

Anthurium: A Caribbean Studies Journal

Volume 7

Issue 1 *The Asian Experience in the Caribbean: A
Special Double Issue*

Article 15

April 2010

Interrogating “Indianness”: Identity and Diasporic Consciousness Among Twice Migrants

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Recommended Citation

Rahemtullah, Omme-Salma (2010) "Interrogating “Indianness”: Identity and Diasporic Consciousness Among Twice Migrants," *Anthurium: A Caribbean Studies Journal*: Vol. 7 : Iss. 1 , Article 15.
Available at: <http://scholarlyrepository.miami.edu/anthurium/vol7/iss1/15>

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What’s in a Name?: Contesting “South Asian”¹

The impetus for this study comes from the need to understand differential migration patterns and settlement experiences across the various national and cultural groups commonly homogenized under the label “South Asian”² in Canada. The paper’s main argument is fuelled by the insistence that the ways in which members of immigrant communities, especially twice migrants, who are the focus of this paper, negotiate national identity and cultural citizenship upon arriving in Canada are greatly influenced by the relations they maintain with and where they identify as “homeland.” Furthermore, insisting on a “politics of recognition” — to borrow Charles Taylor’s term — means that there will be less likelihood that the lives and realities of various “South Asian” peoples will be misrecognized, reduced, and distorted. I suggest that insisting on recognizing differences and distinctions across “South Asian” communities allows for a more nuanced approach to thinking through the complexities of affiliation and self-identification in diasporic spaces.

In contemporary Canada, the term “South Asian” is commonly used to refer to people — as well as their Canadian-born children — who emigrated from and belong to one of the ethno-cultural groups originating in the geo-political region of the world where countries such as India, Pakistan, Bangladesh, Bhutan, Nepal, and Sri Lanka are located. The fact that some academic departments specializing in studies of the region include Afghanistan, Myanmar, and Tibet as part of South Asia and the UN goes as far as to include Iran, is one of the first indications of how amorphous a designation the label is. “South Asian” is also used as an identifying term for communities with historical and ancestral links to this region of the world, who have long since settled outside the region in other places such as the Caribbean and Africa. It is important, however, to note that “South Asian” has very little, if any, currency within such communities, indicating not only that the term gains significance in places and in circumstances where it is necessary to contain and control difference (a difference produced through being identified as being “other” to something else) but also that it is a racialized term, one that is differentiated and identified through certain visible descriptors.

In the Canadian context, the term “South Asian” does not account for clear dissimilarities in language, religion, national, and ethnic origins, in large part because the politics of difference (however benignly understood) that characterizes multiculturalism in Canada requires that specific histories and experiences be erased in an attempt to produce an easily knowable difference. Arun Mukherjee tells us that, “‘South Asian’ is a bureaucratic ... umbrella term [used] to produce a unitary community that is not actually there” (29). Such productions of unitary identity revolve around simultaneously universalizing and essentializing constructions of “Indianness” signified in broadly defining markers such as saris and bindis, mendhi body art, and the very public celebration of festivals. Such simplifications allow for “South Asians” to be knowable and commodifiable within and to mainstream Canadian culture. That some members of communities so designated in Canada have uncritically adopted the term to self-reference and

self-identify, indicates just how powerful and central the label has become in maintaining unequal relations of power.

Is There a Homeland?: Old and New “Indian” Diasporas

The “homogenising tropes” of the term “South Asian” leads to essentialist notions and singular conceptions of “homeland.” Immigrants are attracted to, and come to Canada because the country is actively promoted as a multicultural nation in which they will be allowed to retain many of their customs and traditions, but find upon arrival that they are expected to embrace a constructed South Asian identity that stems from fixed ideas in mainstream discourse about “Indianness.” Benedict Anderson’s argument that communities are imagined into being through complex processes of identification and affiliation rather than existing *a priori* illuminates this tendency to fix and unify (6). As it is, where twice migrants identify as “home/land” and how they see themselves in relation to India and the “Indianness” constructed around “South Asian” Diasporas in the West begs further critical analysis. In this paper, twice migrants refers to communities whose members share a history of migration that did not bring them directly from the Indian sub-continent to Canada, but through the Caribbean.

