in the shift dress. My bare legs were exposed; I wished now that I had not shaved them" (172). Exposed to the insults by the strangers, she feels naked and unprotected. Her shaved legs, perceived as tantalizing, indicate vulnerability standing in stark contrast to an earlier scene in which body hair means confidence and toughness. Mona finds a photograph of her younger self "show[ing] a thick layer of hair on her arms […]. Those hairs must have fallen off over time. When did my rough, tough hairiness disappear? I felt a pang of regret as I looked at the steady arms of that young girl, so sure of herself, so different from the older woman" (133). The removal of hair is a cultural practice to gender the feminine body as different to the male. This inscription turns the once tough, steady into a shameful, docile pubescent body.

Another experience, which further inscribes Mona's body as a sexualized entity, is a family trip to the beach. On their way, they stop for refreshments at a bar whose owner, as Mona cannot help but notice, does not stop to stare at her in her dress. Da-Da who also takes note of this, imbued with reproach, turns to her and yells, "[g]et in de car and stay there, you little bitch. Flaunting yuhself up and down looking for man. All yuh lil girl so damn ting with all

yuhself. Stay dey and keep yuh lil tail quiet" (174). Calling Mona the "lil girl", is a denial of agency and strategy of belittlement by her father. Although just "lil," she is nevertheless objectified as a female-bodied person and doomed to silence. Instead of rebuking him for his behavior, the blame is projected on to her, the victim, for attracting the lustful, voyeuristic gaze of the shopkeeper with her appearance. Consequently, overcome by "a deep wave of shame, re-membering how the shopman had looked at [her]" (174-175), she feels guilty, uncomfortable in her own body which for her is unnaturally sexualized. The girl's body is loaded with guilt and she further internalizes an inferiority com-plex based on gendered, sexualized, and racialized inscriptions on and of her body.

The conflict between Mona and her father culminates at the point when he finds out that his daughter is dating Bree, a "red boy, an obvious mixture of African and other races" (182). This reveals Da-Da's own racist attitude as the reason for his strictness, rather than the worry for his daughter "to get on the wrong track" (209), as he pretends. It escalates when Father Singh returns home drunk, finding Mona once more "in that ho dress" (178), which according to him arouses sexual desire in other men. He insults and slaps her and makes her take off the dress to burn it. The image of the dress captures her rebellion against patriarchal expectations of female adolescence and control of the body and sexuality; his burning of it the attempt of reclamation of lost power. As a form of bodily punishment, she is forced to kneel on the gravel in the yard until the blood runs down her legs, the blazing afternoon sun hot on her. Mona is publicly shamed for transgressing respectable codes of adolescent sexual be-havior. Adding to this, the ethnic tension within Trinidadian society connected to the fear of 'douglarization' (meaning racial 'contamination') is staged upon her body. While Mona is on her knees she is being watched by "a big-mouth boy [who] shout[s], 'Ay, girl! Whey you do? You take man or what?'" (180). This expression clearly shows that Mona's adolescent body is perceived as an available object and it is this accessibility which renders her body even more vulnerable to the male gaze.

The concept of respectability is opposed to slackness as another perfor-mance of gender juxtaposed with a racialized ethnic identity. Earlier, Mona's thoughts ramble about "what fathers or brothers or uncles would do if they caught wayward girls in slackness. When I thought back to those times, it seemed obvious that other girls – black, Chinese, mixed, the few white girls in the school – did not live with the same threats" (138-139). Here the novel is clear about the constraints put on Indian Caribbean femininity and girlhood. Da-Da defends himself: "if we didn't take sufficient care, she would run wild,

she would turn into some slack woman, drinking in clubs, smoking cigarettes, and hugging up all kinda man" (206). This is where the contradictions lie. Modern, urban life is associated with lower class slackness corrupting the individual. Young Indian women in particular are in need of safe-guarding, no matter how brutal and degrading the methods. Da-Da regards it as his duty to protect his daughter's virtue and chastity, a protection which he enacts violently (on Mona's body). The strict policing of women has a historical continuity (seen, e.g., in Mona's punishment on the gravel yard, a disturbing reminder of the treatment enslaved persons received during slavery, cf. 206) and may also be attributed to the more independent lifestyle some women from India were able to lead in the early periods of indentureship. To regain control over women and female sexuality, patriarchal authority among the Indian community needed to be re-established; women's emancipation from this regained authority is considered unruly comportment. This becomes apparent in a scene much later in Mona's adult life when she joins her cousin Bess at a committee meeting of the Indian Heritage Museum. Here, she overhears a conversation among a group of men, members of the committee who complain about Bess' active participation in the organizing procedure but refusal to provide the food:

> 'If woman is trouble! All ah them feel they too damn great now [...]. Getting vex because we ask them to do the Indian delicacies. Since when Indian woman can't cook, eh? [...] A real tempest in a teapot, if yuh ask me.' [...] 'Long time I telling allyuh that girl is trouble [...], what kinda example she is for Indian girls, eh? She ain't no Sita, let me tell you.' (283-4)

The quote evokes the 'Ram-and-Sita-paradigm,' meaning Brahmanic prescriptions and expectation of gender roles (especially womanhood) and morality. That 'modern' Trinidadian women do no longer fit the image of the Sita fuels the fear among Indo-Caribbean men (referred to as "backward" by Bess [cf. 285]) of losing patriarchal control in the diaspora against the background of modernization.

The perception of modernity Da-Da seeks in the city may entail progress and social mobility, political power and the rightful claim of participation of Indian Trinidadians in the nation building process, but it is apparent that this is a male dominated public sphere. At the same time, Mona feels newly imposed limitations and observes a more violent treatment of girls by their family. "For Indians, life in Trinidad at that time was a mess of contradictions. [...] Perhaps our parents were convinced that in this newer, freer world, with new rules being invented overnight, safeguarding their daughters' honour had become much more complicated" (187). Progress and social change does not necessarily

entail liberty and independence for women. Women's emancipation is regarded as a threat to the normative gender order and made responsible for Indian Trinidadian men's loss of control. Their women are supposed to embody the faithful Sita and be the "guardian of Indian culture via [ther] body and [their] morality" (Hosein/Outar 2012: 1), or be a respectable wife to embody Christian values.

For Mona, to unravel her memories is important in the exploration of herself and coming of age. She reconstruct her family's matrilineal history through her great-grandmother's songs[226]: "These songs were my bounty, swinging open a doorway into another world, returning across the *kala pani* to the India the girl Gainder had left, alone. They told a tale of love and loss, distance, journeying, hope, hardship piled upon hardship, and, in the end, the triumph of fidelity" (293). It is this journey across the black waters to India Mona needs to make, crossing the threshold into the other world that is so much part of her identity and helps her to be "alive again" (277). Whereas both Lily and Gainder are forced into married life, Mona succeeds in breaking out of marital confinement by never attaching herself to a partner. According to the norms of Indian Trinidadian femininity she has been socialized into, she does not reach 'true' womanhood; in her very own feminist ideal of a woman's liberty, however, she actually does, which makes her coming of age in a feminist sense a successful one. Mona, "the family rebel" (52), transgresses ethnic, gender, and generational boundaries. Her relationship with Bree, for example, crosses the respectable codes of Indian girlhood and racial purity, and feeds into the ambivalence of national cultural politics that officially celebrates "a Creole bacchanal, multiracial, multicultural" (67), but at the same time keeps the dominant groups through a discourse of 'othering' apart. Mona's refusal to integrate, adapt, and conform – her soiling of her skirt – thus functions as a counter-narrative not only to Christian moral values and traditional Hindu understandings of appropriate gender performances embodied by Ram and Sita in the *Ramayana* script,

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226 Espinet's novel "chronicles the multiple exiles that are part of the Indian experience in the Caribbean and North America" (Mehta 2006: 20). Reconstructing a female genealogy, the novel lends precedence to the lives of the family's women, "commemorate[ing] the maternal roots and routes of Indo-Caribbean history" (ibid.). The songs Gainder sang, and which Mona retrieves, are archival sources. "[T]hey sang the words of love and loss, they sang moral tales and stories of surviving their new life. Gainder sang these songs and Grandma Lil hid them for safe-keeping in the back of her shop books. Lily recorded them for her daughters, for my cousin Bess, for my sister Babsie, for me, for all the women to come, for my film that would tell Gainder's story" (198).

but also to a harmonious integration into the social, normative order prescribed by a teleological *Bildungsweg*.

## 5.4  The Dougla Body and Representations of Racialized Identities

*The real problem is how we fit into life here. You know people talk about Trinidadian culture and another culture called Indian culture? So Trinidadian culture don't have place for Indians too? And you know, is not only the prejudice against Indians by Creole people and white people and red people and Chinee people I talking about. Is the way Indians hate their own background. People like our family, Presbyterian people and middle-class people, they hate the history that marks them as coolies [sic]. (Espinet 2003: 285)*

The previous sections have focused on adolescence, intersecting gender roles and conventions, as well as sexuality and ethnicity. Coming of age and processes of identity formation in Trinidad are negotiated amongst others through ethnic belonging as well as practices and mechanisms of exclusion. While critically reflecting on this process, the novel refers to a concrete postcolonial setting of nation building, creole politics, and the definition of a cultural identity. Thereby, the novel juxtaposes body politics and those formative processes that are constitutive of the coming-of-age genre and which pertain to the subject (or subjectivity) and to culture, the nation state, or society alike. Espinet explicitly addresses the problematic situation of a postcolonial, racially stratified society locked in ethnic conflict, a result of colonial rule that has established sociopolitical structures of inequality, fostered by a political elite that has not yet succeeded to integrate all groups equally within the nation's cultural identity and condition of *créolité* after official independence. It is furthermore revealed in how far Indian culture and the *dougla* body have been subjected to processes of 'othering' which has led to self-denial among parts of the Indo-Trinidadian population.

