

Anthurium: A Caribbean Studies Journal

Volume 7

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

Article 27

April 2010

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Recommended Citation

Ramlagan, Michelle (2010) "Mehta, Brinda. *Diasporic (Dis)locations: Indo-Caribbean Women Writers Negotiate the Kala Pani.*," *Anthurium: A Caribbean Studies Journal*: Vol. 7 : Iss. 1 , Article 27.
Available at: <http://scholarlyrepository.miami.edu/anthurium/vol7/iss1/27>

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Brinda Mehta, *Diasporic (Dis)locations: Indo-Caribbean Women Writers Negotiate the Kala Pani*.

Jamaica: The University of the West Indies Press, 2004, 267 pp.

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Diasporic (Dis)locations: Indo-Caribbean Women Writers Negotiate the Kala Pani, though published several years ago, remains an invaluable contribution to an emerging body of scholarship that focuses on the under-represented community of Indo-Caribbean women. Brinda Mehta writes that there exists, “a serious pedagogical and scholarly flaw” in Caribbean studies, in the form of “a wide theoretical and literary gap in the analysis of Indian constructions of female identity in Guyana and Trinidad and its determining impact on issues of race, class, gender and nationhood” (3). In *Diasporic (Dis)locations* Mehta posits *kala pani* discourse as an alternative analytic framework, or a way of thinking about Indo-Caribbean women writers and their work in order to reposition this marginalized community and its body of concerns as central to questions of national development.

Mehta asks questions about the ways in which “cultural traditions and female modes of opposition to patriarchal control were transplanted from India and rearticulated in the Indo-Caribbean Diaspora,” in an effort to explore, “whether the idea of cultural continuity is, in fact, a postcolonial reality or a myth” (4). Mehta interrogates the extent to which women of the Indian diaspora as well as their diasporic counterparts share the mythologies and histories of women’s migration. A major interest lies in questioning the extent to which migration led to successful renegotiation of patriarchal and imperial conceptions of power. Mehta performs this analysis through a detailed exploration of the ways that Indian women have articulated the necessary process of (re)adjustment within the community and home following their primary displacements from ancestral lands.

Mehta begins *Diasporic (Dis)Locations* with a meticulous survey of the situation of Indo-Caribbean women in terms of their discursive representation and participation, as well as an intellectual cartography of previous scholarship in this area. She argues that earlier representations of Indo-Caribbean women in literature offer views of Indo-Caribbean women through masculinist and Afro-centered prisms that effect “a double literary displacement,” labeling Indo-Caribbean women as inferior and other as a result of both their gender and ethnicity. This mantle has been challenged by scholars such as Bridget Brereton, Ramabai Espinet, Patricia Mohammed, Rhoda Reddock, and Verene Shepherd, whose scholarship and literary contributions constitute a major intervention in social and cultural studies. While resulting theoretical frames, such as dougla poetics and creolization, have created an interstitial space that contests the dominant Afrocentric frame, they have perpetuated a concept of race-based Caribbean identity. Thus, by incorporating postcolonial and transnational feminist thought to dislodge previous models of identity based on race, *kala pani* discourse offers a feminist frame

for forming alliances that are transnational and political in nature instead of biological and ethnic. This critical framework is therefore suitable to the experience of members of other minority populations in the Caribbean such as the Chinese and Lebanese.

While the term *kala pani* refers to the taboo crossing of large expanses of water — in this case the Atlantic Ocean to come to the Caribbean — Mehta recasts this crossing as a positive and empowering move. According to the Hindu system of belief, crossing these large bodies of water meant “contamination and cultural defilement” (5), due to the ways in which such crossings disrupted caste, class, and tradition. Mehta rereads this transgressive crossing of boundaries as a journey that empowers women and allows for “creative (self-)assertions in literary production” (4), both oral and written. This dislocation allowed for a reversal of sorts in cultural roles, thereby opening ways of agency to disenfranchised groups, especially women. In this way, *kala pani* becomes a means of recasting the move from India to the Caribbean as an opportunity to challenge and reformulate gendered identity. It also dislodges the identity of the Indian woman as primarily defined by cultural values and confined to the domestic sphere. In so doing, this discourse challenges stereotypical and one-dimensional representations of Indo-Caribbean women, introducing the idea of plurality or multiplicity of experience. *Kala pani* crossings make visible the work of women in the domestic spheres that would otherwise remain invisible and unaccounted for and also allow for uncovering a body of literature that is both oral and discursive and historically silenced.

