Indian-Trinidadian Women Writers
Frank Birbalsingh
Published online: 26 Mar 2013.

To cite this article: Frank Birbalsingh (2013) Indian-Trinidadian Women Writers, Wasafiri, 28:2, 14-19, DOI: 10.1080/02690055.2013.758929
To link to this article: http://dx.doi.org/10.1080/02690055.2013.758929

PLEASE SCROLL DOWN FOR ARTICLE

Copyright and Moral Rights: 2013 Frank Birbalsingh

This article may be used for research, teaching, and private study purposes. Any substantial or systematic reproduction, redistribution, reselling, loan, sub-licensing, systematic supply, or distribution in any form to anyone is expressly forbidden. Terms & Conditions of access and use can be found at http://www.tandfonline.com/page/terms-and-conditions
Indian-Trinidadian Women Writers

AN OVERVIEW

For historical and sociological reasons, Indian-Trinidadian women writers are late arrivals on the Caribbean scene; they first make an appearance in the 1990s, long after male Trinidadian and West Indian authors generally had established themselves by the 1950s, and even after African-Trinidadian or other West Indian women writers had emerged in the 1970s and '80s. One reason is that Indians arrived in the Caribbean two and a half centuries after Africans, who had become fully indigenised in the region in terms of language and culture well before World War One; another is that, like literature everywhere else, West Indian literature was first produced by male rather than female authors. It also seems that sexist attitudes were more firmly entrenched among Indian-Trinidadians than other ethnic groups and had a greater inhibiting effect on the education and socialisation of Indian rather than other women in Trinidad.

Despite its late arrival though, or perhaps because of it, the work — mainly fiction — of the six authors discussed in this essay — Lakshmi Persaud, Ramabai Espinet, Shani Mootoo, Artie Jankie, Niala Maharaj and Lelawattee Manoo-Rahming — assumes a revolutionary aspect in its presentation of female Indian-Trinidadian characters. Stories and novels by the chief male Indian-Trinidadian authors who preceded these six women — notably Samuel Selvon, Ismith Khan and V S Naipaul — contain portraits of many female Indian-Trinidadian characters, but they tend to be sketched in bare physical and emotional outline, and they tend to play roles that are secondary in importance to those of their male counterparts. Who can be more uncertain, naive and subservient than Urmilla, Tiger's young wife in Selvon's landmark novel *A Brighter Sun*, or more dutiful, obedient and self-effacing than Meena or Lakshmi in Ismith Khan's *The Jumbie Bird?* And, although Mrs Tulsi in V S Naipaul's *A House for Mr Biswas* is a controlling matriarch, she is an anomaly — playing an acknowledged masculine role by substituting for her husband. If there is an exception, it is Binti, Kale Khan's rejected wife in *The Jumbie Bird*, who stubbornly survives as a single woman by selling coconut oil and coal and later opening a small business selling vinegar. But exceptions prove rules; and not until the appearance of the female authors considered in this essay do we get rounded, fully fleshed portraits of Indian-Trinidadian women who are leading participants in the action of their stories.

The chief protagonist and narrator in Lakshmi Persaud's novel *Butterfly in the Wind* is an Indian-Trinidadian girl, Kamla, growing up in her village of Tunapuna during the 1950s and '60s. Since we see her mostly as a child or adolescent, Kamla herself is not the fully fledged portrait of an adult woman, but her story at least introduces us to her social background and the inner dynamics of a typical Indian-Trinidadian family within the ethnic pot-pouri of Trinidad's diverse population. Kamla's Hindu family has prospered financially since the first Indians arrived as impoverished, indentured, agricultural immigrants in Trinidad in 1845. She portrays her father as a model parent who owns a rum shop and grocery, while their family life is seen as an embodiment of cosiness, warmth and security.