The novel describes in several instances the negative perception of (East) Indian culture in Trinidadian society – the denial among the Indo-Caribbean population itself and their discrimination by the white, black, or Afro-creole population. At the age of eleven, Mona is determined "to leave Trinidad for somewhere better" (40), possibly England or North America but not India. For

the young protagonist, India, "a place [her] ancestors had left more than a century ago" (40), is a nebulous fantasy and imagined space of backwardness and poverty (cf. ibid.).[227] Her determination to leave discloses a migratory desire for upward mobility and economic advancement that migrants from the Caribbean hope to experience in the metropolitan centers in the North.[228] More importantly, however, her remark – "I was glad they [her ancestors] had left [India]" (40) – reveals her initial rejection of her ancestral roots and ignorance of her family's history, instigated in part by the Canadian Presbyterian mission,[229] imperial dominance, and a general neglect of Indian culture among the Indo-Caribbean communities after indentureship. During her quest for selfhood, however, Mona also sets out to unlearn her prejudices against 'Indianness' and will discover that part to be valuable for her identity. The novel thus unfolds a discourse of discrimination aiming to deconstruct related stereotypes – which is associated with the pedagogical purpose of this work of fiction.

In the course of the missionary work of the Presbyterian Church, many of the Indian, mostly Hindu, population of indentured laborers have converted to Christianity. The willingness to convert and adapt to western standards may also be due to the racial discrimination and stigmatization of Indian culture as backward, foreign, and exotic. A conversation between Mona and Kello reveals the hardship, unfair treatment, and racism their grandparents suffered from. "Pappy had lost his job in the sugar factory. [...] He was fired because he cussed up a young white overseer. The man horked and spat near Pappy's foot and called him a stupid bong coolie [sic.]. For nothing, just because he was white and could do it" (58).[230] In relegating Mona's and Kello's grandfather to a sub-

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227  She shares this view with her father who, in a letter to a Trinidadian newspaper in 1964, explains how his ancestors had left India, a country which he describes as "a backward system of arranged marriage and suttee [widow burning]" (74).

228  I should mention that this short episode, in which her desire to escape and thoughts of fantastical getaways (cf. 40) are revealed, is placed right after the scene in which Mona's uncle sexually molests her mother (and later Mona, too) and right before the rape scene with the taxi driver I described above. Mona wants to flee from sexual violence. That way, it is indicated that bodily integrity and sexuality, too, are factors related to the desire of migration.

229  "From the mid-19th century, the Canadian Presbyterians, whilst still colonists ruled by Britain, had started a campaign aimed at converting the 'heathen' population wherever these could be found. [...] In 1868 they despatched [sic.] the Nova Scotian John Morton to Trinidad" (Samaroo 2009: 31). The missionary work's aim was not only a religious one of conversion but also to create nuclear family structures based on a European model.

230  At the age of five, Mona is confronted with the racism against Indians and made aware of her alleged difference when she is called out by some girls as "coolie." Her reaction to this illustrates her own incorporated prejudice against Indianness: "Until

ordinate position and using the racist, pejorative 'c-word,' the overseer marks Indian subjectivity as inferior to white superiority. The narrative continues to reveal Trinidadian Creole society as a hostile place for "early Indians like our own grandparents, ignorant in the ways of the Creole culture, [who] needed to work out a means of survival in the face of so much hostility" (59). Finding themselves in an ambivalent position within the colonial, social make-up of Trinidad, conversion and membership of the Presbyterian community, thus, maybe perceived as a strategy to survive and belong, but goes along with the detachment from foundational roots, which, as a consequence, leads to "psychological alienation" (Mehta 2006: 28) and disavowal of the Indian heritage. The name change of Mona's grandfather from Ganga Singh to Stephen, his "Christian name" (63) under which everyone in the town apparently knows him, serves as an example but seems rather symptomatic for the transformation and adaptation and possible loss of cultural, ethnic identity.

The denial of Hindu belief as part of (the own) Indian culture in Trinidad as well as juridical strategies of exclusion and othering by the majority society manifest themselves in the legal status of Hindu weddings and the general social perception of the ritual ceremony. While cleaning up the attic, Mona finds her grandfather's letters, one of them sent from his first wife, Etwaria the 'bamboo wife' who is never mentioned in the family. The reason for this is immediately disclosed by the narrator's explanation:

> the marriage was a Hindu ceremony conducted "under bamboo," in the bamboo and tarpaulin tents that Indians in villages built for their lavish wedding ceremonies. These weddings were not recorded legally. [...] These church people from Canada interfered so much with our lives; to me [Mona] it was very puzzling. Big strong men like Pappy and Mr. Bhim up the road, allowing a few white men to rule their lives and tell them who to marry and who to leave. [...] Or how, if we were Etwaria's grandchildren, born out of bamboo, we would all be illegitimate. Pappy's land could never have been ours. (63-64)

Clearly, addressed here are issues of citizenship status and rights in relation to ethnicity and religion – to be precise, Hinduism partially adapted to the circumstances created by indentureship and plantation life. Marital and family affairs – Hindu weddings are as the quote indicates not recognized by the law and church – as well as landownership and inheritance patterns are regulated and controlled by the colonial government and "missionary interventions" (64). The interference with privacy and family life, undermining those cultural prac-

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the moment I heard the words [...] I had been just a girl. [...] A coolie was a nasty ugly thing. I hated coolies" (204).

tices and social conduct that are perceived as threat to morality and respectability based on Christian values, negatively impacts the perception of Indians and local practice of Hinduism. As children, Mona and Kello attend a Hindu wedding, giggling throughout the ceremony demonstrating their misunderstanding and disrespect until they are rebuked by their grandmother: "we should understand that not everybody was Christian like us. But Kello had just one question for Mama: "They poor?" She nodded, and he looked wise and nodded too" (64). The novel problematizes the second-class status and ridicule of Indians who have not converted to Christianity, hence are considered as poor, backward, and simple. Confusion and neglect connected to the embarrassment and stigmatization are also caused by the Christian socialization of many Indians who as a result turn to 'Western' ideals perceived as more 'modern,' but also keep certain aspects of Hindu tradition alive: "It was a time when newly educated people would throw out almost everything Indian at first, and would slowly gather back into their lives only those relics that were essential for survival" (29).

In her reading of the novel, Mehta points out that the "novel demonstrates how the conversion to Christianity reinforced the precarious position of Indo-Caribbean Christians through mediated identifications, a disavowal of history, and the internalization of Western referents" (29). Indeed, the novel highlights and critically examines the Indo-Caribbean population's assimilation of Western-European and Creole culture. As Mona observes:

> By the time my parents were born, many Indians in Trinidad had become Christian converts, and those who had not still took advantage of the church schools set up by Presbyterian missionaries from Canada. A precarious middle class had begun to spring up among those formerly doomed to indentured servitude. [...] Indentureship was over; it had ended in 1917, before they were born, and denial had set in. (28-29)

Belonging neither to the majority African-descended nor to the white, European population, conversion is regarded as desirable since it provides access to social structures and education and in the longer term facilitates access to capital and the more prestigious professions (cf. Brereton 1981; Samaroo 2009). It also provides a way out of labor bondage and plantation history and economy – singing Presbyterian hymns, "[o]ur hearts flew up to heaven, and all the soot and flying dust of burning cane vanished into the smoke fires of hell while we ascended skywards [...]. The hymns [...] promised us neutrality and a bigger place in which to live" (30). Canadian Presbyterians have thus helped in the creation of a small, rather isolated Indian middle-class that adopted a Western-

ized life style and distanced itself from Indian culture and Hindu values. "Like their parents before them, abandoning Hindu and Muslim traditions in favour of education, Muddie and Da-Da anchored themselves insider their Presbyterian community, building a slow, deadly respectability" (29). The precarious situation of this Presbyterian Indian-Caribbean middle-class the quote above alludes to refers to what Espinet describes elsewhere as an "invisible buffer class" between rural, non-Christian Indians and the more affluent, urban, and Creole population (Birbalsingh 1997: 165; interview with R.E.).[231]

The Indian-Caribbean and, or dougla body is set in relation and opposition to the Creole, black body, as the following sections show, but there is also an expressed preference for European culture, U.S.-American lifestyle, and whiteness. Mona's mother, Myrtle, styling in the fashion of Jeanette MacDonald, a U.S.-actress of the 1930s and 40s, and her father, Mackie, looking like Clark Gable, copying the "big big life on the Hollywood screen" (28), embody westernized ideas of modernness. Mona's description of her parents at that time adds to this perception:

> my parents, stylish and cool, keeping in step with the fashion of those far-off
> times in cosmopolitan Trinidad, once dubbed nothing less than 'the Paris of the

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231 The novel critically evaluates the position and influence of the Canadian church as well as the economic and political engagement of white missionaries in the colony. "The Canadian missionaries had brought sweetness and light to us on their terms, wrapping us in a tight cocoon while they enjoyed the privileges of whiteness in a colonial society. New converts were not allowed to smoke or drink, a rule probably established to rein in the estate drunkenness of Indian labourers on payday and to quiet the night-time cries of beaten wives. But Da-Da and his friends scoffed at such absurd attempts at control. The business interests of key church figures were no longer hidden" (81). A further contradiction lies in the sexual conduct of some. Apparently, being in the colony provides white persons with the privilege of a more liberal life style and of engaging in 'unrestrained' sexual conduct. The relationship of Lotte, a young teacher from Canada of German descent, to "her lady friend," Lorna, their indecent behavior, is eyed with disapproval: "You think they could make zami open so in de Prairies where Lotte come from? Them reckless prairie men wouldn't stand for it. They would beat them like snake, yuh hear? But here they could come brazen so and do anything just because they white. And everybody here fraid to say a blasted thing" (156). In the Anglophone Caribbean, the expression 'making zami' refers to a lesbian relationship, but can also mean a close, intimate friendship among women. *Zami* has a derogatory meaning, but is also used positively to celebrate women's sexuality (cf. Audre Lorde's *Zami: A New Spelling of My Name*). Implied here, too, is that Canada is not a safe haven for homosexual persons either. While in Trinidad they enjoy the privileges attached to their skin color and live out their sexuality relatively free in the white community, back home in the Canadian countryside they would certainly face social exclusion and threat of bodily harm.