Mehta sketches the larger framework of Caribbean citizenship within which Indo-Caribbean female subjectivity and femininity is inscribed. She does this by addressing the ways in which women have been silenced. These include the omission of women’s history by masculinist narratives from the Caribbean and the representation of Indo-Caribbean women as subordinate when representation does occur. To rectify this omission, Mehta identifies the common history of geographical and cultural displacement, forced migration and historical silencing shared by both Indo- and Afro-Caribbean women. She engages with significant work that has already been done by such scholars as Rhoda Reddock towards development of a hybrid consciousness that allows for interracial collaboration. Models of hybridity, such as dougla poetics, allow for the development of hybridized consciousness in literary production. This frame has allowed writers, who are Indo-Caribbean or offer models of Indo-Caribbean characters to do so through reading Caribbean identity as a space of interracial collaboration. Notwithstanding these frames, Mehta notes that in spite of careful documentation and visibility of Indo-Caribbean feminist experience that such work grants, the experience of Indian women and other ethnic groupings is always filtered through the lens of an Afro-centered experience of Caribbean authenticity. Further complicating this is the tendency of the Afro-Caribbean feminist tradition to understand women’s liberation in terms of the ability to work outside the home. Unfortunately, representations of Indo-Caribbean women’s contributions, which often take place within the home, reproduce Indo-Caribbean women as docile contributors within the domestic sphere.

Mehta challenges us to go beyond this pattern of literary representation by exploring the spaces that Indo-Caribbean women have had to negotiate and to the home space. First, she explores the role that Indo-Caribbean women played in the sugar cane industry through such historical figures as Phoolbasie, who showed their tenacity and strength. She also offers against the grain readings of Merle Hodge's *For the Life of Laetitia* and Narmala Shewcharan's *Tomorrow is Another Day*. Hodge's protagonist succeeds with the help of an Indo-Caribbean character, making the latter an active contributor to a douglarized poetics. Shewcharan's characters use their interracial connections to generate and control their own lines of economic production, thereby ensuring their survival. Thus, the work of writers such as Hodge and Shewcharan reclaim a silenced history of collaboration between Indo- and Afro-Caribbean feminists and give voice to otherwise unvoiced contributions.

Mehta further develops the role that the home space plays in "Creativity, Identity and Culinary Agency," where she continues to negotiate gendered identity by exploring the way in which the language of cooking functions as a script that both maintains traditions associated with India and also adapts to the specifics of the Caribbean. As *kala pani* survivors, spices become markers of history by fostering a "culinary belongingness" through the "oral transmission of culture" (107). Spices allow an otherwise uprooted and displaced community to feel at home in a foreign space. The kitchen is a space, which facilitates control of their circumstances. Treatment of food is registered an indigenous form of activism whereby women negotiate change and identity.

Mehta explores Lakshmi Persaud's *Sastra* and *Butterfly in the Wind* and Ramabai Espinet's "Indian Cuisine" as offering two different models of food discourse and female Indian identity. For Persaud's heroines, food becomes a vehicle for maintaining the purity of the Hindu community. While they are somewhat skeptical about mixing or creolizing their spices, which would represent a communal identity, they also realize that spices and food allow for sharing. Espinet's characters are ambivalent when it comes to the possibility of intermingling cultures; however, they ultimately realize that culinary experiments are tools that enable communication.