Kamla describes a colonial, Caribbean education system that indoctrinates students with foreign (mainly British) information by rote, enforced often through brutal corporal punishment. Religion is a problem too because Kamla is a Hindu in a Catholic school where she learns everything from English songs to Negro spirituals, but nothing about her Hindu culture. Kamla's experience illustrates the greater difficulty of developing educational and other institutions in a multi-ethnic British Caribbean colony like Trinidad, rather than in one like Barbados with a more uniform ethnic (African-Caribbean) population. In addition, although it may sound precocious for someone of her age, Kamla perceives a potential for ethnic disunity in the rambling, mismatched cultural diversity around her; despite Trinidad's majority African population at the time, she remarks on the 'psychic importance' (Persaud, *Butterfly* 184) of India's independence in 1947 being recognised only by the island's Hindu Mahasabha movement. She laments: 'It [Indian independence] should have been of equal importance
to all non-white races in British colonial Trinidad, but sadly, we were a people already divided amongst ourselves’ (ibid).

Kamla also reveals inherited disadvantages of gender in Trinidad. She believes, for instance, that opportunity for higher education is a special privilege and thanks her parents for offering it to her, ‘a female child, disadvantaged by custom — an untold freedom and privilege’ (Persaud, *Butterfly* 202).

Gender inequality is also evident in an anecdote about the milkman Baboo who is greatly respected in his village as an authority on the Hindu scriptures, yet betrays hypocrisy and patriarchal abuse when, with total impunity, he abandons his wife for a younger woman employed as the family’s maid.

Although they are not clearly articulated, the incident introduces distinctly feminist longings in Kamla’s adolescent mind.

Additional issues of ethnic rivalry and corruption appear in Persaud’s second novel *Sastra*, where the main focus is a love story that pits traditional and modern sects of Hinduism against each other, with the lovers, in the manner of *Wuthering Heights*, continuing their relationship beyond death. Persaud’s third novel, *Raise the Lanterns High*, conjures up a more eerie atmosphere through action that unfolds both in Trinidad and India. In the Trinidad section, set in the 1960s, a young Hindu woman must decide whether to marry the husband chosen for her after she secretly observes him raping another woman. Persaud then creates an impressively vivid portrait of an historical, eighteenth-century Indian milieu complete with elaborate details of dress, religious rituals and dietary practices. More impressively, *suttee* (ritual suicide), a practice which must appear barbarous to Western readers, is plausibly exposed, in the debate among the three queens, as the result of the manipulation of ancient texts by corrupt courtiers, priests, politicians and military officers to control the lives of ordinary people. The author’s fourth novel, *For The Love of My Name*, deploys action on an imaginary Caribbean island – Maya – which, despite the fact that Guyana is not an island, considers a politicised, racial conflict that is an exact replica of events in the régime of Robert Augustus Devonish, aka Forbes Burnham, which pitted Indian- and African-Guyanese against each other between 1964 and 1985.

Persaud lived briefly in other parts of the Caribbean and finally settled in Britain, but diasporic themes of displacement and homelessness do not enter her novels in quite the way they do in the fiction of Ramabai Espinet. Espinet has lived in Canada most of her life and is the author of poems, essays, children’s stories and one novel, *The Swinging Bridge*, in which the forty-two-year-old narrator, Mona Singh, is also born in Trinidad and lives in Canada. Mona recalls her life story from the arrival of her Indian great-grandmother Gainder in Trinidad in 1879 to a period shortly after her family’s migration to Canada in 1970; and this individual family narrative reconstructs the entire history of Indian indenture in Trinidad from a distinctly female Indian-Trinidadian perspective.

In contrast to *Butterfly*, the action of *Bridge* is raw and unrelenting, inspired by an urge to expose unsavoury secrets of Indian-Trinidadian culture, especially sexism that has been long concealed in dark corners of a history of slavery and indenture. While still at primary school, Mona hears the word ‘cooler’ used as a term of racial abuse to define Indian-Trinidadians solely by their indentured status, as lowly and cringing, socially beyond the pale. It incites in her a flaming anger: ‘a cooie is an ugly nasty thing. I hated coolies’ (Espinet, *Bridge* 204). Mona’s internalisation of ethnic hatred, so outspokenly expressed, illustrates the raw and unsparing quality of Espinet’s novel as a whole.