> West Indies'. […] Their glamour they got from the movies of the day; their noble ideals they got from the book-club membership that brought Lloyd C. Douglas, Pearl Buck, and Émile Zola into our home. Their moral rectitude, though, they got from the Bible and the evangelical enterprise of the Canadian Mission. […] All that backward [Indian] stuff was best forgotten. (29)

Against this background, Mehta, again, argues that by "[i]nternalizing the racism of dominant stereotypes characterizing Indians as backward, unrefined, and lacking in moral integrity, the parents become colonial caricatures who overtly discard Indian traditions as a means to acquire a passport to Trinidadian respectability" (Mehta 2006: 29). Their caricaturing or their (non-subversive) mimicry of Western culture is hence closely connected to their aspiration towards respectability; it is associated with their struggle for approval, belonging, and propriety and, indeed, ideals of culture and civilization that are apparently entangled with creolization: "They were not civilized or 'creolized' enough. They did not reach the approved standard of proper Trinidad society" (145)

Their ambivalent position is obvious. "If there is to be no more Mother India, where do we stand? Is our right to exist as Indians, with a distinct way of life, now threatened?" (74) In this quote resonates a sense of mourning for a lost mother country and roots lost in the *kala pani* crossing as well as doubts regarding the own right to exist. If the Indian subject has been stigmatized since indentureship and throughout the first half of the 20th century (which the generation of the grand- and great-grandparents demonstrate), Indo-Caribbean identity continues to be marginalized in the first decades after independence and throughout the nation building processes and anti-colonial politics that focus on African-centric Creole culture (as the generation of Mona's parents show; and the consequences of which Mona needs to bear, which adds a gendered component). What does the novel associate with Creole culture, what kind of body politics is promoted, and how does the family Singh relate to it and fit in? Despite the relative comfort and social uplift provided by the Church, both the Presbyterian mission and the strictness of the Indian community alike restrain social activity and life. "Young men like Da-Da felt a reckless need to break out of these constraints, but where could they go? They drank and smoked and gambled, embracing the Creole culture with a vengeance" (82), and loved "calypso, steelband, and Carnival" (70) – all of which symbolizes African-Creole culture. In search for a space of self-realization, the 'new' generation of Indo-Trinidadians adopts Creole culture which, quite on the contrary, is regarded as more liberal and liberating in terms of sexuality and consumption, seemingly offering a space of resistance to the rigidity of, as Mehta

finds, the "socialization imposed on them by a Hindu patriarchy, in the name of cultural integrity" (2006: 29).

Creole politics and creolization, as the novel suggests, is further intertwined with gender and sexuality politics: a Black hypersexuality in opposition to an effeminate Indian manhood in particular, as well as body ideals of beauty and Creole femininity. The historian Rochelle Rowe investigates the juxtaposition of beauty contests with discourses of nationalism in Jamaica of the 1950s. She argues that the diverse bodies on display are meant to suggest racial harmony (cf. Rowe 2009: 36). While Trinidad's society shall not be conflated with the Jamaican one, there are, however, similarities when it comes to the struggle for independence which the two former British colonies achieved in the same year as well as their nationalism and strong focus on a 'happy hybridity' or creolity that local women embody. The spectacle of the paraded female bodies, following Rowe's argument, may be regarded as marketing tool "in the construction of a multiracial modern Jamaican identity" (ibid.: 37). The novel highlights the popularity and success of Trinidadian beauty queens. "Trini women were the most beautiful in the world" which is due to the "mixture of races" within the "cosmopolitan population" (173). The local beauty pageants in Trinidad that the novel refers to, too, are part of a body politics to promote the national credo of unity. Usually, the selected winner is a girl who embodies perfectly the Creole ideal prevalent within the society. Such is the case with the contest at the annual bazaar I have referred to above: the queen crowned one year is an icon of the national identity, described by Mona as "a lovely red girl, mixed-up-just-like-callaloo" (173). Against this beauty ideal, the Indian female body (the 'coolie' or dougla; cf. 203, 75) is set to emphasize its corporeal difference and the racial inscriptions, defining Mona's position within the social hierarchy.

The novel not only addresses the marginalization of one ethnicity but also draws a complex portrait of a racially stratified society where the national credo "all ah we is one" (70), promoted in the novel by the first prime minister Dr. Hector James, called De Doctah, which resonates as well with Trinidad's official national motto "Together We Aspire, Together We Achieve," seems nothing but an illusion.[232] Set against the decolonial context of the 1960s, "a time of promise and excitement" when "Massa day done" (70), the ruling government promotes an ethos of togetherness, national unity, and a unique cul-

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232 Mackie Singh wonders "why couldn't we make a place where every creed and race had an equal place, as the new anthem proposed?" (71). The multi-ethnic composition of the society along with a racial divide is disclosed, for instance, by Mona's account of the earlier loan system: "Money was needed and banks were for white people, for the local whites and high-browns. 'Not for poor people, coolie people and black people. [...]'" (253).

ture – "a Creole bacchanal, multiracial, multicultural, cosmopolitan" (67) – but in effect does not hold up to its promise. Mona's father, Mackie Singh, is an idealist and fervent admirer of the government's celebratory attitude and embodies the wish for oneness. He "held fast to the romantic idea of a body politic that would accept people of every creed, every race. He saw himself as an Indian man and a Trinidadian, neither cancelling out the other, a natural inheritor of the Creole culture he loved" (71). However, he realizes that the promoted national unity does not incorporate Indo-Caribbeanness and that the interests of Indians are not included in the nationalist aspiration and economic advancement of the country. Disappointed and disillusioned, he turns his back on James' politics, turning increasingly to Hindu nationalism. He expresses his frustration in several letters to a local newspaper which he signs – not without cynicism – with *Noam Maharaj* (cf. 73, 74, 76; Mahārāja is Sanskrit meaning 'great king' or 'ruler'), speaking for the Hindu and Muslim Indians (cf. 69). These letters, which, and arguably so, Espinet intends to be archival sources, explicitly address the hypocritical rhetoric of the government and the ethnopolitization practiced by the ruling elite. He unveils the politics of the prime minister to be nothing but a "partisan display of power for the benefit of the black population" which is destructive to "any vision of oneness and equality" (72). That the postcolonial Trinidadian society is meant to benefit the African-descended population in the first place seems obvious to Mackie. In fact, he accuses "De Doctah" of preferential policy and racism as he labels "the Indians of this land, as a 'hostile and recalcitrant minority'" and relegates them "to the dungheap of history" (73).

Moreover, one of the letters addresses the juxtaposition of issues regarding racial purity and sexuality. The body politics of creolization favored by the ruling party favors interethnic unions which Mackie perceives to be an attempt to extinguish the Indian population if it is forced and does not happen 'naturally' over time (cf. 74).[233] The fear of intermixing, of a contamination of the Indian body (and just to be precise, the same fear exists also among the African-Trinidadian population) evokes the figure of the *dougla* and the discourse surrounding *douglarization*. The narrator will recall later

> how Indian men were enraged at what they perceived to be a coercive drive to
> intermarriage between Indians and Africans in the Trinidad of the fifties and

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233 A body politics of separation but 'mixing' is made clear in the brilliant description of the city: "San Fernando housing its twin but separate populations, African and Indian, [...] inveterate mixers seduced by curiosity and a taste for difference, whose blood and semen and juices would solidify and form the rickety bridge across which others might begin to cross the rapids" (103).

sixties. That deep-rooted fear had never gone away. I had heard only recently about protests from the Indian community in Trinidad about forced *douglarization.* But *dougla* was such an old term for a person of mixed African/Indian ancestry. (75)[234]

The dougla is described as an ethnic in-between figure and as such embodies a social taboo of interracial unions and the fear of cultural contamination. The "dougla in-betweenness has often been a source of derision, alienation, misperception and social rejection." (Mehta 2004: 14). As struggles for ethnic hegemony are staged on the body, the *dougla* body is perceived as proof of "the contamination and dilution of Indianness" (Puri 2004: 193).[235] The definition of a national, cultural identity has turned into contested terrain and is further intertwined with a restriction of sexual conduct and morality especially on the parts of women.