Indo-Caribbean communities in Canada are twice removed from India, and hence, their relationship to India as a place and as an imagined community is complex. An important question, then, is whether or not the specter of India haunts and has any impact on their sense of who they are, and whether they embrace or reject India and “Indianness” as the main signifier of their self and community. I argue that, for twice migrants, India exists only as an ill-defined memory and is not actively incorporated in the ways in which they currently imagine themselves. This is in large part because the majority of such individuals have no direct connection to or experience of India. Their relationships to India exist mainly through oral history, in the legacies of indentureship, and through recreations of India in the Caribbean.³

In an effort to address the issues raised above, this paper seeks to explore the ways in which twice migrant groups from the Caribbean imagine themselves in Canada. Cultural productions, such as novels, are an often neglected, but yet are highly insightful sources, as literature reflects a particular construction of self (Nair 26), and thus emphasizes the subjectivity within the diasporic experience. The following analysis of *The Swinging Bridge* seeks to demonstrate how twice migrants of “South Asian” ancestry disrupt narrow definitions of Diaspora, specifically in its construction, memory, relationship, and desire for the ‘homeland.’

William Safran’s seminal definition of Diasporas in the inaugural issue of the journal *Diaspora* has in some regards set the standard for the understanding and definition of the term “Diaspora.” Safran argues that the model of diasporic community is the Jewish Diaspora and, on this basis, establishes the criteria by which “expatriate minority communities” (83) constitute a Diaspora. These are:

1) ... they have been dispersed from a specific original ‘centre’ ... 2) they retain a collective memory, vision, or myth about their original homeland ... 3) they believe that they are not—and perhaps cannot be—fully accepted by their host society ... 4) they regard their ancestral homeland as their true, ideal home and as the place to which they or their descendants would (or should) eventually return ... 5) ... they should, collectively, be committed to the maintenance or restoration of their original homeland ... 6) they continue to relate, personally or vicariously, to that homeland in one way or another ... (83-84)

Safran’s definition is problematic in relation to the “South Asian” Diaspora, especially twice migrants.

Many alternatives to Safran’s understanding of Diaspora have been published since then, among them, Paul Gilroy’s *The Black Atlantic*. The model of Diaspora that Gilroy develops (as do others such as Avtar Brah and Stuart Hall) is one that opposes the idea of Diasporas necessarily having a center from which a group or community has dispersed, or a communal source of origin, a model that privileges the metaphor of “roots” (190). Rather, Gilroy’s model of Diaspora privileges a hybrid subjectivity, where the Diaspora is no longer unitary, but based on movements, interconnections, and mixed references. The metaphor for this conception of Diaspora would then be that of “routes,” associated with “‘traveling cultures’ that break with the essentialism of the anthropological tradition, showing themselves to be diverse and unlocalized” (Chivallon 360). This theoretical approach is useful when analyzing twice migrancy in that a fixed homeland, or a conception of “there,” is not evident when a twice migrant subject could look to both India and the Caribbean, or even Canada in the search of “home.” In a more generalized reading, hybrid diasporic subjectivity stresses the diverse possibilities of location, space, and time. James Clifford argues that diasporic discourses articulate notions of “roots” and “routes” that invoke discussions of transnationality and movement, but also creates a space for discussions that define the local, a distinctive community that has come out of historical contexts of displacement (309). Thus, the emphasis in discussion should be as much about “here” as about “there” when defining one’s place or identity within diasporic subjectivity.

In addressing these issues, I want to explore the ways in which twice migrant groups from the Caribbean imagine themselves in Canada. Cultural productions, such as novels, are insightful sources, since literature reflects a particular construction of self (Nair 26) and emphasizes subjectivity within the diasporic experience. Thus, the experience of the characters in Ramabai Espinet’s *The Swinging Bridge* becomes an important space of analysis in an exploration of homeland and belonging. My analysis of *The Swinging Bridge* seeks to demonstrate how twice migrants of “South Asian” ancestry disrupt narrow definitions of Diaspora, specifically in its construction of memory, relationship, and desire for the “homeland.”