While Kamla’s father in *Butterfly* is a paragon of parental virtue, Mona’s Da-Da in *Bridge* is a tortured soul who, in one incident, calls his daughter ‘a little b**ch’ (178), burns a dress of hers which he considers too short and provocative, and forces her to kneel on gravel and march, military style, which makes her feel like ‘kneeling on thousands of little knives’ (179). All this is mainly because he suspects Mona of having an affair with a Creole boy. Da-Da’s sadistic cruelty has obvious affinities with the physical brutality and sexual exploitation of women that are part and parcel of the history of slavery and indenture on Caribbean plantations.

Less well known may be the collusion between sexism and brutality within the Indian indentured family itself. There is, for instance, no hint of this in Persaud’s *Butterfly*. Quite the opposite. Espinet, on the other hand, stresses lamentable wife beatings, cutlass attacks and murders of women by Indian indentured husbands, fathers and other male relatives. If such cruelty from Indian men partly derives from Indian traditions, it certainly finds a fertile environment in the brutal practices of Caribbean plantations.

Denouncing the sexism and cruelty of indentured Indian men towards their womenfolk introduces a strident and political tone to Espinet’s novel, and directly challenges the view of indenture as a ‘righteous family pact’ (*Bridge* 279) while championing a more adventurous version of indenture as ‘a journey of young widows looking for a new life’ (ibid). But perhaps Espinet goes too far by betraying a note of retaliation when almost every other male Indian character in *Bridge* is either violent like Mona’s Da-Da or a potential philanderer/rapist like her Uncle Baddall, leaving female characters largely bereft, holding hands in solemn resistance to their shared victimhood. At school Mona and her friends can only whisper about their predicament: ‘We heard of girls being cursed and even beaten by family members for so much as looking at “Man.” And husbands too, beating and kicking wives’ (187). Still, whether her reaction is retaliatory or not, Espinet’s portrait of Indian-Trinidadian sexual mores remains the most comprehensive that we so far have in fiction.

So far as nationality is concerned, as an Indian whose family has lived in Trinidad for at least three generations, Da-Da supports the dominant People’s National Movement (PNM), an African-based party led by the African-Trinidadian Dr Hector James, a pseudonym for Dr Eric Williams, who dominated Trinidadian politics from the 1950s to the 1970s.

Da-Da firmly believes that Africans and Indians have been indigenised or creolised by their long residence in the Caribbean: ‘He [Da-Da] saw himself as an Indian man and a Trinidadian, neither cancelling out the other, a natural inheritor of the Creole culture he loved’ (71). In Da-Da’s view, both Indian-Trinidadians and African-Trinidadians are Trinidadians, full stop. But he becomes disenchanted by the deep-seated Afro-centricity of the PNM and of African-Trinidadians who advocate ‘forced douglarization’ (75) — ‘a coercive drive to intermarriage between Africans and Indians’.
I heard these discussions at home in taxis, in shops, even at school. In Da-Da’s letters I read the map of our departure from that early island home to a Canadian migrant existence. (72)

Migration, however, is no panacea for inherited problems of identity and nationality which inevitably transmute into wider diasporic afflictions of displacement, exile and homelessness. By fleeing to Canada, Da-Da jumps from the frying pan into the fire, exchanging African-Trinidadian racism for white racism in his new ‘home’. Besides, in this multilayered novel, his family faces the ambivalence of Canada which exists side by side with a longing for Trinidad as home. This provokes a sense of desperation when the impending death of Mona’s brother Kello from AIDS pushes him to urge Mona to recover their first home — the Trinidadian family property which had been sold by Da-Da.

Thus migration complicates the notion of ‘home’ as some family members are left in Trinidad while new ones are born in Canada; and Horace Baddall, Canadian-born son of the notorious philanderer Uncle Baddall and a French Canadian woman can, without any real knowledge of his Trinidad ‘home’, yield to fantasy and seriously venture on a wild, imaginary idea of prospecting for Indian (Rajput) treasure there. Horace’s fantasy perfectly matches Salman Rushdie’s idea of ‘imaginary homelands’ among Indian immigrants who, feeling they cannot reclaim what they have lost by leaving India, instead ‘create fictions, not actual cities or villages, but invisible ones, imaginary homelands, Indias of the mind’ (Rushdie 10).

