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## Bridges Beyond the *Kala Pani*: Transgressing Boundaries in Mootoo and Espinet

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# Bridges Beyond the *Kala Pani*: Transgressing Boundaries in Mootoo and Espinet

## **Cover Page Acknowledgments**

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“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” (Espinet 304). The image of a swing bridge over raging waters serves to describe the experience of Indo-Trinidadians such as Mona Singh in Ramabai Espinet’s novel *The Swinging Bridge*, a character whose narrative invokes the *kala pani* or “dark waters” navigated by Indian subjects indentured and shipped to locations in the Caribbean in the nineteenth century. The fiction of authors such as Espinet and Shani Mootoo, as well as scholarship by Brinda Mehta, Shalini Puri, and others, has begun to excavate Indo-Caribbean experience as well as to chart paths from places such as Trinidad to locations in the North, especially Canada. Such work also underscores the multiplicity of subject positions in a country such as Trinidad, where the arrival of laborers from India complicated the dynamics between Europeans and those of African descent newly emancipated from enslavement. Relations constructed along lines of ethnicity and racialized identities resist strict rules originating in the countries of origin, such that potential bridges test the dangers of crossing boundaries. Scholarship on Mootoo’s *Cereus Blooms at Night* has also brought transgressive sexualities into sharper focus, complemented by Jacqui Alexander’s work on the Trinidadian legal system that reinforces heteronormativity and homophobia. In considering issues of belonging, texts by Espinet and Mootoo offer insights into both the enduring borders that shore up norms and the ways that non-conforming subjects may build bridges to more inclusive concepts of relation. I discuss Espinet’s *The Swinging Bridge* (2003) and Mootoo’s novel *Valmiki’s Daughter* (2008) through the lens of transgressive sexualities that seek spaces of belonging beyond the dark seas of normativity and taboo.<sup>1</sup> The central question is whether such rebellions, which aim to cross and blur identities of race and gender as well as sexuality, possess a transgressive potential. Must belonging necessitate a lack of freedom, or is it possible to love freely and follow one’s heart, while also enjoying full, safe citizenship?

## I.

For Indo-Caribbean subjects, the journey begins in the sea, crossing the *kala pani* or dark waters from India to locations such as Trinidad and Guyana. Though her discussion focuses on “a culturally specific woman-centered Indo-Caribbean experience” (4), Brinda Mehta explicates the *kala pani* in ways that apply also to the non-normative gender identities of Espinet’s and Mootoo’s male characters: “According to Hindu belief, the traversing of large expanses of water

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<sup>1</sup> On *Cereus*, see King; Garvey; Mehta 2004; Donnell 2011.

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” (5).<sup>2</sup> Espinet weaves this experience into the background of her narrative, in the story of a female ancestor who came to Trinidad by boat. The first step in this process was to cross a bridge both literal and figurative: “The gangplank clacks and swings precariously as the women scramble up onto the deck” (Espinete 3). That image of being suspended between two places and two identities frames the novel in the recuperated story of the narrator Mona’s great-grandmother Gainer, a widow who met and lost a male lover to the *kala pani*, and in her songs that Mona eventually finds and translates. In a 1995 interview with Elaine Savory, Espinet discusses the situation of Indo-Caribbean women in a community (in Trinidad) that she calls “extremely conservative,” since “[t]here are all sorts of established codes—some very sophisticated in terms of teasing and irony, for example, which keep its members in check, especially its female members” (104). Explaining the rule-breaking and mixing of form in her own writing, Espinet states that a silencing of Indo-Caribbean women undeniably occurs and needs more investigation (Savory 113). Her novel performs that in-depth study via the excavated story and recuperated songs of the *kala pani* survivor, Gainer. I am arguing that this resuscitation is interwoven with the other un-silencing that this text performs – that of transgressive sexuality – into a complex, nuanced exploration of multiple obstacles to full participatory citizenship.<sup>3</sup>

Mona is the Nowarian whose perspective guides the narrative. Relocated to Montreal, Canada to make films, she excavates the stories of her great-grandmother Gainer and that woman’s female descendants, as well as facing her own traumas originating in the family home in Trinidad.<sup>4</sup> The bridge of the title haunts her memories of childhood in Trinidad, a swingbridge over a river that “reminded me of a spider’s web—as transparent and fragile” (Espinete 85). Crossing it on a dare, she fears falling into the wild waters below and must navigate the crazy swinging caused by the young boy who dared her. He enrages her not so much by that act but rather “it was his little mannish attitude, as if he was sure he was better than I was and would always be” (Espinete 87). That bridge comes to represent the journey she attempts in order to cross a modern *kala pani* and “close the circle,” as well as to challenge silences and taboos.<sup>5</sup>

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<sup>2</sup> See also Mehta 2004, on *The Swinging Bridge*, 24. On female sexuality, indenture in the Caribbean, and Indian nationalism, see Niranjana, especially 123-124. See also Christian.

<sup>3</sup> On Indo-Caribbean female experience as reflected in *The Swinging Bridge*, see Mehta 2006.

<sup>4</sup> On Indo-Caribbean women seeking “safe spaces,” see Adams.

<sup>5</sup> On the image of the “swinging bridge,” see Mehta 2006, especially 25, 30, 36. See also Kuortti, especially 311, 327.

While on one level, then, the texts focus on women's oppression and their verbal methods (both oral and written) of resisting and surviving, the question of belonging is also raised through the possession of land and a home.<sup>6</sup> That form of belonging resides firmly in a patrilineal tradition of inheritance.<sup>7</sup> It also relies on heterosexual unions between those of the same racial or ethnic background in order to maintain at least the surface appearance of propriety and conformity. Families hide the secrets and pressure their members to adhere to the normative rules or risk bringing scandal and shame to the family. For Indo-Caribbean subjects, as the texts show, this threat is very effective in shutting down the fulfillment of open same-sex desire and love safely while remaining in Trinidad.