Imagining “Home” and “Homeland”

In any discussion of Diaspora, homeland and the Diaspora’s connection to it is an important point of reference. The notion of Diaspora to a certain extent implies homeland as a point of departure, be it as an imagined construction or an actual national location. With Safran’s definition of Diaspora presented above, the homeland is somewhere fixed and tangible, a center from where a community has dispersed, and to which it eventually wishes to return. This is a problematic assertion because “homelands” are imagined by the Diaspora in ways that are very different from the people in the homeland themselves; in the Diaspora, India is recreated and symbolized in objects and rituals. For example, the *Ramayana* is recreated in Fiji and the Caribbean as the Hindu religious text, when Hinduism has no one book (Mishra “Diasporic Imaginary” 432). Because “homeland” is imagined, it then has the ability to change and be manipulated into a creation and location that satisfies the diasporic subject. bell hooks has written on how the idea of home changes with experiences such as slavery, indenture, migration, and immigration:

at times, home is nowhere. At times, one knows only extreme estrangement and alienation. Then home is no longer just one place. It is locations. Home is that place which enables and promotes varied and everchanging perspectives, a place where one discovers new ways of seeing reality, frontiers of difference. (148)

This creation of an imagined “homeland” is linked to a moment of trauma that represents having been wrenched from one’s motherland. In the case of Indo-Caribbean twice migrants, these moments of trauma can be linked to the crossing of the *kala pani*⁴ during the indentureship period. In the words of Mishra, “the ‘real’ nature of the disruption is, however, not the point at issue here; what is clear is that the moment of ‘rupture’ is transformed into a trauma around an absence that, because it cannot be fully symbolized, becomes part of the fantasy itself” (“The Literature” 16). India then becomes the loss of twice migrants, and thus is recreated and imagined in the various diasporic locations its migrants find themselves in (Ghosh 77), in this case, the Caribbean and Canada.

Another aspect of the Safran definition of Diaspora that this paper seeks to question is that of return. Mishra discusses the idea of the “return to the homeland” within an analysis of the “ideal” Jewish Diaspora to show that this return even in the Jewish case is but a myth (“New Lamps” 71). He states that Jews looked upon ethnic enclaves that they had created in the Diaspora as their homelands rather than to the Israel of the Torah. The return to the homeland of Israel was a creation of political myth rather than a real return, which has been presented as a basic characteristic of Diaspora. In this sense then there is no return for Caribbean twice migrants. Going back to India is not a possibility, but always remains a desire. There is always the need to look back, but since it is not possible, it fuels imagined creations of the “homeland.” This point is well put by Salman Rushdie who argues that:

It may be that writers in my position, exiles or emigrants of expatriates, are haunted by some sense of loss, some urge to reclaim, to look back, even at the risk of being mutated into pillars of salt. But if we do look back, we must also do so in the knowledge — which gives rise to profound uncertainties — that our physical alienation from India almost inevitably means that we will not be capable of reclaiming precisely the thing that was lost; that we will, in short, create fictions, not actual cities or villages, but invisible ones, imaginary homelands, Indias of the mind. (10)

In many of the novels of V.S. Naipaul, this tension between remembering India but not being able to return is evident. In *A House for Mr. Biswas*, Naipaul expresses the desires of older Indo-Caribbeans to return to India, though when they are presented with the possibility of repatriation they hesitate at the opportunity (Ramraj 81). This may be, as Roy Heath has suggested in his novel *The Shadow Bride*, that the language of India has been lost in the Diaspora and life has started anew: children have been born of the “new” land and thus return is but an elusive attraction (Birbalsingh 28). Shalini Puri would suggest that for Indians in the Caribbean, return had been written into the contracts of indenture, and thus indentured labourers and their descendants will always harbor a desire to return, though it will never be fulfilled (171).