Similar to her father, Creole culture is embraced by Mona, too, to break free from imposed conventions and strict rules, to challenge a respectable performance and the behavior that is expected of Indian girls.[236] Mona's body, sexuality, and morality become the battlefield of conflict between Creole, Indo- and Afro-Trinidadianess; her behavior the measure for the degree of respectability and man's authority. At the age of seventeen, Mona is in a secret relationship with Bree, "[r]eal name Carlos Antonio Gonzales [...,] a red boy, an obvious mixture of African and other races" (182). When her father finds out about this relation, he severely punishes her for transgressing the unspoken prohibition to 'mix.'[237] The relationship with Bree brings shame over the family and community. However, it is not just Mona's behavior that leads to the escalation of the situation. Mackie transfers his overall political disappointment in to the private sphere; it culminates in domestic violence. Mona is the main target of his outbursts and violent assaults. The political conflict which is at the same

234  Similar to Shalini Puri who discusses identity formation and cultural and literary production under the concept of dougla poetics from a theoretical viewpoint, Espinet takes up on the dougla discourse from a fictional, literary perspective.

235  Puri argues that "anxieties around racial ambiguity are often expressed as disavowals of the dougla – either through the discursive repression of the dougla or through explicit attack on the category" (Puri 2004: 190).

236  Hosein associates creolization with the "loss of [...] Indo-Trinidadian female honour" with a display of a "more assertive sexuality, greater freedom from patriarchal control, and association with Afro-Trinidadian bodies and practices" (9).

237  This example shows to what extent national politics, the struggle for hegemony among ethnic groups have been staged on the female body, Indian femininity, and sexuality (cf. Puri 2004: 189-191). It has also disclosed the complexity and confusion of identification either with Indian or African (or both, or even Trinidadian), which alludes to what Gilroy describes as a "double consciousness" (Gilroy 1993: 1).

time a conflict of identity is staged on the female body and her required purity. Njelle Hamilton summarizes this thusly, the body of "the Indo-Trinidadian woman became the site of angst over nationhood, and the two main ethnic groups, locked in a stalemate over sexual politics, found themselves in a stalemate over national and cultural politics as well" (Hamilton 2013: 79). Years later, Kello will accuse his father of his violence making him aware of his own racism (cf. 206) which is just underneath the surface of his alleged love for unity. The punishment for Mona's forbidden desire of the 'other' also reveals the hypocrisy among the ethnic groups. Kello confirms this by saying that "it was about her black boyfriend. The red boy she was in love with. [...] You [Mackie Singh] did this to a girl who showed the kind of courage that our pissy little Presbyterian world wouldn't allow" (206). A culture of ethnic dominance fueled by discussions on racial purity keeps the ethnic groups apart. "[O]ur racial difference was solid, immense, never leaving us...the great wedge that had driven us apart" (189), as observed in the novel.

The reference to Carnival season, especially the scenes of the opening parade, the *J'ouvert*, adds a further gendered and sexual component to the way the novel represents Creole culture, thereby indicating its 'Afro-Centrism' and exclusion or rather ridicule of Indo-Caribbeanness. On the one hand, Carnival is an essential part of Caribbean identity; having emerged out of the colonial context, it is, amongst others, a cultural practice of resistance and subversion. It creates a space temporarily free from regulation and conformity, where gender performances are undermined and transgressive behavior is rendered possible. In such a "reckless space without boundaries" (99), the grip of patriarchal dominance and sexual morality is loosened, "turning upside down the order of the world we knew. Everything was reversed: man turning into woman [...], and woman turning into man" (98). The novel describes such a space but connotes it with an excessive Black sexuality that Mackie perceives as repulsive ("Da-Da [Mackie] came home sickened by the revelry" 100). He and Mona used to celebrate and enjoy this season until the year when Mackie is disgusted by the increasing vulgar display of the body and sexual immoderateness. At one point, accompanied by the calypso tune "My Pussin" by Lord Kitchener, "a stunning black woman, her eyes glazed with the night's rum, danced out of the band and up to Da-Da, [...] voluptuous, dressed in tight pants [...], her closed fists positioned at crotch level, both thumbs making scooping movements" (101). Lord Kitchener sings "*Is my pussin / Is my pussin / Is my pussin / Is my pussin / I bathe her, feed her, clothe her from small / Man take way yuh hand from she / Doh touch my pussin at all* (101). Mackie remains motionless, expressionless which is contrasted to the woman's enticing, active sexual body that she is in control

of; in this instance an erotic Black female body that the Indian man is not supposed to touch. Moreover, the appearance of "a stout dark-skinned man, drunk and staggering," who "walked up to an electric light pole and began to rub his genital area on it in desperate circling motions[…,] the outline of his penis was visible, almost bursting out of his tight gun-mouth pants" (101-2), not only serves as an example of a certain (threatening, virile) Black sexuality, but is for Mackie also a proof of the degeneration of the society dominated by the African-Creole population.

On the other hand, Carnival is also a comment on politics and the progress of the nation. Current political events or random happenings are performed and ridiculed, as for instance the murder presumably by an Indian man or the hanging of two Indian men (cf. 100). For Mackie, Carnival symbolizes Creole national culture and as such is then rejected by Mackie taking it as an offense and an example of how, to speak with Rhoda Reddock, "the dominant creole culture imposed its idea of culture and identity on the entire population" (1998b: 423). linked to the "low moral standards of creole society and the African population […]. In this situation it is the Indian women in particular who have to be watched for it is they who have the responsibility of maintaining the image of the culture" (Reddock 1998b: 425). For Mackie this is further proof of the threat of contamination of the untainted Indian female body through black sexuality and the degeneration of the whole country he once loved.[238]

The character Mr. Singh, his political acumen and relation to his daughter, reveals how frustration and disempowerment can lead to domestic violence and alcohol abuse. The source is the ethnic conflict between the African and Indian population as well as a social hierarchy based on respectability that privileges *whiteness*. Da-Da compensates the loss of power and social control with violence. The novel thus implies that a destructive masculinity partially originates in the socially perceived alterity of the Indian body as well as the overall economic and social disenfranchisement of the Indian population.

Being perceived as the Asian 'other' (cf. Mohammed 2009), the family Singh occupies a precarious position trying to integrate into the Creole project of nationalism but struggling to retain Indian cultural identity keeping a distance to the dominant Afro-Creole culture, which further alienates the family. At the same time, they suffer from invisibility and alienation from the Hindu, and likewise a smaller Muslim, community as being not Indian, i.e. Hindu, enough and are blamed of having betrayed their culture as Christian converts. This, furthermore, connects to the Indians' "continued insecurities surrounding their

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238 On Indian women's sexuality and its representation in Trinidadian popular culture, such as chutney-soca and calypso, see, e.g., Niranjana (2006).

rights of citizenship" (Reddock 1998c: 193) that stems from their position "outside of the cultural mainstream and their continued need to prove their 'Trinidadianess' and improve their social status" (ibid.). As the novel indicates the missionaries' strong influence within the still colonial social structures led to an estrangement of "the Indo-Trinidadian community from their values and culture, they also result in making women like Mona strangers to their bodies" (Hamilton 2013: 76).

## 5.5  Estrangement and Becoming the 'Other' in Canada

*Presbyterian Indians became Indo-Creole-Canadian. This represents a double colonization, because the Canadian 'way' was largely made up of a colonized world view, and we became another colony within an existing British Caribbean colony. (Birbalsingh 1997: 164)*

The decades following Trinidad's independence are marked by ethnic conflicts, economic decline, poverty, and, as a consequence, large-scale migration in particular to North America. For the family Singh, too, the factors behind the emigration are economic, political, and family-related. When Mona's father feels overpowered by disillusionment and frustration unable to pay the mortgage and full of worry for his daughter "to get on the wrong track" (209), he decides for the family to move to Canada (cf. 27). The narrator, once again, sets her account of this relocation in a concrete temporal frame and contextualizes it historically against the background of contemporary migration policy:

> The migration of many families like ours took place with a rush in the sixties and the early seventies. After Enoch Powell and the British anti-immigration policies of 1968, England had closed down. We could no longer see it as the mother country. Many families like ours came to Canada, the natural home, perhaps, for Indian / Presbyterian people. We arrived in 1970. (104)

What resonates here is the novel's underlying criticism both of Great Britain's migration policies of the 1960s directed especially against immigration from the West Indies as well as the conflicting, unequal relation between the former colony and the imperial power, the "mother country." On the other hand, the narrator, too, hints at the close ties between Canada and Trinidad which have been established since the end of the nineteenth century fostered by the Pres-

byterian Church. Although Canada, a former British colony itself, is referred to as the "natural home," a sense of home in the new world is not easily established. The family Singh finds themselves in a likewise marginalized position as in Trinidad in terms of the lack of economic capital and the racialization or ascription of ethnic identity. While the latter pertains primarily to the changing perception of Indo-Caribbean identity and the ethnic label of 'South Asian' in Canada, in her narration, Mona also contrasts the whiteness of Canadian society (aesthetically evoked by snow and winter) to their 'brownness.' For instance, she refers to her uncle who has moved to Canada at an earlier stage and settled down in the country, as she notes, "locked in his prairie whiteness with his ultra-Canadian family" (132). Although the narrator remains vague about the meaning of the denomination of ultra-Canadian and her uncle's apparent acculturation, it seems obvious that Mona, her family, and other immigrants from the Caribbean do not fit in within the boundaries of WASP-identity.