There is a double perpetuation of the status quo, even as queer subjects act on their desires.<sup>8</sup> According to Amar Wahab, "[t]he nation-state's requirement for useful and viable self-fashioning is primarily conditioned by a compulsory demand for heterosexuality, enshrined in its legal-discursive and popular domains that control the legitimate spectrum of respectable and reputational sexualities" (496). Mona's brother Kello would seem to have acceded to that demand, as he married and had children despite having left Trinidad for Canada. Now divorced from his (white) Canadian wife, he has not openly acted on his queer desires, hiding his relationship with a man (also white Canadian) until illness forces his family to look directly at Kello's transgressive relations. Only as he lies in a hospice dying of AIDS does his sister Mona begin to accept his queer identity and recognize that he has layered his life so as to appear to adhere to the status quo of his Caribbean nation and especially his Indo-Caribbean family, while also engaging in a long-term relationship with Matthew. The family has "all stayed in that place of silence about Kello's illness," a site of denial that also represses what

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<sup>6</sup> On women's experiences in the transition from India to the Caribbean and their ways of establishing safe spaces, see Christian. See also Adams, on citizenship, outsiderhood, and the therapeutic value of words.

<sup>7</sup> In examining heteronormativity as part of the formation of the nation-state in Trinidad and Tobago, Amar Wahab discusses how citizenship is "constituted, conferred, mobilized, and withheld" (496). Wahab explains that "respectable" refers to middle-class and "reputational" to working-class constructions of citizenship: "Ironically, the dominating consensual thread across the respectability-reputation binary is the compulsory demand for heterosexuality. [...] In this contract between value and countervalue, conditioned by the demand for heterosexuality, homosexuality is symbolically positioned outside the framework of respectability *and* reputation that informs the moral limits of the political" (485, emphasis in original). See also Kuortti, 321.

<sup>8</sup> While aware of resistance to and critique of the use of "queer" in non-US contexts, I employ the term in this study for identities and desires that challenge heteronormativity in an Indo-Caribbean (specifically Trinidadian) context. See Arondekar on queer globalism and transnational work. Significantly, Shani Mootoo is the only author of Indo-Caribbean background whose work is included in the collection *Our Caribbean: A Gathering of Lesbian and Gay Writing from the Antilles* (Glave), perhaps indicating that the process of un-silencing has only just begun. See also McCormack; Donnell (2012), especially 217-219 (on Caribbean queerness).

Mona describes as “ugly and violent secrets locked inside the family walls” (Espinet 15). As Kello’s desperate wish to buy back the family home in Trinidad demonstrates, citizenship and belonging are represented by land and houses, as well as by family and genealogical relations, all based in a heteropatriarchal system. Heritage and inheritance also inhere in gender, ownership identified in masculine terms. As M. Jacqui Alexander states, “Conjugal heterosexuality is most concerned with the patrilineal transfer of private property” (9). Kello’s desire to reclaim territory in Trinidad—his grandfather’s land, house, and legacy—replicates a normative component of citizenship. He tells his sister, “‘Mona, [...] I want you to go and act on my behalf. Go to Trinidad, inspect the land, and confirm that the transaction takes place. Be my right arm. [...] Do this for me, Mon. I want this land, Pappy’s [his grandfather’s] land’” (Espinet 53). He will achieve this reclamation from Canada, however, not from within Trinidad, and he must do it through female agents because he is too ill to initiate legal proceedings himself.

We thus observe a double distancing of the queer male from ownership of property in Trinidad. Kello in fact fled for Canada years earlier after a “big row” he caused over his father’s decision to sell the family property and refusal to listen to the son’s dissenting voice.<sup>9</sup> In a further distancing from citizenship in Trinidad, Kello engages in the process of buying back the land from his bed in hospice, a borrowed space and a temporary home. Espinet offers a detailed description of this location: “a beautiful Victorian house with a regal entranceway and ornately carved doorposts. An indoor garden, well-placed lighting, and deep wicker furniture in the large hallway reinforced the patrician atmosphere” (55). Inhabiting this re-imagined space of domesticity, Kello has a large sunlit room overlooking a garden. As Mona leaves, she sees a neighbor watching her and wonders “what he thought of an AIDS hospice being planted in his solid neighborhood” (Espinet 55). In spatial terms, we see a subtle seepage of queerness into the British (and colonial) structure symbolic of the normative family. The urgency of Kello’s push to reclaim the familial land in Trinidad further suggests a queering of the heteropatriarchal. As Mona observes, “he was manifesting a powerful masculine drive to possess, to control, even in the face of a terminal illness” (Espinet 56). Giving Mona power of attorney for him, Kello presides over the negotiations that pass on ownership, but he is a ghostly presence, his desire haunting the text both before and after his death about two thirds of the way through. The quest for citizenship crosses to Mona and their cousin Bess, the journey to reclaim the land taking Mona back to Trinidad as Kello’s proxy and giving the “illegitimate” Bess, now a real estate agent, a voice and a controlling hand in recovering the property.

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<sup>9</sup> On the “big row,” see Simone A. J. Alexander.