This desire for home but not necessarily a physical return is taken up by Avtar Brah, who describes this tension as a “homing desire.” This homing desire does not necessarily inscribe a return to home, but nonetheless does not dismiss home and India remains an important element of diasporic subjectivity. According to Mishra, “For some, such as the South Asian groups in Trinidad, cultural identification with the Asian subcontinent might be by far the most important element” (193); though there is not a desire to return to South Asia.

Indian/Caribbean/Canadian?: Identity and Home/land in Ramabai Espinet’s *The Swinging Bridge*

Ramabai Espinet is a writer, a professor, a poet, a dramatist, and most recently a novelist, with the release of her debut novel, *The Swinging Bridge* in 2003. Espinet was born into an Indian family in Trinidad and migrated to Canada over twenty-five years ago. Espinet’s life in Canada mirrors many of the issues that the protagonist in her novel faces, issue of Caribbean culture, community relations, writing, activism and the search for lost histories. She describes this engagement as a “complicated discourse, marked by conflicted points of view, denial and irresolution” (*P.S. Edition 2*).

The Swinging Bridge tells the story of Mona Singh and her family, following the family’s generations through their histories of migrations from India to Trinidad to Canada. Mona lives in Montreal and when her older brother Kello becomes terminally ill, her family — father Da-Da, mother Muddie and sister Babs — come together to comfort him in his last days. Kello’s dying

request is that Mona return to Trinidad and buy back their grandfather's land. Mona is reluctant to make the trip, although when she does she engages in a discovery of her great-grandmother Gainer's indentured migration story from India to Trinidad, and also Gainer's lost songs, composed to ease the pain of indentureship. Immersed in this discovery, Mona begins to explore her own identity and belonging to the Caribbean, Canada and India simultaneously: "I was an Indian, an Indian from the Caribbean, an Indian long out of India, for generations now" (188)⁵

Mona muses on this thought late one night while in New York, as she lies in bed with Bree, her lover from her teenage years in Trinidad whom she meets again years later while on vacation in the United States. Although this seems to be but a passing thought, it is the central question in the following analysis of *The Swinging Bridge*. Making sense of her Indian identity, and the hold that her Indian past has on her, mediates the journey of discovery that Mona undertakes throughout the novel. This opens up the question of her identification as a "South Asian" in Canada, which she rejects in favor of her Caribbean connection. It may seem contradictory that Mona negotiates her "Indianness" within the Caribbean and also defines the Caribbean as Indian and African, but this struggle is one that is unique to the twice migrant experience. Furthermore, discussions of "homeland" and the myth of return support the idea that India is part of Mona's construction of the Caribbean and thus a rejection of a "South Asian" identity in Canada.

Resisting a "South Asian" Identity

The racial basis for the construction of "South Asian" is disrupted by Mona's confidence in her Caribbean and Trinidadian identities. Even though Mona is still actively negotiating her links to India through the stories and history of her great-grandmother Gainer, she is not interested in recovering some essential "Indian" part of herself. Rather, her purpose is to understand how her Indian ancestry has helped shape her Caribbean/Trinidadian identity.

Falling outside and resisting "South Asian" identity is very subtle in the novel, and often goes unnoticed. For example, Mona reflects on how her father's keen sense of style, surely influenced by Creole and Western cultures from Trinidad, goes unnoticed in Canada. Da-Da becomes "an elderly South Asian man ... that's all this country can ever make of him" (79). It is apparent then that Da-Da is seen strictly as South Asian in Canada. The language here becomes an important point of analysis; when speaking of their own identities and experiences "Indian" is used as a signifier, but when describing the perception of mainstream Canada, "South Asian" is utilized. Thus, not only does Da-Da's style go unnoticed, but so does his family's history and struggles of migration and experience in India, Trinidad, and Canada.

As a response to the homogenizing categorization of Mona and her family by mainstream Canada, there are strong points of resistance exercised by the characters. The way in which Da-Da and Uncle Tristram consciously switch between their "Trini" Creole and "the Queen's

English" asserts their connection and belonging to a specific history in the Caribbean and solidifies their Indian presence in the creolization of Trinidad. The conscious decision in choosing between these different forms of English depending on the environment and situation in which they find themselves allows for a certain level of self-definition in the Canadian landscape.