In "Orality, Indo-Caribbean Feminism and *Aji* Culture," Mehta continues to map a redefinition of spaces by challenging the Hindu segregation of space in order to define female-empowered spaces. The division of space in the Diaspora into public and private spheres and the ensuing confinement of women to the private home sphere has rendered the home an ambiguous space for women, where they are in many ways empowered by the control that they exert within it, but ultimately they are kept from controlling it. Mehta therefore looks at works in which women resist confinement at home and redefine the home space as a place for historical and cultural production. The house/yard becomes the space of this production. Female activity here fosters community among women through the sharing of stories. It also reconstructs the past through the oral transmission of stories to include women's histories and to offer a more positive version of these stories. Mehta refers to this process as "aji culture," named for the strong female matriarchal figure in Hindu culture.

Mehta uses Persaud's *Sastra* and *Butterfly in the Wind* as well as Jan Shinebourne's *The Last Plantation* and Narmala Shewcharan's *Tomorrow is Another Day* to continue this exploration of space. Mehta reiterates that space in the Indian household is frequently divided along gender dichotomies, and for women the home is a conflicted place because she has paradoxically occupied it and been kept from owning it. Mehta draws on the work of Patricia Mohammed to explore how the yard becomes a space that women can (re)claim for the feminist activity of (re)claiming the nation. The yard space is representative of a more external and global exchange. It becomes a space for "woman talk" in which women can voice repressed history in the form of stories and conversations. Indo-Caribbean women become communal healers; mothering is therefore more than a biologically defined relationship. Among the literary figures that illustrate this model are Shewcharan's Kunti, a cane-field worker, who shows her solidarity through her labor in the canefields, and Jan Shinebourne's Nani, who elaborates a "visionary politics" through a unique knowledge of economics and the rules of production. Reconfiguring private and public space invites a reconfiguration of institutional space, and suggests a politics of change.

The experience of exile is one that has been claimed historically by male Caribbean writers. In "From Dispossession to Recuperation," Mehta turns her attention to exiled poets and writers and inserts women into this framework by articulating the crossing of the Atlantic as a movement into exile in order to challenge the status of male-voiced exilic consciousness as representative of a universal Indo-Caribbean experience. Women's creativity remains invisible within male-voiced and male-centered economic systems. Indo-Caribbean women writers such as Mahadai Das, Lelawattee Manoo-Rahming, Rajandaye Ramkissoo-Chen, and Ramabai Espinet are discussed in this chapter as writers for whom the experience of exile is articulated upon and through the dislocated female body. This dislocation is manifested through violence and madness. Physical violence against the body through such acts as rape and mutilation are read as attempts to control the history of exile that these bodies can tell. Women's madness becomes a rejection of conformist roles as well as a metaphor for women's cultural and intellectual exile. In these works, Mehta sees the body as transcending its infirmities when it claims the land of exile as its own.

While *kala pani* crossings kept certain sexual codes from being re-instated, Indian patriarchy is reinstated in a number of ways. The state and family continue to collude in this new space. In "Sexuality, Violence and the Female Body Erotic," Mehta reads Shani Mootoo's work as an indictment of the state's sanctioning of sexual violence against women in order to shore up the power of the male patriarchy. In *Cereus Blooms at Night*, Mala's eventual murder of her father in a moment of fury represents her rejection of the state's collusion with her father, who is also the patriarchal power in the home, to control her through sexual violence. In Mootoo's "A Garden of Her Own," the character is able to claim agency by inserting lesbian identity in hostile patriarchal space. Mehta also reads the *Matikor* space, the woman-centered space of sexual ribaldry before a Hindu wedding, as a space liberated from the male gaze where taboos and

silencings of female sexualities can be challenged. The challenge for Indo-Caribbean women writers remains the “claiming and sustaining decolonized sexual subjectivities through the rupturing of classically defined male and female sexuality” (226).

Diasporic (Dis)Locations represents an important contribution towards bridging the existing gap in relation to the analytical gap in relation to Indian constructions of female identity and the contributions of Indo-Caribbean women on questions of nationhood, race, gender, and class. This work is particularly useful for understanding representations of Hindu Indo-Caribbean women in Trinidad and Guyana.

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