The house we encounter in the two women's memories, during a cleaning of the attic, is one filled with secrets, rape, abuse—female stories and songs at the center of the familial past. Relations are tangled, hidden, erased, in this version of heteropatriarchal family, in which Bess represents a double illegitimacy as both female and “outside child.” Espinet writes, “[s]he dealt in lineage and posterity and generations and descendants. Family was not just breeding and reproducing—it was a work of art in itself, as carved and sculpted as any other legacy that one could leave behind” (123). She battles to become legal heir to her biological father, “no easy task in Trinidad, where legislation about inheriting property was still colonial to its core, ignoring illegitimacy and the straying habits of ordinary people” (Espinete 123). Thus, her struggle to purchase the land directly challenges normative patrilineage. In regaining what would have been Kello's inheritance, Bess acts as surrogate (male) citizen, a necessary accomplice to the absent Kello. She visits the land and captures it in photographs, her camera operating as an “eye” and “I” for both Mona and the male would-be owner who lies incapacitated in another country. Bess walks “to the boundary lines and taken panoramic shots” and envisions its development: “through her eyes I [Mona] saw the property's possibilities and knew that Kello would be pleased” (Espinete 126). The property passes in a shifting pattern of ownership that envisions a different kind of citizenship, perhaps: from a family's patriarch, to developers, and then through a queer man's homesickness, via two women's hands to his posthumous possession. Nevertheless, the land will eventually be developed and provide home-sites for Kello's children (he has divorced their mother), and thus still follows a patrilineal line of inheritance.

Queerness silently infiltrates familial space, however, as evidenced at Kello's funeral, where his lover Matthew appears as an anonymous figure in the crowd of mourners while Kello's former wife and his children are seated with the family. Mona has met Matthew earlier, at Kello's bedside, and been struck by his face and the expression of emotion between the two men: “You grow used in life to closed faces, shut from the world by those masks that we construct for different uses—the family mask, the subway mask, the workplace mask [...] . . . but this Matthew had a maskless face. The whole person looked at me and smiled” (Espinete 163). Despite her recognition of the truth of their love, Kello shuts Mona out, along with “the whole sinuous Indian family that wound itself into every crevice of each other's lives, like miles and miles of lovevine. He would not allow me into this one place of his own” (Espinete 164). Protecting love from the insidious, penetrating gaze of those who would deny queer belonging, Kello enforces his own boundary; nevertheless, that love asserts its presence. In the church, “Matthew brought a spray of three brilliant tropicals—birds of paradise---that Bess took wordlessly and placed in the coffin before it was sealed” (Espinete 217). Public and private ceremonies, taking place concurrently, occupy opposite

sides of a dark sea of secrecy informed by normative roles and boundaries. “Two funerals were simultaneously in progress—the public one, and the private one that was between Matthew, Babs [sister of Mona and Kello], Bess, and me” (Espinet 217). The white ex-wife, Irene, and the children of that union are incorporated into the official body of family mourners, while the queer white male partner is excluded from public grieving, joined by women who also do not fit the heteronormative paradigm or who threaten to queer the patrilineal genealogy.

Nevertheless, these women—Bess and Mona—perform a cultural preservation and contestation; Mona in her archival excavations to find and understand Gainder’s songs, Bess in her exhibit of artifacts of indenture. The latter takes places as part of Divali celebrations and focuses on women’s lives—traditional dishes prepared by older women, jewelry worn by the indentured, and Gainder’s songs mounted as paintings. As Bess explains, ““You see, Mona, the 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 [Gainder’s]. Not a journey of young widows looking for a new life”” (Espinet 297). Bess’s artist boyfriend, Rajesh, a Rastafarian, has mounted the display of Gainder’s songs; he has also constructed a mosaic:

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

Rajesh is a dougla, revealed when his mother tells Bess about her husband, a Creole man. Bess’s desire thus crosses borders of race, a further bridging of difference, a queering of borders. Accepted fully by Rajesh’s mother, Soomin, Bess has a relationship that Mona observes with a kind of longing: “how simply and freely they belonged inside each other’s world” (292). Mona sees, too, “how much [Bess] had invented herself, out of virtually nothing” (292). Her relationship with Rajesh creates a partnership embodying the mixedness of Trinidad itself and shapes a potential model for moving beyond boundaries while also preserving and respecting the worlds that have shaped each individual.

Mona’s memories also perform a cultural preservation that challenges borders and relishes the possibilities of mixing. In an extended meditation on San Fernando, Trinidad, “a montage of images,” she describes the city:

The city of San Fernando housing its twin but separate populations, African and Indian, each lacerating the other, each

tolerating the other's crossovers, the strayaways, the 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 that they feared would wash them out into the open sea*. My place, this fertile, exuberant, wounded city. (Espinet 103, my emphasis)

This invocation of the population of San Fernando, mirroring that of Trinidad, envisions a way to form a bridge beyond the *kala pani*, as did Mona's love for Bree, a taboo desire for a "red boy, an obvious mixture of African and other races" (Espinet 182), which drew her father's ire and violent punishment when she was a teenager.<sup>10</sup> Tellingly, her rebellion occurs during the time of independence. She notes, "[i]t was a puzzle, the sheer violence of that time. 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. Now I can see that not the least of the complications would have been the new freedoms being sought by those same betraying daughters" (Espinet 187). In present time, Mona has decided to end her relationship with Scottish-Canadian Roddy, reasserting her commitment to herself never to marry. She tries to imagine what life would be like had she never left Trinidad, thinking "[c]ould I have lived here with Roddy, whom I missed more than I cared to admit? But I knew the answers now. I would still have left and become a wanderer, a nowarian" (Espinet 303). Mona finds herself more at home as an immigrant in Montreal, "and right now I want no other place. Like any other migrant navigating new terrain, I bring own beat to the land around me" (Espinet 305). She calls that heart beat "Caroni Dub," evolving inside her since childhood, "parts of it at war with itself until the separate parts recognize the point of fusion and merge seamlessly" (Espinet 305). Despite that hopeful vision of a combination of parts and a bridging of the dark seas, Mona's final words connect Caroni Dub to Gainger's songs born of the *kala pani*, "telling the story of her secret life, her life, her love, locked in a cell carved out of a rocky outcropping on the island of St. Helena, off the coast of Africa," a song of love lost in the swirling dark waters of the ocean (Espinet 306). That somber note suggests that the bridge necessary to prevent perishing remains a work in progress.<sup>11</sup>

<sup>10</sup> On this love, see S. Alexander, especially 279-282.