Redefining "Homeland": The Crossing of the Kala Pani

Part of Mona's resistance to an essentializing identity, which takes the form of "South Asianness" in Canada, is Mona's negotiation of her "homeland." Mona's great-grandmother Gainder's crossing of the kala pani in *The Swinging Bridge* is the moment of trauma and loss that is associated with the homeland of India being imagined and recreated in the Diaspora. The crossing of the kala pani by Gainder as an indentured laborer brings much sorrow and pain and this is demonstrated in the novel by the loss of Gainder's love Jeevan, who is left behind on "The Rock," an island in the South Atlantic en route to Trinidad. Jeevan can be seen as an analogous to India, as the homeland that is left behind, abandoned but still remembered in Gainder's songs. This corresponds to Mishra's observation that imaginary "homelands" are constructed from the space of distance to compensate for a loss occasioned by an unspeakable trauma ("Diasporic Imaginary" 423).

The crossing of the kala pani also allowed for the recreating of identities and families, thus further severing their connection to India, and cementing their belonging to Trinidad. The construction of *jahaji* brotherhoods on the ships is symbolic of the letting go of family in India in order to create new bonds of kin in Trinidad. The shedding of caste and the reinvention of mostly casteless Hindu societies in Trinidad is also symbolic of how India has been reinvented in Trinidad.

The title of the story also underlines the trauma of the crossing of the kala pani. "The Swinging Bridge" may refer to the uncertainty of the terrain on which Mona finds herself once she is forced to reflect upon the meanings of her past and present life. It may serve as a metaphor for the "indeterminate timelines in which the past mediates a future-inspired present in the form of multiple diasporic dislocations and exilic relocations" (25). I read the title as the gangplank bridge on the *Artist*, the ship that carried Gainder and other indentured workers like her to Trinidad: "The gangplank clacks and swings precariously as the women scramble up onto the deck ... Finally, once they are all on board ... the rickety bridge swings up and this ship is on its way" (3-4). The swinging up of the bridge symbolizes a final departure from India, though it is occasionally allowed to swing back down in memory, as with Mona's search for Gainder's past.

India Imagined and the Myth of Return

A return to India in the lives of indentured people and their descendants can only be a mythical one that is inscribed in the contracts of indentureship. But, for the most part, it is a return that is never realized (Puri 171). This mythical return is especially distinguishable between the old and new Indian Diasporas when they come together in Canada, where return in a physical sense is possible and conceivable for direct migrants (Bhachu 164). For twice migrants the link to India has been destroyed by the crossing of the *kala pani*. The impossibility of return is exemplified in *The Swinging Bridge* when Mona's Uncle Peter attempts to reunite with their long lost family in India. He is disappointed to find that there is no excitement of reunification among his long lost cousins. There is "no invitation to return ... nor did they ask to see his children. They were satisfied. The circle has been closed" (91). This circle does not represent the traditional understanding of Diaspora (as prescribed by Safran, for example) where there is movement between two spaces and the desire and possibility of return (Mehta 31). Rather, this circle represents a closing, a point of finality that "maintains the sanctity of Indian history without the 'contaminating' stains of indenture" (31). Thus the "return" can never be to India, and can only remain in the imagination of its migrants.

The myth of return to India is also written into the formal aesthetic of the novel. When the stories of Gainder and her journey from India are told, they are written in italics, indicating their belonging to the novel, but also the ambiguity of this belonging to Mona's identity. The italics represent India as an ancestral linkage, but not necessarily that of identity, and surely not within the possibility of return. It also indicates that the life Gainder creates on the island of Trinidad is not Indian per se, but rather the coming together of India and Africa to create something that is specific to the island of Trinidad.