Alienation, emotional detachment, and outspoken racism become clear in Mona's depiction of migrant life in Canada, the Canadian landscape, and climate. In her first year in Canada, Mona writes in her diary that she "had come to the edges of the First World and had been set adrift" (243). At that time, the more visible 'Caribbeanization' of the city that Mona observes in the 1990s had not yet taken place (cf. 103). A negative, hostile, cold, and white imagery of Canada persists throughout most of the novel (cf. 49, 50, 165).[239] This symbolizes the "misery" (165), estrangement, and discrimination they experience despite the multicultural harmony officially promoted. "When I arrived in the early seventies, Canada was a white country. If multiculturalism was an idea, it never touched me," an observation emphasized by "a wall covered with graffiti that read Keep Canada White" (243; 104-5). Mona points out that the "racism of this place [...] was always ready to crack you across your back when you least expected it" (47). If Canada is praised for its openness and liberalization, the novel explicitly addresses the problems and lived experience of racism and exclusion

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239 She recalls the coldness especially in situations in which her brother's sickness is too real and close for her to endure, the helplessness of her parents too much to sustain her. Thus, Kello's death turns into both an emotional and bodily experience for Mona. In stark contrast stands the comforting warmth, safety and softness of their Trinidadian home she endearingly describes as "a cocoon" (24). The description of cold winters, as in Espinet's novel such as the "harsh Canadian winter" (50), is a recurrent theme in Caribbean diaspora writing – and in migrant fiction in general – frequently employed to symbolize racism, alienation, and solitude. Jamaican-British writer Joan Riley, for example, in her novel *The Unbelonging* (1985) evokes cold weather as an uncomfortable contrast between the host country England and the warm Jamaican home of the protagonist. The spatial description of bathrooms and their tiled coldness further adds to Riley's aesthetics of trauma.

which do not have a place or do not even exist in the hegemonic public discourse of diversity and integration nor the "elaborately concealed Anglo-Saxon attitudes" (54).

The novel reflects on the marginalized position of Caribbean migrants: their insular status and the reduction of their subjectivity to skin color, meaning their embodied being defined solely in racial terms on. Mona assesses their social status and terms of existence thusly:

> We had reproduced our very early life here in many ways; being in my parents' house again brought this truth home to me. We, and others like us, were living in our own insular world, oblivious of how we appeared to the rest of the society around us. However protected we had been in our little Presbyterian world in San Fernando, one shove into the bustle of Port of Spain would put us squarely back into our places as country Indians, nothing more. All it took then in Trinidad was looking Indian; all it took now in Canada was skin colour. We had not moved one inch. (81)

Mehta analyzes this scene, explaining how

> the mimetic reproduction of the first crossing a century later revives the primal trauma of unbelonging when Indianness persists as a visible marker of difference. The spatial mobility of migration does not complement the illusion of social mobility in Canada, leading to the very same impasses that the family attempted to escape in the first place. (Mehta 2006: 30)

In this respect, Espinet critically evaluates not only the national politics regarding cultural identity in postcolonial Trinidad – the seemingly hopeless situation of a nation locked in ethnic conflict, and of a Creole elite that has not yet succeeded to integrate all groups equally –, but also the failure of the multicultural promise of the Canadian government leaving many migrants disempowered and without prospects. This point is further strengthened by Mona's incomprehension regarding the delusions attached to migration and upward mobility. "Why did people leave the place they were born for an illusion of a better life? […] All of us migrants, the Chinese man, the black waiter, Da-Da never finding a place here […] – why did anyone leave?" (26).

Estrangement and racialization are most dominant in the protagonist's characterization of her father. Mona notices how her father's "body [has] grown heavy over many winters of inactivity" (79). His body displays his disillusionment and frustration. Unfulfilled dreams and ambition, again, were turned down by racial politics and produce a passive migrant body. As well, the novel takes issue with ethnic labelling that constructs an artificial group identi-

ty, lacking, however, historical significance and reference potential. Accordingly, Mona describes her father who, back in Trinidad, "had been [...] a striking figure in any gathering," is now "against the Canadian landscape [...] only a *brown Indian* man, his impeccable sense of style unnoticed, his appearance ordinary. An elderly *South Asian* man, I thought that's all this country can ever make of him" (79; emphasis added). The term of South Asian reduces Mr. Singh to an unrecognizable ordinary appearance as a "brown man." The novel indicates that Canadian society deprives Indian migrants from the Caribbean off of their identity and history by placing them within the constructed community of what the census labels as 'South Asian.'[240] The novel criticizes the label for its racialized connotation and as a discriminating strategy by Canadian migration and identity politics in that it constructs an 'other' opposed to a white Anglo-mainstream body. The homogenizing and essentializing notions of what 'Indianness' or 'Asianness' are defined to be, are in their consequence ignorant of specific diaspora histories, differences in migration patterns, and diverse Caribbean identities. "[I]n an attempt to produce an easily knowable difference" (Rahemtullah 2009: para. 3), the Indo-Trinidadian presence in Canada is erased from the North American country's migration history irrelevant to fit into the multicultural landscape.

The 'invisibility' of Caribbean migrants of Indian descent in the example above is a matter of a statistics which falsifies ethnic belonging. The invisibility of the body of color is furthered in personal and professional relations accompanied by its criminalization. A disembodiment of the migrant subject takes place in the scene when Mona's father goes shopping and is ignored by the cashier and other customers. He rages: "'So you didn't see me here all the time? I look invisible to you? You don't have the manners, the simple courtesy to treat all the customers here the same?' Alarm bells began to go off all over the store" (105). In this incident of every-day racism, Mackie fails in the attempt to reclaim his agency and right of equal treatment. He is first ignored but when he dares to raise his voice, make himself visible, he is put in his place, criminalized, an alien other.

In her book *Plantation Memories* (2008), psychoanalyst and postcolonial theorist Grada Kilomba writes about the structures of every-day racism and its colonial continuity. She analyzes the psychological effects of the "traumatizing contact with the violent unreason of the *white* world, that is with the unreason

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240 The ethnic group described by the label "South Asian" counts among Canada's "visible minorities" under which Indo-Caribbean is often grouped and which also includes, for example, "East Indian, Pakistani, Sri Lankan, etc." (cf. "Visible Minority Population and Population Group Reference Guide, 2006").

of racism" (Kilomba 2008: 20). The exposure of the embodied subject to discrimination and mechanisms of social exclusion is unmistakably made clear in the novel. On a train ride from Montreal to Toronto, Mona is unexpectedly confronted with the racist attitude of another passenger who reproaches her shouting "Why don't you go back to where you came from" (47), leaving her in a state of shock, "close to tears at the unkindness of life, of the racism of this place that was always ready to crack you across your back when you least expected it" (47). The insult, 'to go back,' brings up the troubling question of origin to indicate her foreignness and her belonging to another place but not here. The exclusion and marking of the territory as Anglo-Canadian place her outside the national imagination.

Mona's unbelonging and "psychic disorientation" (Birbalsingh 1997: 218), that may be associated with her sense of nomadism or 'nowharianism,' stem from uprooting and disconnection from her childhood home as well as her 'double' socialization in Trinidad and Canada. Remarkable here is the textual absence of more than twenty years of Mona's life in Canada – the time spanning from her arrival in Montreal in the early 1970s until well into the 1990s, the time she starts the narration. Whereas Mona's description of the period from girl to young woman (the adolescent phase) is very vivid, throughout the adult years it seems there is no significant character development, the more contemporary context of the narration is seemingly at a standstill. This not only slows down the process of story-telling but also has an effect on how the reader perceives the adult Mona, namely as being in stasis, inactive, in limbo. The gap of more than twenty years is evidence that the family's move to North America critically impacts on her individuation, troubling her process of becoming an adult woman. This second *kala pani* crossing renders her speechless, almost traumatized, which is indicated by the memory fragments closing in on her. Hence, this textual silence indicates that her migrant life in Canada along with the experiences of racism constitute a trauma that Mona is not yet able to face and put in words – being marked as the 'Other body.'

## 5.6 Gay Politics, Bodily Decay, and the Patriarchal Order

If the novel deals with 'otherness' mostly in racialized terms, otherness in terms of sexuality, or queerness, enters the novel via Kello's body and sexual identity. Mona's older brother and his homosexuality are often overlooked in

scholarly publications that discuss Espinet's novel (cf. Mehta 2006; Solbiac 2013; Hamilton 2013).[241] This is surprising, and may be due to the rather flat character description; but it could also hint at the perception of homosexuality as tabooed topic. Joel Kuortti's essay on the novel's silenced (diaspora) narratives briefly discusses how "Kello's hidden homosexuality deconstructs the existing gender structure in questioning the heteronormative matrix" (Kuortti 2008: 321) – into which Mona herself does not fit because of her own rejection of married life. In fact, the novel's explicit mentioning of "the politics of being gay" (160) extends the literary discourse of *kala pani* to also include sexualities and gender identities that are outside of heteronormative inscriptions of the Indian male body. The extent to which the homosexual body is perceived as deviant and transgressive, but also as threat to social normality despite its marginality is underlined by Kello's sickness and the process of bodily decay that the novel reconstructs in aesthetic ways.

Kello plays a key role in Mona's life and initiates her full subject formation. He does not get along with their father, whose drunkenness frequently turns into rage. The "big row" (17) at Christmas in 1958, when Kello was almost strangled by his father, made him, according to Mona, a man at the age of nine. He leaves home early and later goes to live in England to obtain a university degree. The absence of her brother is a painful experience for Mona, who is now the target of her father's abuses (cf. 161). From the U.K. he moves to Canada in 1970, about the same time as the rest of the family, where he works as engineer and prospers by investing in the stock market. He gets married to a Canadian woman of Italian background. Like Mona, but different to their siblings, Babs and Johnnie, he feels very attached to their home in Trinidad, which is the reason for him to buy back the land of his grandfather that his father has sold and thus interrupted the paternal line of inheritance.