Espinet conjures impressive coherence out of multiple strands connected with Mona’s extended family and the search both for her family’s property and the songs her Indian great-grandmother used to sing. The plot, which is circular, begins with Gainder’s flight from India and ends with discovery of her songs in Trinidad, and celebrates the inherent, if suppressed, spirit of independence in women. This, after all, is the driving force in Bridge — exposure of strategies such as racism, sexism and classism used to prevent Indian-Trinidadian women from reaching their full potential.

At the same time, Espinet creates a protagonist — Mona — whose energy, independence and assertiveness contrast sharply with the submissiveness of heroines in the work of earlier male novelists. To some extent, the contrast may be explained by the stronger influence of indenture on these earlier heroines during the 1940s and ‘50s, and ‘70s, when Mona grows up, long after the demise of indenture in 1917 and independence in 1962, sexual liberation was in the air as a worldwide movement. It also validates Espinet’s portrayal of revolutionary energy and iconoclastic ambition in Mona when we consider that similar qualities must have been needed by the current Prime Minister of Trinidad and Tobago — Kamala Persaud-Bissessar — in her struggle against patriarchal and historical precedent, to become the first female head of her nation in 2010.

Although Espinet’s Bridge is a flagship work of sexual liberation in Caribbean literature, hints of female homosexuality appear in only one relationship. Where Bridge is less explicit about homosexuality among Indian-Trinidadian women, the fiction of Shani Mootoo blazes a pioneering trail on the subject. Born in Ireland of Indian-Trinidadian parents in 1958, Mootoo grew up in Trinidad and in 1977 migrated to Canada, where she still lives. She has so far produced one volume of poems, three novels and a volume of stories, Out on Main Street, which was her first book.

Like Espinet, Mootoo’s fiction examines themes of race, colour, sexuality, class, identity and nationality among Indian-Trinidadians. Some stories in Out on Main Street look specifically at the experience of female Indian-Trinidadian immigrants in Canada. ‘Sushila’s Bhakti’, for example, considers strains and stresses felt by Sushila, an Indian-Trinidadian immigrant living in Vancouver, trying to make a career as a painter. Sushila’s displacement from Trinidad and cultural mixing in Vancouver slowly induce in her a feeling of floating aimlessly, as if she has lost the solid sense of belonging she once had in Trinidad.

Because of her brown skin, Sushila is regarded as an Indian in Vancouver; but she speaks no Indian language and feels alienated when mistaken for one of numerous subcontinental migrants who also live in Vancouver and speak Indian languages among themselves. As someone who neither observes Hindu rituals nor wears Indian clothes there is nothing, except skin colour, that identifies Sushila as Indian, and the result intensifies her sense of appearing mysterious, nondescript, as neither a proper Indian immigrant nor a proper (white) Canadian. Her professional life too is problematic; after an exhibition of her work, Canadian art critics don’t know quite what to make of her paintings and politely murmur vague, complimentary clichés about authenticity.

Overwhelmed by sheer frustration, Sushila seeks refuge in recollecting familiar images of Trinidadian street festivals like hosay and phagwa which may be Indian in origin, but are now transformed by a century and a half of creolisation in Trinidad. Emigration = exile = homelessness. Sushila’s reactions are part of the diasporic experience already seen in Espinet’s Mona and members of her extended family living in Canada.

In Mootoo’s first novel, Cereus Blooms at Night, bizarre events unfold in a town ironically named ‘Paradise’ on the imaginary island of Lantanacamara — a stand-in for Trinidad. Similarly, the action of her second novel He Drown She in the Sea takes place on another fictional island, Guanagaspar. These fictional settings hint at a search for ‘home’ by people from the postcolonial Caribbean driven by a combination of economic and ethnic grievances to seek better living conditions and a more stable nationality abroad. Mootoo’s Cereus, however, is mostly concerned with ambivalent or fluid sexuality, while He Drown She concentrates on classism and nationality.