Canada can also be seen as the return in the journey of leaving India. The return need not be to India but to Canada, where the initial quest for a better life continues (Espinet "Unpublished"). When Mona is leaving Trinidad after her trip to recover her family's land and also her family's history, she leaves "with a mixture of sadness and excitement. In a strange way, I felt I was leaving home for the first time" (304). After her discovery of Gainder and the affirmation of her history within the Trinidadian narrative, Mona does not feel the need to remain in Trinidad, but finds that Montreal is where she needs to be: "I am part of this city I live in, and right now I want no other place. Like any other migrant navigating new terrain, I bring my own beat to the land around me" (305). Mona thus returns to Canada not with a stronger understanding and recognition of her "Indianness," but rather with a confirmation of her "Caribbeanness," an identity that is created in the Caribbean out of Indian and African "routes." As the writing of Cyril Dabydeen, another Indo-Caribbean writer living in Canada, inscribes the possibilities of multiple homes, multiple identities, and multiple possibilities for belonging (Simpson 104), so does *The Swinging Bridge*. Canada, Trinidad, and India become Mona's return and her sense of identity and home, where home "is no longer just one place" (hooks 148).

Conclusion

What this paper has tried to achieve is twofold: first, it has been preoccupied with examining the term “South Asian” which, as a simplifying category, has over the past two decades increasingly gained widespread usage in Canada to homogenize people of diverse national, ethno-linguistic, religious, and cultural backgrounds who have different migration and settlement experiences. Although this homogenization creates a seemingly unified racial/ethnic group that is easily identifiable in bureaucratic contexts, it is, as has been demonstrated, very problematic as it erases various historical specificities and experiences which have been homogenized under the label “South Asian.” Using the experiences of twice migrants from the Caribbean, I have demonstrated that the “South Asian” community in Canada is heterogeneous and fragmented, and made up of diverse peoples of different histories and experiences of migration and settlement.

Second, by examining a cultural production, Espinet’s *The Swinging Bridge*, which deals with the experiences of twice migrants in Canada, the notion of “homeland” is questioned. Immigrants coming to Canada are essentialized and made to construct their identity based on a fixed “home/land.” As shown in this paper, twice migrants not only disrupt the idea of a homogeneous “South Asian” community, they also destabilise the entire idea of a fixed “homeland” on which such problematic constructs as “South Asian” are necessarily based. The experiences of Indian migration to the Caribbean and then to Canada poses very serious challenges to the problematic notions of identity, belonging and imaginations of “homeland,” and contest traditional understandings of Diaspora.

The Swinging Bridge tells the story of Mona Singh and her matrilineal ancestry in India, Trinidad, and Canada. Mona struggles with a seemingly contradictory tension of belonging, where she explores the significance of being “Indian” in Trinidad, but then also affirms the construction of Trinidad from the routes of India and Africa. This tension is further complicated by the way Mona negotiates her belonging in Canada. Mona’s familial history and experiences lead her to resist the classification of “South Asian” in Canada. When she claims Canada as home, that sense of belonging is brought about by her strengthened understanding of her imagined India and douglarized Trinidad. The insights gained from this text, which has not received the academic attention it merits, fills an important gap in the literature on the South Asian migration, and opens up the field of twice migrant Diasporas to include literary critique. Moving the discussion on twice migrancy away from empirical and socio-demographic findings has allowed for the exploration of the unique identity construction of twice migrant subjects.

Notes

¹I am indebted to Professor Hyacinth Simpson for her suggestions in structuring this analysis.

²Inverted commas are used around the phrase South Asian throughout the paper to distinguish it from its common use as an official geopolitical term, and to insist on its discursive construction in the Canadian context.

³There is scholarly precedent for researching the impact double migration has on the nature of migration and the settlement process within Diasporas in the West, and this research has generally focused on the negotiation of Indian identity by second-generation Indo-Caribbeans in Canada (Warikoo; Cheddie; Singh). Though, significantly lacking from the literature is any discussion on twice migrant resistance to the homogenization of the 'South Asian' Diaspora or the extent to which they identify with and attempt to make connections with India.

⁴Kala Pani is literally a Hindi word for "Black Water" and figuratively represents the waters of the Indian and Atlantic Oceans, the route of Indian indentured labourers from India to the Caribbean.

⁵Numbers in parenthesis in this section refer to page numbers in *The Swinging Bridge*.

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