Kello, as it turns out, is separated from his Canadian wife and children, and lives with his partner Matthew. This, however, he keeps a secret from his family. He confides in Mona only at his deathbed, which, together with the fact that Kello has not come out officially, underlines the discomfort related to and the suppression of homoerotic desire. The two funerals taking place, a public one and a private among those who knew (cf. 217), are emblematic for the secret of Kello's life and his tabooed sexuality. Social constraints and family relations hinder Kello to lead his life as an open homosexual person ("Had he come out to his wife?" [160]). Living "quietly, outside the gay community" (ibid.), the gay community in Toronto does not seem to offer a space for him either – here, the

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241  In Mehta's case this neglect is due to her feminist though heteronormative focus on the women characters (Mehta 2006).

reader can only suspect that Kello's ethnic identity (or racial difference) vis-à-vis the predominantly white gay community may be problematic. Mona's initial reaction to Kello's revelation of his sexuality mirrors her own discomfort with same-sex desire and internalization of normative assumptions of sexuality. "I felt my foundations rocking. I had never thought of myself as homophobic and found my inability to take in Kello's unknown life surprising. [...] I had never felt a guardedness between us before" (52).[242] While Mona restores the stories of the family's rebel women within a patriarchal system, the narrative of homosexual intimacy and same-sex desire remains obscured and anti-homosexual social structures remain largely unchallenged.

In addition, the novel not only deals with deviant, transgressive sexuality, but also, similar to Jamaican Patricia Powell's novel *A Small Gathering of Bones* (1994), tackles the problem of AIDS and society's difficulty to deal with the HIV-infected body adequately. Mona's questions – "Why would he want to keep it secret? [...] And how did he get AIDS? Promiscuous sex? Needles? Was Kello gay? Sure we weren't such creeping, crawling hypocrites" (48) – reveals the ignorance and the stigma attached to the infected body and shows the hypocritical attitude within the family that Kello, different, apparently, to Mona, is aware of. Kello prefers to die "without the whole tribe of relatives whispering and shooshooing about him in the way that they will if they know any of this. [...] Taking man and battyman this and that, and heaven knows what other nastiness and bacchanal" (ibid.). Mona's suggestion of possible causes of the disease, ranging from promiscuity over drug abuse to homosexuality, in fact discloses common prejudices against AIDS through a questionable identification and stigmatization of so-called risk groups, whose members are already suspect only because of their membership and not their actual behavior, and the general conviction regarding the moral reprehensibility of the infected subject. The use of the pejorative Caribbean creole term "battyman," as in Silvera's novel, furthermore indicates a homophobic discourse through the term's disparagement, rejection, and pathologization of anal sex. This discourse goes in hand with a particular belief about the body and sexual normality constitutive and foundational of family, citizenship, and the nation state (cf. Alexander 1994).

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242 Mona indicates her own socialization into heteronormativity when she thinks back to her childhood and the woman from the church community, Miss Lotte, and her "lady friend" from Europe, Lorna. They were called "the two Ls" the two lesbians? early sexual try-outs. , with the "zami rumours at school" (156) and her relief to find out that "tryouts did not qualify as making zami" (156).

If the novel discusses the silencing of AIDS and homosexuality within the family, it also reveals the anti-homosexual attitude of an otherwise liberal Canadian society and its reservation towards infected bodies. On one of her visits at the hospice, Mona encounters a man on the street and begins to "wonder[...] what he thought of an AIDS hospice being planted in his solid neighbourhood" (55). In this case, homosexuality unsettles a petty bourgeois lifestyle and morality. The quote, too, expresses the skepticism, even fear towards the disease. This middle-class neighborhood of "settled values, Victorian chic, and [...] fake gentility" (54) stands in for a heteronormative concept of citizenship and a particular body politics that excludes unhealthy subjects.

The visible bodily transformation indicates Kello's progressing sickness and imminent death. "He looked thinner too, although when he held me I found that his arms had not lost their wiry strength. But the biggest change was in his sallow complexion, that and his glittering, slightly mad eyes" (51). This aesthetics of decay comes to the fore also in the description of Kello's "thin brown skin that would disappear soon, turned to dust, this bravery" (207). Not without a tint of pathos, the sick, sallow body, the perishing body, hints at the vulnerability of the body and dissolution of the homosexual subject. As Kuortti concludes, "the novel seems to fail in deconstructing the heteronormative matrix. Women are bound to stay put and homosexuals to die" (Kuortti 2008: 322). Arguably, the death of Kello, indeed, can be interpreted, as Espinet's failure to liberate same sex desire from the closet – different to Shani Mootoo's short story "Out on Main Street" or the novel *Cereus Blooms at Night*; her priority, and this is underlined, for example, by the narrative authority Espinet's female protagonist has, lies with heterosexual women's emancipation from gender oppression. In addition, Kello's death-ridden body, like Mackie Singh's ghostly appearance, may be a manifestation of the family's sufferings and diaspora journeys (the diaspora body turns into a body in pain). The debilitated male body symbolizes not only the precarious status of Indian diaspora communities but also the weakness of the male heir. Also, death (at a first glance) seems to be Kello's punishment for leaving home too early, for the rebellion against his father's authority, and, ultimately, for the sexual transgression of heteronormative boundaries.

However, Kello's death – Kello who "had always left his own stamp on the world" (15) – may not mean the complete defeat of the homosexual subject. Counter to the seeming dissolution or disembodiment of the gay subject runs Kello's attempt to secure his position in the family lineage. In fact, he re-enforces the patriarchal order through ownership and heritage by re-purchasing the family's estate in Trinidad, which, at the same time, materializ-

es the connection to a home space from the diaspora location. He makes Mona responsible to act on his behalf, so that she can re-connect to her home and, in the long run, her identity; he bequeaths the property to his children with the hope that his children will take an interest in their roots and their father's place of birth. "My seed – it exists. It'll surface in time. Nothing perishes" (166). Kello's remark, on the one hand, is meant to reassure the dying subject his significance after death. The idea of the imperishability makes room for a religious interpretation of reincarnation in Hinduism and introduces a cyclical moment (the circle of life, death, and rebirth) as defining of the coming-of-age novel. On the other hand, it constitutes a patriarchal claim in existence and promotes a particular body politic considering the male seed as origin of human kind. Moreover, through Kello (and his financial means), Mona buys the land and obtains a place in a traditional male line of heritage, though her relation to property is completely at odds with that of her male relatives. "I couldn't help trying to tell him how ownership meant nothing to me. I wondered to myself about the men of the family and their very different responses to land" (55).[243] While Kello connects identity and existence to land, Mona's quest for belonging and history is less materialistically motivated. However, while Kello is fading out, Mona fades into the role of sole heir (the first in line as second-born child), in this instance reversing conventional gender roles and workings of (paternal) inheritance (cf. Donnell 2006: 169).

What is of interest is the parallel between the brother's death and Mona's own revival. Kello's death initiates the protagonist's own coming-of-age process and coming into being which the novel further illustrates by contrasting his decaying body with Mona's awakening body. Yet, if Kello is Mona's "second self" (51), as she claims, but is dying, what happens with the subject, the perception of the own subject status, if one part is missing? "I was suddenly overwhelmed by the finality of it all and broke down. [...] something was being pulled from under my feet and I was landing on ground that I could not feel, not with my toes, not with any part of my body" (49). The sadness over the loss (mourning) becomes a corporeal experience of pain. Kello's inevitable death confronts Mona with her own life and "unfulfilled ambitions" (62) and her cau-

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243  The novel's concern with land ownership and its colonial and gendered implication is revealed in several instances. For example, Mona's cousin Bess, who is an illegitimate child, needs to fight for the right of ownership of her grandmother's house to which she is not legally entitled to. The extent to which the postcolonial state continues to exert biopolitical power and control over the population and their sexual behavior through property rights is disclosed by the "legislation about inheriting property [which] was still colonial to its core, ignoring illegitimacy and the straying habits of ordinary people" (123).

tious, passive behavior, her "hanging suspended in mid-air, waiting and watching for some twist of fortune" (79). She reflects the fact of Kello's death on to her own life. "Kello's life would be over, but who was Mona? Had I even made a life for myself?" (94). If he is dying, her disorientation and disconnection from her own self may be regarded as some kind of social death.

The death of Kello further triggers a sudden emergence and subsequent negotiation of multiple traumatizing experiences. His terminal illness initiates Mona's recollection of the family history and acceptance of the past. Kello reconnects Mona with her family, enables her to reconcile with her father and forgive him. Likewise, after years of emotional distance, Mona manages reconnect with her mother. Furthermore, the revelation of his sexuality confronts Mona with her own reservation towards homosexuality, serving the purpose of sexual education and breaking the taboo of AIDS. Finally his burial brings together the extended family, scattered in North America and Trinidad. Kello's body dies and Mona awakens, a development symbolizing their spiritual interconnectedness – hence the term 'novel of awakening' seems relevant here. Kello's death and their father's aging, too, his fragile body, linked to Mona's awakening indicate that women's empowerment and the revaluation of their contribution to the survival of the Indian community may be possible only with the death of patriarchy – which equals a radical feminist statement. In this vein, Mona concludes her narrative by stating "I was alive again" (277).