<sup>11</sup> See also Kuortti, who argues that Gainger's songs form a swinging bridge and challenge the power structure (329), though he also offers a too-grim comment that "the novel seems to fail in deconstructing the heteronormative matrix. Women are bound to stay put and homosexuals to die" (322). Mona's placement of herself in Montreal moves beyond displacement or dislocation, and she also challenges any prescription for women to "stay put." On the ending, see also Rahemtullah.

## II.

While Mona directs Espinet's narrative, Kello remaining ghostly, his queer desires for citizenship haunting the novel, Valmiki Krishna's presence frames Shani Mootoo's *Valmiki's Daughter* and we enter his mind first. From the prologue, his regret over lost opportunities and choices driven by conformity reveals fear in the face of powerful desires and impulses he has repressed, rendering him immobilized in an existence conducted according to border-setting rules of the postcolonial society. Rather than challenging those norms, he actively shores them up. He illustrates Simone Alexander's point that "heterosexuality becomes coterminous with and gives birth to the nation. Its antithesis can unravel the nation" (10). The *kala pani* receives only one direct mention in Mootoo's novel, yet it can be said to inform the attitudes and behaviors of the central characters, both the parents' and the children's generations (215). Brinda Mehta states that the "*kala pani* is a discourse of rupture that initiates transgressive boundary crossings through creative (self-) assertions in literary production." (2004, 4). In particular, Mootoo's novel depicts the complexities of relocation in Trinidad, offering complicated permutations of transgressive sexualities. While the term "queer heterosexuality" forces a resolution that simplifies the tensions and ignores the very real effects of normative rules and proscriptions, queerness does permeate the interactions and desires of the characters.<sup>12</sup> Like Espinet's Kello as well as female characters in that novel, Mootoo's Valmiki and Viveka each experience potential outsiderhood and the threat of "contamination" due to their same-sex orientation.

In both texts, lies and repression mark the lives of Indo-Caribbean men who desire other men: Kello Singh, living in Canada with a male lover and dying of AIDS in Espinet's narrative; Valmiki Krishna, leading a double life in Trinidad as married doctor with children *and* lover of a working-class man who is also married. Both characters have found some freedom in exile, Kello as an immigrant in Toronto, Valmiki as a student in the UK. Both texts emphasize spatial arrangements, specifically houses and property in Trinidad, to examine issues of territory, citizenship, and nation for Indo-Caribbean subjects and to challenge borders that maintain normative identities as they label "perverse" and "unnatural" those whose desires blur such boundaries. As in *The Swinging Bridge*, a woman is surrogate for the queer male's desire to be fully at home in

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<sup>12</sup> On heterosexuality as "a queer potentiality," see McCormack, especially 10, 22-23. See also O'Callaghan: "Despite the apparent reinstatement of traditional family models, there is no resolution of sexual ambivalence or queer desire, no reconfiguration of the normal heteronormative family as a solution to those who inhabit slippery sexual identities" (239). She does not specifically mention Indo-Trinidadian identity, family, traditions in this context, however.

Trinidad. Mona and Bess reclaim the land for Kello, who dies in Canada, essentially in exile. Ironically, they are his eyes, voice, and legal representatives. In *Valmiki's Daughter*, Viveka embarks on a path that her father explored but renounced, at least on the surface of his successful life as a doctor, but she, too, abdicates her love in the face of family exclusion and heteronormativity.

The prologue, steeped in regret and loss, takes place (over the course of twenty-four seconds) in a room filled with the paraphernalia of impending marriage. Valmiki's thoughts form this opening, as he watches his daughter Viveka, surrounded by her wedding gifts, and wants to cry: "He'd rather [...] throw a net over her, wrap her tightly in his grip, and flee with her. Take her deep into one of the forests hunting with him. [...] Never to return" (Mootoo 3). Yet he is stuck in his own choice to keep his queerness hidden and to remain in the enclosure of heteronormativity, rather than to "undo" that form of belonging: "it isn't really so 'suddenly' that his daughter reared up and threatened to undo them all," he thinks, as he reflects on both his own transgressions and his wife's adherence to "how things are expected to be" (Mootoo 93). In the flashbacks that form the bulk of the text, Valmiki at first silently encourages Viveka to explore her same-sex desire (for a French woman married to a neighbor), but becomes conflicted and ultimately betrays her by abiding by the rules of heteronormativity. He thinks, "[h]e has done not a damn thing to help her [...]. If only he could take her away. Tell her his own story so that she might create a different one" (Mootoo 4). He regrets not allowing her to follow her own desires and now seeing her about to embark on a loveless marriage, believing "[h]e should have let his daughter do all that she wanted, be all that she wanted. But in a place like San Fernando, that was impossible" (Mootoo 4).<sup>13</sup> He thus accedes to the rules of what is and is not "possible" in their Indo-Trinidadian community.

The opening scene, addressed to "you," a visitor to San Fernando, establishes this city as a space of order imposed on chaos. The narrative gaze notes signs of institutional solidity—Chancery Lane, the General Hospital, "official and public buildings, and commemorative statues," streets radiating from a clear center (Mootoo 7). Yet even in that apparent orderliness, "You would see that narrower secondary streets emanate from the central hub. Not one is ever straight for long. They angle, curve this way than that, dip or rise, and off them shoot a maze of smaller side streets" (Mootoo 7). The cityscape reflects the multiplicity of identities and relations under the surface of perspectival control and careful mapping. The passage continues to introduce a sensual panorama of

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<sup>13</sup> San Fernando is both the location of Viveka's forced adherence to "family values" and also the city to which Mona and Kello's father insisted on moving for opportunity when he decided to sell the family land. It thus serves as site of compulsory heteropatriarchy and silencing of queer desires. Yet, as seen in Mona's description, it also may offer a "rickety bridge" of newly conceived relation.

this urban space, slowly weaving Dr. Valmiki Krishna into the scene, placing him in the hospital where he works as a physician and in the wealthy neighborhood of Luminada Heights where he owns one of the grandest homes. Reminders of discipline appear in the offices of lawyers, in the scene of prisoners led handcuffed to cells, and the convent school. Just as the side streets do not remain “straight,” however, but twist into maze-like confusion, so, too, is Dr. Krishna’s life not as obedient to laws of conformity and propriety.