## 5.7  Historiography and the Diasporic Coming-of-Age Narrative

In her critical, non-fictional essay, "The Invisible Woman in West Indian Fiction" (1989), Espinet laments the absence of the Indian or Indo-Caribbean female subject in Caribbean fictional writing which goes hand in hand with her status – peripheral at best – in national(ist) discourses and official historiography.[244] "*It is an untold story*" (3). With these words, Espinet commences her novel – a first-person, adult-narrated, women-centered coming-of-age novel. It is clear that a very specific story, which as the novel indicates has been subjected to historical erasure, will not remain untold any longer. This sentence also

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244 The novel's 'purpose of revelation' is further indicated in the novel's epigraph reading "raise a cloth from a covered face" quoted from Chilean poet Gabriela Mistral (1889-1957).

begins one of several what may be called historiographic inter- or preludes entitled "*Kala Pani.*" These interludes (cf. 3-4; 117-9; 247-9), which are set apart from the main body through italic script, introduce each of the novel's three parts and thus disrupt the main narrative. Mona reverts to these historical fragments to substantiate the reliability of her memory and fill in the archival gaps of indentureship history and, effectively, her own biography and subject formation. The *Kala Pani* account claims historical accuracy; it also recounts the live story of Mona's great-grandmother Gainder and her journey from India to Trinidad. Mehta describes the novel as an "existential quest for selfhood" (Mehta 2006: 20), being intertwined with the live stories of her foremothers (or *her*stories[245]). In this respect, I argue, Espinet deliberately mixes the genres of the coming-of-age novel and neo-historical fiction,[246] which ties in well with the "pedagogical impulse" of Caribbean diaspora literature that Elena Machado Sáez, for instance, points out (cf. 2015: 16).

Donnell characterizes the protagonist as "the perpetual historian and compulsive voyeur" (Donnell 2006: 168). Mona's profession as documentary film maker influences the way she perceives her surroundings and refers to her memories, and, on an upper level how the focalization directs the reader's view and attention. Her accounts, descriptions and self-characterization are highly self-reflexive, even objective and at times with a great distance. The narrator implies that her memory is in fact more precise than any official visual recording of the event and histories, which implies her claim to a more authentic perspective. Her status as documentary film maker lends her authority. "No camera could have recorded that day with the detail that was engraved on my memory" (41). In the course of the novel, her reliability, though, is questioned when she expresses uncertainty, "I replayed those memories in my mind, I

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245 This is a term used in gender studies and feminist criticism to challenge the masculine and patriarchal claim within 'mainstream' historiography. Mehta calls out for "epistemological reevaluations of colonial historiography from its heteropatriarchal and elitist baselines" (Mehta 2006: 24), which she finds realized in Espinet's novel.

246 The neo-historical novel, according to Elodie Rousselot, is an emerging sub-genre of the historical novel which by re-visiting key historical events and moments and re-appropriating the past also connects to and comments on the present time while laying open its own constructedness (cf. Rousselot 2014). "Signals, beckoning me into the past" (5), Ramabai Espinet's narrator thinks, pointing out explicitly the preoccupation of the novel with the past. In general, engaging with the own history is a common feature in Caribbean fiction. Interestingly, Torres-Saillant, though he does not differentiate historical and neo-historical fiction, argues: "The convergence of the 'historical imagination' throughout the area is such that it may well be almost redundant to speak of 'the historical novel' as a separate genre in the Caribbean" (Torres-Saillant 2013a: 106).

wondered, did they really happen that way" (151). The juxtaposition of an authentic voice with a possible unreliable narration thus makes us question the act of storytelling and construction of a supposedly authentic history, unravelling instead its fictional character.

A female genealogy, it lends precedence to the destiny of indentured women, thus "commemorate[ing] the maternal roots and routes of Indo-Caribbean history" (Mehta 2006: 24). The *Kala Pani* interlude reconstructs the voyage of *The Artist*, a ship that brought 285 women and 159 men to Trinidad – an unusual ratio as the narrator informs (cf. 4). It is the year of 1879; among the women who went to Trinidad are also those 'pariah' women, *rands*, who are excluded by Indian society, such as widows who after the ban of sati by the British colonial government in 1829 became social outcasts (cf. 3). The novel inscribes itself within a specific historical moment of colonialism, retracing the routes of labor migration from Benares to Calcutta, passing Madagascar and St. Helena (117), to Trinidad.

> The evening darkens as they head out of the Bay of Bengal, India receding before the immensity of ocean billows, and now there is no horizon but water, nothing but pani, pani, pani. My foremothers, my own grandmother Gainder, crossing the unknown of the kala pani, the black waters that lie between India and the Caribbean. (4; italics in original)

Telling the *kala pani* history exclusively from a woman's point of view is a way of reclaiming a lost story. Francis' claim that Caribbean women's writing often "resist[s] canonical historical representations by creating counterarchival sources to replot history" (Francis 2010: 6) may change our perception of fictional writing and ways of reading. In many respects Espinet's novel reads like a history book, if that is a qualified claim. The difference is that it reads history against the grain offering an alternative version of Trinidad's national history and Indo-Caribbean migration history in Canada. Mariam Pirbhai, too, comments on such a "historiographic impulse," stating that

> Indo-Caribbean women novelists arguably work in tandem with historians in the memorialization and excavation of women's narratives, for they not only strive to fill in historical gaps but also to mobilize these stories as models of cultural and feminist agency for present generations. (Pirbhai 2010: 47)

The *Kala Pani* narrative transplants a historical 'reality' of facts, data, and realist descriptions of places into the realms of the fictional. Interestingly, the novel achieves an epistemological and cultural translation; its didactic purpose effectively educates readers within and outside the text. Mona as reader of her

grandmother's story and readers of the novel alike are asked to make sense of the text, to question the official narrative, and to dig deeper for a hidden 'truth.' They need "to weigh competing narratives, revise and dislodge previous knowledges, and slowly piece meaning together" (Puri 2004: 160).

The novel is subdivided into three parts, "Borrowed Time," "Manahambre Road," and "Caroni Dub," that reflect on the different phases of Mona's personal development. In a homodiegetic I-narration, the adult Mona of the 1990s recounts parts of her life in flashbacks, starting with her childhood in the late 1950s introducing an extensive cast of characters. Except for the chapters of the third part, the majority of a total of 25 chapters take place in the early days of postcolonial Trinidad of the 1960s and 70s. The narrative present is constantly interrupted by jumps back in time. Mona randomly remembers past incidents when she is either in conversation with her family and Kello or when she is clearing out the attic of her parent's house in Toronto. That way, the Canadian context, which is otherwise rather marginalized in the narrative, gains importance as narrative setting. Unlike the two preceding parts, part three, "Caroni Dub,"[247] is set almost completely in the narrative present. In this chapter, Mona actually visits the Caribbean home to research for her documentary and to repurchase the family's property. This visit not only transforms Trinidad from an imagined home (a constructed space in the protagonist's memory) into a 'real' space, it also turns into a key moment in the completion of subject formation as the narrator reveals: "My research was yielding real gold this time, gold that would make sense of my own life" (294). It is a puzzle of both an individual coming-of-age script and collective history.

Mona's quest for identity and her disorientation are transferred to the reader, who is sent on an ocean voyage departing in India in the nineteenth century and then on a journey from Trinidad to Canada and back. The fragments and pieces of memory, Mona's questioning of whether they really happened that way, leave the reader at a loss, and add to the sense of displacement and confusion. The narrative structure conveys a sense of disorientation, thereby mirroring diasporic entanglements and evoking a traumatized subjectivity. This is achieved by a fragmentary narrative pattern and a continuing sense of rupture that pervades the text. The reader finds herself in diaspora, confused in time and space, surrounded by the deep waters of the *kala pani*. The structure of the novel relocates her in the diaspora *gefühlswelt* of living in different places but feeling at home in none of them, not at ease with the self. Instead of a migration story told from childhood to adult age, narrated stringently and chronolog-

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247  Caroni is one county in Trinidad, located in the west of the island, and home to the largest sugar company, Caroni Ltd.

ical, which could have followed Kello's revelation of his deathly sickness as the *initiating moment*, the novel displays a labyrinth of thoughts, flashbacks, past and present incidents. This is a deliberate act of story-telling strategically applied to cause confusion, bewilderment, and insecurity.

The narrative movement of a back-and-forth is anticipated most obviously in the title of Espinet's novel by the swinging bridge. The structure makes sense with regard to the protagonist's need to look back, to confront, and ultimately accept the past as part of her being in and relating to the world. Typical for the woman-narrated coming-of-age novel, the narration and development are non-linear, refusing to create a static binary between past and present, a here and now versus a there and then. Rather, *The Swinging Bridge* suggests a dynamic interplay, swings between different spaces and times, creating a continuum in which individuation is possible. For this reason, the novel, despite the fragmentary revelations, offers narrative closure and a completed subject formation. While the story unfolds, the reader accompanies Mona and her "nowarian self" (152) on her journey of self-discovery, and will eventually be able to put together the jigsaw pieces that are buried in the recesses of Mona's mind. After reconciling with her past and "unraveling a too tightly wound cocoon" (304), Mona feels completely at home in Montreal without the acute desire to live anywhere else. "I am part of this city I live in, and right now I want no other place" (305). In fusing the Caribbean body, lived reality, and belonging with the urban surroundings of Montreal, the narrative is rooted in Canada and thus constitutes a diasporic coming-of-age poetics.