Valmiki illustrates a “compulsory invisibility” (Wahab 496), by investing in heteronormativity, and hiding his current affair with the Afro-Trinidadian electrician Saul, just as he earlier renounced his love for Tony, a student from Goa who was the first person with whom he ever had sex. That relationship haunts Valmiki as a source of the regret and loss he expresses in the prologue and waking him in the middle of the night: “thinking of Tony. No, not thinking of him, but with a feeling of him in his belly, in the muscles of his thighs, and an ache in his early-morning sleep-hardened penis. It had been twenty plus years since he had last seen Tony, and still this” (Mootoo 61). Instead of establishing a long-term commitment with Tony, he returned home “to fall into whatever role was expected of him, or at least to adopt some form of numbing complacency” (Mootoo 67). A disciplined citizen, Valmiki passively makes the choice of the expected path of belonging over his heart’s true desires, in the face of Devika’s unintended pregnancy and his adherence to the norms that led to their marriage. He has sex with her, “cementing, in case of a dip in his courage, his determination to marry her. He would turn into a man who was dead in spirit but whose physical body was trapped in everyday Trinidadian limbo” (Mootoo 69). Valmiki thus has not chosen the route of “sexile,” though he at times veers half-consciously in that direction. In developing the term “sexile” from an unpublished paper by Ben Sifuentes-Jáuregui, Yolanda Martínez-San Miguel argues, “diaspora is imagined in terms of sexile for those who perform desires that transgress the internal boundaries of the nation” (819).<sup>14</sup> Valmiki at times wishes that his affairs with women would “leak—no, rather explode—throughout the town, and cause such a scandal that his family would toss him out like a piece of used tissue or flush him from their lives, and he would be forced to leave the country. He would be freed” (Mootoo 42). He has not, however, found or crossed that potential bridge to freedom and belonging.

In his seemingly successful life in Trinidad working as a physician and inhabiting the upscale Luminada Heights, Valmiki carefully manages his masculine “reputation as a womanizer” (183), constructing a visible secrecy that

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<sup>14</sup> As Martínez-San Miguel explains at the beginning of her article on the displacement of sexual minorities in the Caribbean, “According to Manolo Guzman, the term “sexile” refers to ‘the exile of those who have had to leave their nations of origins on account of their sexual orientation’ (1997, 227)” (813).

relies on his public, professional role as doctor. Having lightly concealed affairs with female patients is a “double-edged sword” for him:

On the one hand, it was a suggestion of his more-than-okay status with the ladies (not one, but many) and so worked against suspicions of who and what he was at heart. A man was certainly admired by men and women for a show of his virility, even by the ones he hurt. On the other hand, since philandering had never been a shame in Trinidad—a badge it was, rather—for a man who wanted to be caught, broken, and expelled, it was a problem. (Mootoo 42)

Valmiki further contradicts his disciplined, ordered existence by meeting Saul for hunting expeditions and surreptitious sex, even going so far as to buy Saul and his wife a house. While the hunting validates Valmiki’s masculinity, the activity does contradict strictures of class and crosses racial lines. So, too, do his liaisons with married white women, preferably foreigners “who had no ties to Trinidad, to whom their Trinidadian and Indian communities had no loyalty” (Mootoo 71). He cannot seek out Saul at his workplace to persuade him to go hunting because “[h]e dared not be seen going there to meet a tradesman, pulling this worker out to go and fritter away a day with him. People would talk. They would wonder if he had lost his mind” (Mootoo 74). Is his behavior an example of “queer heterosexuality”? That interpretation stretches the concept of inclusiveness too far, I would argue.<sup>15</sup>

Valmiki rather seems resigned to not building bridges to another place of belonging, much as he may long for that imagined country:

Maintaining his obligation to Devika—there was no question about that, he would do that for her—but loving someone, a man, a man from his own world with whom he would share another life. In Valmiki’s mind, this man had something of a face and a shape—much like Tony’s—but he was always in shadow. There was enough of him, though—the thickness of a man’s body, the muscular hardness [...]. Valmiki just wanted the chance one day to feel something more than obligation. He dreamt of that day, a day he knew would never come. (Mootoo 72)

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<sup>15</sup> I thus disagree to an extent with the claim that Mootoo’s novel “[...] works toward a logically sensitive idea of sexual relations that accounts for the complex and distinctive matrix of human emotions that guarantee a rewarding life” (Donnell 2012, 226).

He acquiesces to a shoddy facsimile of belonging; this life requires layers of masking and hiding, yet the secrets are all open to familial eyes and a general policing. The wives both know and yet avoid knowing, becoming complicit in the subterfuge and façade of heteronormativity erected by their husbands. Valmiki notes a “queer openness” between Saul and Saul’s wife, who even tells Valmiki directly, “I know about him and you, you know, Doc. I know he real take to you” (Mootoo 74). In an exchange with Saul’s wife, Devika exhibits denial of and resistance to the possibility that her husband is not heterosexual, and refuses even in her own mind to acknowledge the truth. Yet she, too, knows the truth: “Perhaps Saul was different, and was able to do it with his wife as well as with her husband. She didn’t even know for certain what her husband and Saul did, and she didn’t want to be sure of any of it” (Mootoo 123). As she thinks about her marriage and her reputation, she parenthetically acknowledges to herself that “(she couldn’t bear the thought that anyone would know she had married a man who, although he was known for his affairs with women, actually preferred the company of other men)” (123-124). Devika obeys and embodies the normative pressure to which Valmiki himself ultimately accedes, by performing the policing of boundaries that prevents him from pursuing the freedom to love or a full experience of belonging.

Devika also turns her normalizing gaze on their older daughter, Viveka, who is frequently perceived by her mother and other characters as too “mannish,” an “onomatopoeic word that sounded as disgusting as what it suggested” (Mootoo 114). That this thought is Viveka’s own self-assessment indicates the degree of self-loathing already instilled by the panoptic gaze. Both male and female characters, starting with her immediate family, criticize Viveka for her short hair, refusal to wear make-up and dresses, stocky body build, and dedication to sports.<sup>16</sup> Her sister Vashti participates in this policing of Viveka’s appearance, replicating the maternal gaze that attempts to reshape the older daughter into an acceptable version of “woman.” Another form of policing occurs in the monitory example of Viveka’s former schoolmate Merle Bedi, who is rumored to be both lesbian and prostitute. Merle hails Vashti on the street early in the narrative and

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<sup>16</sup> Viveka also has an alter-ego she named “Vince,” her “boy-self”: “She used to think of herself as a blond-haired boy who was strong, powerful, peaceful, and could do anything and everything. [...] His name was Vince, short for ‘invincible’” (110). On Caribbean women whose gender is unconventional, King comments: “There is a persistent popular belief, in the Caribbean and elsewhere, that biological men who exhibit unconventional gender are both more numerous and more policed than biological women who flout gender expectations and stereotypes. And yet the absence of literary and scholarly material on women who flout their assigned gender means that such actions have, in face, largely been policed into silence. This silence points to the insidiousness of androcentrism and patriarchy [...]. This silence also points to the potential of biological women who exhibit trans identities to destabilize patriarchy” (584). See also Tambiah, especially 153-155.

clearly stands as a warning of what may happen to “mannish” Viveka: “Her long hair is oily and clumped. She wears what was once a white shirt [...] but it is yellowed and soiled, and the trousers she wears, men’s trousers, are covered in dirt, dust, and urine. [...] she is barefoot” (Mootoo 22). Merle represents the female who dares to ignore boundaries, who courts danger in her sexual transgression, whose eventual solitude underscores the “unnatural” desires she exhibits. Exclusion is the fate of the transgressor who has betrayed her family and thus deserves her homeless status. Further, in Merle’s story (which echoes in Viveka’s mind throughout the narrative), Viveka can read the consequences of being seen: the object of the normative gaze risks creating a scene of scandal. Borders are sharply drawn around heterosexuality such that it becomes a cage, a prison; nevertheless, the alternative looms as loss of family, connection, and even selfhood.

The heterosexual compulsion tortures Viveka, most blatantly in her relationship with Elliott, who on the surface might appear to offer a bridge beyond the dictates of Indo-Caribbean femininity. Of black, white, and Carib ancestry, he is decidedly not Indian, but that racial difference is superseded by his insistent desire for sex with her. Their moments of intimacy (which do not include intercourse) lack any hint of pleasure, described in terms of battles and dissatisfaction on both sides. Thus, when Viveka meets Anick, a neighboring family’s new daughter-in-law, her own responses both excite and frighten her, “as if she had been swiftly pushed high up on a swing and was coming back down ultra fast” (Mootoo 197). Like Kello, Viveka desires a white lover, not someone Indo-Caribbean, as if crossing the border of same-sex identification cannot happen with a partner who is constrained by both nation and culture to follow heteropatriarchal rules.<sup>17</sup> Same-sex desire, for a foreign, married, white woman, creates more boundaries to cross. The entire socio-cultural context, along with their individual relations, militates against a lesbian relationship. They conduct secret phone conversations in French, establishing an illicit intimacy in their friendship even before they realize their mutual attraction. Mootoo writes, “There grew between them a boldness and a closeness that both frightened and weakened Viveka” (258). Myriad eyes on them create a panopticon from which there is ultimately no escape within Trinidad. Recognizing the danger,

[Viveka] decided one morning to still whatever thoughts and feelings Anick Prakash had stirred in her. Such thoughts and feelings were dangerous tricksters out to trip her up and land her, like Merle, out on her own, family-less. And Anick Prakash, being

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<sup>17</sup> Among all the characters in both novels under discussion, Tony and Valmiki are the only same-gender loving partners of Indian descent, and their affair takes place in the UK, not in Trinidad or in Goa (though they talk on the phone from those two locations over the years).

the root of such thought, was even more dangerous. A troublemaker. Brave. Stupid. Disrespectful of Trinidad, its people, its ways. (Mootoo 261)

Viveka, already uncomfortable with her own visibility as “unfeminine,” fears this intensifying of the gaze now directed at her and Anick, which threatens to send her (like Merle Bedi) into an exilic state within the nation.