The fragmentary character of the novel is meant to indicate diaspora experience and existence. It furthermore accounts for individual dealings with traumatizing experiences.[248] Boyce Davies talks about a literary strategy of healing when she refers to narrative acts of remembering through retrospective narration that include and emphasize disruption (cf. 1994: 17). The personal procession of the past and constant re-living of the trauma account for the uncontrollable and involuntary appearance of memory scraps. Mona's seemingly random statements of facts are in fact a therapeutic way to deal subjectively with her history and the things that happened to shape her identity. *The Swinging Bridge* illustrates a nation's history of trauma caused by colonial oppression and debilitating inter-ethnic conflicts fostered by an anti-colonial, Creole nationalism. Moreover, the novel provides a space to come to terms collectively with the traumata of diasporic dislocations and unbelonging which affects even the youngest generation of migrant families. Mona's younger sister Babs, for

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248 The motives of trauma and survival, along with a more detailed discussion of trauma theories, are central to my analysis of the following two novels.

instance, was still too young when she left the Caribbean to think of Trinidad as her home, but does not fit into Canadian society completely either: "I too feel a sense of not being grounded anywhere. I can't remember a time when I belonged some place, when I was not an outsider" (229-30). This may speak to the diaspora community as a whole.

The issues of belonging and identification – as central aspects of the genre itself – with regard both to gender and ethnicity are further problematized in Espinet's novel. Religion and Hinduism are taken as reference points for diaspora identity construction and the position of the individual within society. The ancient Indian epic *Ramayana*[249] the novel alludes to several times fulfils various purposes. The sacred text alludes to and materializes cultural, religious specificities that Indian indentured laborers brought with them and which are part of Trinidadian culture and a larger diaspora experience. It contrasts Hindu and Christian gender expectations and how both inform young Indian-Caribbean adult women's subject formation. It constitutes an authoritative script on virtue and morality: "In the world of the *Ramayana*, perfect virtue is rewarded, good overcomes evil and light triumphs over darkness" (Khan 2013: 22). Sherry-Ann Singh provides an extensive study of Hinduism in twentieth century Trinidad and the meaning of *Ramayana* and its written version the *Ramcharitmanas* that serve as "religious writ and as social doctrine" (2012: 7). Regarding the socio-religious changes in the period from 1917, after indentureship was officially over, until 1990, she argues that, "operating on principles parallel to those of the *Ramayana* tradition on a global level, local variations both reflected and generated the transformation of thought, attitude and action in almost all spheres of life" (Singh 2012: 26). Mona recalls those nights, before she moved with her parents from the Trinidadian countryside to the city, when she woke up to the singing of a beggar woman, Baboonie,[250] who lives in a shack close by and is victim to the frequent abuses by the village men:

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249 The epic *Ramayana* tells about Prince Rama and his banishment from his father's kingdom. Being forced to live in a lonely forest, he proves his courage and masculinity by fighting demons and monsters. After fourteen years he is allowed to return from exile to be crowned king and reunited with his loving, obedient wife Sita, who in order to prove her faithfulness to Rama has to pass a purity test in a trial by fire. Arguably, this test is evoked by the punishment Mona has to endure when she kneels on gravel in the hot blazing sun.

250 A "babu (baboo)" or "babuman" is Creolese for an "old East-Indian man, usu[ally] bearded and poor [...] of unsightly appearance" (Allsopp 2003: 54). Like the *bogeyman* in Haiti, the term is also used to frighten children. Baboonie seems to be the female equivalent in Trinidadian usage. The Hindi "Baboo" is also a courtesy title in addressing a male person. In the novel, "Baboonie" is translated with "young girl" (114). The name also contains "baboon" lending the woman animalistic traits, which

> I listened to music and a story, till then unknown to me, coming through the wailing voice of an old beggar woman, crying through the rain, breaking up the classical words of the *Ramayana* with her own tale of exile and banishment, and in broken chords and unexpected riffs telling the story of a race. Of racial and tribal grief, of banishment, of the test of purity. (113)

The retelling of the *Ramayana*, which used to be done by a *pandit*, or priest, and its adaptation to the local Trinidadian context is, hence, a specific Caribbean form of women's agency. This female counter-narrative provides a space to express rage and suffering; to construct a community in which women may eventually be liberated: "Free in this land, free from stain / [...] Free, free again" (295). Mona's great-grandmother Gainder, too, "used to sing Ramayana [...] – not the real Ramayana you know. She used to sing the kind that village women would sing" (251). Baboonie, "a bundle of sticks and stones, whose bones remained unbroken" (112), was singing with a "strong voice" (114) fighting "off intruders upon her body" (113). Both women do not fit the normative perception of femininity. Singing and adapting the *Ramayana*, reinterpreting the holy scripts of ideal gender roles, conduct, honor, and strict distinction of good and evil, turns into a subversive, empowering strategy of resistance to men's enacted control over the female body to cope with and survive the inflicted pain. The divergence from the tale is necessary to fit the specific circumstances and women's lived experience during and after the indentureship period in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries.

Considering the original pedagogical purpose of the traditional *bildungsroman* with regard to, amongst others, normative gender roles, morality, and codes of behavior, Espinet's coming-of-age novel transgresses such a convention. Her protagonist resists stereotypical requirements of the obedient wife and loving mother; the novel itself does not offer a sub-plot of love and romance.[251] Mona defies 'traditional,' respectable perceptions of Hindu and Presbyterian womanhood associated with marriage and maternity, by embracing Creole identity refuses to conform to ethnic separationist policies, and qua her migrant status is not part of the mainstream in Canada either. As such, the novel constitutes a criticism of the genre itself and its literary depiction of conformity. The novel's attempt is to reconcile the various, sometimes contradictory or opposing elements that inform Trinidad's multiethnic society and, likewise, a Caribbean diaspora consciousness.

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is degrading and denies her humanity. However, since the ape figures prominently in Hinduism as well as in the *Ramayana* in the shape of the ape-like god Hanuman, Baboonie may be read as a female revision.

251  See Francis on the "antiromance" (2010: 4-7).

## 5.8  Concluding Remarks

*The Swinging Bridge* recounts a young woman's coming of age, the successful solving of her identity crisis, and the recovery of her great-grandmother's story, which is meant to be exemplary for the history of indentured women in the Caribbean. Espinet has composed a diasporic, feminist novel in which she (re)constructs a specific aspect of Caribbean diaspora history reading it against the grain by privileging Indo-Trinidadian subjectivity and focusing on the matrilineal history of indentureship. The protagonist, describing her diaspora identity as "nowarian," defies normative codes of Indo-Caribbean femininity and scripts of patriarchal family structures. This gendered version of the crossing of the *kala pani* is an attempt to deconstruct hegemonic discourses (relating to such diverse topics as gender relations, sexuality, ethnic identity, or historiography) that succeeds due to the strong narrative voice of Mona Singh as well as Espinet's meticulous research and account – albeit within the realms of the fictional – of the historical context. Espinet's critique is manifold: it is directed at the erasure of women from historical record, racial politics and creolization of Trinidad, patriarchy, the shaming of the adolescent female body, as well as the multicultural promise of Canada, migrant life, alienation, and racism. The issues she examines relate to questions of home and belonging, complexities of diaspora, and, eventually, its effects on a young girl and her self-perception. Espinet states that "[f]eminism – [...] meaning the empowerment of women on all fronts – is always part of my writing" (*Espinet/Savory 1995:* 111-112). In this statement, and arguably so, we find a reference to a politically engaged writing. She, like many other Caribbean women writers, aims to "carve safe spaces of self-affirmation for [herself] and [her] sisters" (Mehta 2004: 23). This notion of feminist solidarity translates into a textual healing of the body and the subject, meaning recognition, acceptance, and recovery, and a personal quest for identity via the genre of the coming-of-age novel.

Espinet's diaspora novel intertwines notions of home and away and merges the distinct locations of Trinidad and Canada into a transnational imaginary. Canada as home and diaspora location gains importance due to several factors: Toronto is the location where much of Mona's memories come back, Montreal is the city she returns to and makes her home eventually. (And if nothing else, Canada is also the adopted home country of the author from where she writes.) The bridge, shaky and pulled at, metaphorically connects Mona's childhood, adolescence, and adulthood. It connects the "two Trinidads" – the Afro- and Indo-Trinidadian communities, as well as myriad diaspora experiences and

locations. The crossing of that bridge and connecting its ends, is for Mona "a process that takes her back in order to move forward" (Donnell 2006: 170), thus symbolizes recovery and a necessary reconciliation.

Taking into consideration that Indo-Caribbean women's bodies, sexuality, and morality have been locked in stereotypes which inscribe them "as Hindu, as passive, as heterosexual, as conservative, as submissive, as guardian of Indian culture" (Hosein/Outar 2012: 1), Espinet's is an attempt to deconstruct this dominant cultural discourse in the Caribbean and Canada alike. Her novel and the paradigm of the *kala pani* continuum is part of the increasing body of diasporic literature and theory that "disrupt and dislocate existing hegemonic discourses: they rock the boat and swing the bridge of established truths" (Kuortti 2008: 311). The novel challenges established social categories of ethnicity, creolization, gender, citizenship, and belonging. It is a cultural artifact that makes visible Indian women's agency within the history of indentureship but also uncovers patriarchal narratives of nationhood and exclusion. Ramabai Espinet's literary and scholarly work thus adds a distinct Trinidadian voice for the cultural identification and survival of the Indo-Caribbean community in Canada.