One source of that gaze is Anick’s husband, Nayan, who has already expressed homophobia in reaction to Anick’s sexual history of sleeping with women. He is another “cop” who polices the borders of the nation and citizenship.<sup>18</sup> Initially, after they met in Canada and traveled to her home in France, he was “intrigued [...] by her interest in women,” but with marriage and their arrival in Trinidad, he is “disgusted,” “appalled,” and “tormented” by what he considers her sexual deviance (Mootoo 232-233). The borders of Trinidad reinforce heteronormativity, as if those national boundaries contain potent homophobia that permeates his mind once he emerges from Customs. Perceiving her past actions as “contrary to everything he had been taught was proper in a woman and a wife,” he thinks he can change her and also fears the appraisal of others if they knew her past—what they would then think of him, as a man (Mootoo 250). Her identity complicates the situation, as she is French, not as bound by Trinidadian rules and prohibitions. His identity is also in question, in suspension, as a Trinidadian of Indian descent. He tells Viveka, ““So many years after leaving India, after losing the language, after watering down the culture, the religion, we’re groping, still shy of becoming Trinidadian. [...] We are not properly Indian, and don’t know how to be Trinidadian. We are nothing,”” (Mootoo 307). His masculinity depends in part on a wife’s heterosexuality and adherence to the norms of both the Indo-Caribbean family and the nation-state itself.<sup>19</sup>

As in *The Swinging Bridge*, those boundaries are shaped by spatial arrangements, which play a central role in identity formation and belonging for Mootoo’s characters. As noted, the transgressor Merle is consigned to a squalid existence on public streets, banned from the familial home. Where is the space that women-loving women might safely occupy? Simone Alexander argues, “Because it [the house] has been an important space, where a particular kind of

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<sup>18</sup> Nayan tells his family history to Viveka while driving her to visit Anick at Chayu, a passage that offers a narrative from the *kala pani* through indentureship to purchase of the estate and development of the plantation. The entire story focuses on his male predecessors, another instance of the powerful connection between masculinity, patriarchy, land, and family. See Mootoo 214 ff. See also Mohammed’s discussion of Naipaul’s novel *A House for Mr. Biswas*, especially 68-70.

<sup>19</sup> See Mohammed on the dual status of Indo-Trinidadians, in the context of what she terms “the problem of being Asian in the Caribbean” (60).

hierarchical power has resided, the state must move to rehabilitate this sphere by specifically recoding women's experience of domestic violence and rape within it, and generally, by disallowing any household space for lesbians" (19). This statement applies to Espinet's Mona (sexually abused by an uncle in the patriarchal home) and to Viveka and Anick who try to engage in a relationship that is also limited to patriarchal spaces. For Viveka, discovering her sexuality is confined to hidden spaces: a room within Nayan and Anick's home in the country on the old familial cacao estate named Chayu (originally a French planter's domain named Chaillou). The house has passed from colonial European to formerly indentured Indo-Trinidadian, and then stood abandoned, even as the plantation continued to produce chocolate. Now in the process of a restoration overseen by Anick, Chayu is the first space in which Viveka and Anick explore their mutual attraction. The surrounding forest also calls to them, as it does to Valmiki and Saul in their hunting expeditions, most significantly, a small cabin that Anick has had constructed on that property. This hut has a door that locks and Viveka recognizes that it is Anick's "own space" (Mootoo 318). Superficially conducive to their desire, the space creates a visceral disconnect in Viveka between that expression of her self and the taboos that hold her back, since "as true as all this so surely felt, she feared, too, crossing a boundary, crossing into an aloneness from which there might well be no return" (Mootoo 320). The entire property is also policed by a regulatory gaze, including that of the caretaker, Mr. Lal, who observes the two women when they walk to and from the cabin (Mootoo 294). That omnipresent gaze of others will eventually sunder the relationship.

Men police the two women's desire and deepening relationship, not only Nayan as husband, but young black men whose gaze consumes Viveka playing volleyball and who question her presence in this public space, asking "'What a Indian girl like you doing playing in the park? Your dad and mom know you here?'" (Mootoo 331). Indeed, her wish to play volleyball proves a site of contention between Viveka and her parents near the beginning of the narrative, a sign to Valmiki and especially to Devika that their daughter looks and behaves in "mannish" ways that contradict the dictates for Indo-Caribbean womanhood. And volleyball provides the site where she and Anick meet publically, enacting their desire in covert gestures and words. In the scene above, the policing is deepened by a male acquaintance who acts on behalf of family and community. This young man, Trevor, intrudes directly into Viveka and Anick's conversation about going to Canada, Anick's vision of their disappearing and reinventing themselves elsewhere (which recalls the plans of Sarah and Lavinia in Mootoo's first novel). That leaving would be the scandal of the century, Viveka thinks. Trevor knows Trinidad intimately, is at home there, and knows in particular the patriarchal rules that govern female behavior. He tells them, "'My own father was an old-fashioned Indian man through and through when it came to his daughters. I

imagine yours to be no different” (Mootoo 338). Trevor will serve as the agent of both the Indian community and the nation-state to which Viveka responds with both dissent and capitulation. Despite the depth of her feelings for Anick, she is disciplined to reject her desires as shameful, as a force that will split the family and render her home-less like Merle.<sup>20</sup> Viveka faces a status of compulsory invisibility with Anick in Trinidad.

For both Valmiki and Viveka, same-sex desire and queer identity smash against another boundary, that of pregnancy. Devika’s pregnancy ends Valmiki’s relationship with Tony; Anick’s pregnancy, announced at an anniversary celebration replete with wedding cake topped by bride and groom figures, rends Viveka’s heart and makes her more vulnerable to Trevor’s advances and proposal of marriage. In the scenes with Trevor that lead to their marriage, we see the damage done by forced (even “chosen”) heterosexuality. In their outing to the beach, when he swerves away from the crowded highway and takes her to a remote site on the coast, she feels as if under water, and then the environment lashes at her, sharp blades of plants causing her legs to bleed. The beach is inhospitable and difficult for her to reach. But she experiences a distancing, as “it was only the surface of her skin that stung, and it was as if she stood some distance from herself, watching—not feeling—the pricks” (Mootoo 388). This description of disassociation alerts us to the trauma Devika suffers in this scene. She is both hidden and exposed, and the sex (her first sexual intercourse with a man) resembles rape; her reaction to the tiny scratches anticipates her “splitting” during that traumatic moment. Acting as agent of family and nation, Trevor thus claims and marks Viveka, physically and psychologically, severing her from Anick—and from herself. “Which was greater, she wondered—to be all that you were, to be true to yourself, or, to honour one’s family, one’s society, one’s country? Her family, despite everything, was her life. [...] She could never do to them what Merle Bedi had done to her family” (Mootoo 326). Thus, as in the framing scenes of Viveka surrounded by wedding gifts, the object of the familial gaze contains and disciplines her.

In her family, of course, she has a father who potentially might understand her desires and offer some support. Indeed, initially Valmiki wants to connect Viveka and Anick, in part wishing to give his daughter an example of more “feminine” behavior but also sensing Viveka’s strong attraction to Anick. When Viveka first resists visiting Anick and Nayan in their new home in Rio Claro, he even tells Viveka, “Just do what you want to do, Vik, don’t worry about what anyone else thinks” (Mootoo 284). But he then begins to resent his daughter for that very choice, the one he denied himself with Tony, and he does not push her to

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<sup>20</sup> Several critics discuss the pull of family and to varying degrees seem to interpret Viveka’s “choice” as a positive affirmation of communal values. See McCormack 22, 23; O’Callaghan 244; Donnell (2012) 221, 226.

refuse marriage and instead follow her heart. As noted above, the narrative is framed by a wedding that signals regret, loss, and rigid rules: the father could have helped his daughter by giving her his story as a warning and a negative model. He wants to sacrifice for her, but how? His thinking near the end is confused, perhaps because there is no viable way out of heteronormativity within the national borders. So he thinks that she should leave, but do it on her own, not with his help. “He wanted to tell her to leave this place, to go far away, but he held himself back. [...] He could not lift and carry her. He could not set her down on the correct stepping stone” (Mootoo 354). He understands that the first step onto the wrong path probably began “when he, Valmiki, had decided to leave the only person he had ever truly loved, Tony, and to court Devika Sankarsingh” (Mootoo 392). And though he does tell his daughter that Trinidad is too small, that she should leave to find all that is waiting for her elsewhere, his final thoughts are that “Viveka would, in the end, like everyone else, have to cut out her own path. He had no advice and his glass was empty” (Mootoo 392). So she is to find and cross her own bridge, if she is not to sink under the dark waters.

The novel ends in a liminal space, on a patio where Viveka and Trevor discuss how long their marriage will last, and in a threshold time, before the wedding but when divorce is already a presumed outcome. As they talk, he gives their marriage five years, while she says it will last only two. The novel questions where they can find home and belonging. Canada might appear to offer possibilities, but we do not go there with Viveka, as we do in *The Swinging Bridge*.<sup>21</sup> Viveka has expressed her own fervent wish for a full citizenship that would allow for and respect her queerness: “In exchange for honesty, integrity, a lifetime of service, she prayed that she and all people like her be granted the freedom, so long as it did not hurt anyone, to love whomever they chose, to love well, and have that love returned without judgment” (Mootoo 360). The line drawn, though, is that it does hurt others, who have invested in the definition of citizenship enforced by the powers of the nation-state. And even were she able to defy her family, she sees “nowhere on her small island far away and safe enough” to live openly with Anick (Mootoo 360). She has no “map of future,” but she knows that she cannot leave and establish a life with Anick, because Anick’s marriage and pregnancy traps her in heteropatriarchy as wife and mother-to-be. In the novel’s last line, Viveka tells Trevor, ““You’d be surprised at my courage right now”” (Mootoo 345). To step onto the bridge beyond the *kala pani* indeed

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<sup>21</sup> As Brinda Mehta argues, “the collusion between the racist policies of the Canadian state with respect to its immigrant populations, the cultural high-mindedness displayed by South Asian nationals from India, and the hetero-patriarchal foundations of the home state (Trinidad) and the metropolitan state (Canada) creates an undeniable refugee status of nationlessness for Indo-Caribbean lesbians, by awarding irrevocable citizenship to heterosexual men” (2004, 217-218).

takes courage, the desire and ability to follow one's heart into a more authentic belonging, and Mootoo leaves us with the potential for that transgressive crossing.

Ultimately, does anyone transgress boundaries in these two narratives? Does anyone bridge the *kala pani*? Both texts indicate that all the characters inherit the heteronormative strictures and stop resisting—by living in secrecy or fleeing to another country.<sup>22</sup> In both texts, the men remain invested in a patriarchal system of property and inheritance, hiding dissident sexualities. The women openly dissent from that system—especially Espinet's Bess, as doubly excluded subjectivity. We thus observe both de-colonization and re-colonization in these two texts. In Trinidad, it is extremely difficult to go against the legalizing, politicized, familiar arrangements of relation linked to both sexuality and property. Transgressive sexualities tend to stay hidden, too bound by the heteronormative patriarchy and its socio-political advantages, or too conscripted by the strictures against homosexuality. Women have more freedom, ironically, but we see no lesbian relationship thrive and persist in these texts. Also, ironically, marriage to Trevor allows Viveka to become a "sexile," offering her an anticipated liberation for which she summons her courage. Even if Viveka's marriage clearly stands on shaky ground and will presumably fail, she anticipates neither a reunion with Anick in Canada nor a return to Trinidad to join her lover. She will seemingly escape the "compulsory invisibility" of her father, but how she will become visible, and with whom, is left uncertain. The longing to belong persists as characters like Viveka continue to hover between the dictates of the heteronormative family and the desires of the heart. Indeed, queer (un)belonging would provide the most successful bridge beyond the *kala pani*, and one hopes that Viveka will locate the stepping stones to lead her onto that swinging path, allowing her the freedom to love.

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<sup>22</sup> Brinda Mehta states that the "claiming of lesbian identity in an openly hostile environment demonstrates an attempt to denationalize the unilateral primacy of the economy of heterosexual desire through a certain decolonization of self" (2004, 218).

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