In Cereus Chandin Ramchandin, an alcoholic, commits incest regularly with his daughters while his wife escapes abroad with her female, white missionary lover. One character, Ambrosia, who is born a girl, changes her sexual identity to become a boy. Meanwhile, in He Drown She the central event — the attempted drowning of Rose by her husband Shem Bihar — is prompted by Rose’s sexual infidelity and its adverse implication for Shem’s social status as Attorney General of Guanagaspar. In Bridge, Mona similarly complains about her
black, Chinese and mixed blood school friends being able to socialise more freely than her because they are more urbanised or creolised and less hidebound by ancestral customs.) To cap it all, true to Mootoo’s penchant for magic realism, Ambrosia’s transformation and the escape of Rose and her lover by boat from Guanagascap are presented as magical events that lift ordinary characters and happenings out of the limiting blandness of everyday existence into an imaginary realm of happiness, hope and self-fulfilment; Ambrosia is happier as a boy named Otoh, whilst Rose and her lover hope to find refuge and freedom elsewhere.

In *Valmiki’s Daughter*, Mootoo’s fourth novel, the Trinidadian locale of a Mootoo novel is acknowledged by name for the first time and its landscape, vegetation, trees, flowers, animals etc fulsomely celebrated in brilliant, visual terms which remind us that, in addition to her fiction and poetry, Mootoo is also a visual artist and videographer. Her description of San Fernando, for instance, the southern Trinidadian town, takes up most of a twenty-page-long chapter that furnishes the most complete pen portrait of a West Indian town in imaginative literature — equal in literary merit to Dickens’s pen pictures of London, although Mootoo’s San Fernando, with its uniquely Caribbean physical contours and tropical colour and variety, could not be more different from Dickens’s murky, clogged and fogged up London:

Bleachers encircle the park. Behind them is the foot of the San Fernando Hill, a once magnificent natural promontory and wildlife paradise in the heart of the town, a forest of bamboo, silk cotton, poui, and flamboyant, a birdwatcher’s haven, a reptile sanctuary, a nature lover’s refuge, disfigured now with treeless trails that ensnare it, tractors and trucks crawling up and down its raw bruised sides, moving whole cubic acres of its white bedrock daily, its most perfect beauty pulverized for a most singular profit. (*Valmiki* 24)

The chief protagonists in *Valmiki’s Daughter* consist of Valmiki Krishnu, his family and their social circle — all Indian-Trinidadians, who live in San Fernando. But the difference could not be greater between a simple peasant like Selvon’s Tiger or a lowly, rural shopkeeper like Kamla’s father in *Butterfly* and Valmiki’s associates. The latter are educated, Hindu professionals, top entrepreneurs and businessmen rolling in wealth and social prestige. To these élite Indian-Trinidadians, their indented origins are either too distant a memory or hauntingly remembered as a guilty stain; and instead of the genuine ambition of Tiger or the warm domesticity of Kamla’s home, the lives of Valmiki and his friends are riddled with shallow values of self-indulgence, ostentation and deceptive respectability that, ironically, harbour the very racism and classism of which their forebears, as ‘coolies’, were once victims.

Valmiki, a medical doctor, is bisexual and neglects physical relations with his wife in favour of a sexual affair with Saul, a working-class African-Trinididian. With the cunning connivance of his secretary, Valmiki also sleeps with white, female patients and is strongly attracted to Anick, a French-Canadian woman who is married to the son of one of his best friends. On top of all that, Anick has a love affair with Valmiki’s bisexual daughter Viveka, whose portrait as a young woman, struggling against the ostensibly puritanical values of her hypocritical society, is both sensitive and touching. Part of Viveka’s appeal is that she is completely unaffected by the shallowness, hypocrisy, racism or classism around her — values in which her mother Diveka is steeped.

Although Persaud, Espinet and Mootoo consider a host of themes, from race, class, ethnicity and nationality to diasporic concerns about exile and homelessness, only Persaud, albeit using an historical Indian milieu, writes directly about India. Not to say that Espinet and Mootoo neglect India as the historical origin of Indians in the Caribbean — any more than African-Trinididian authors like Earl Lovelace or Dionne Brand neglect Africa in their fiction — but they also acknowledge that creolisation is fundamental, both for Indians and Africans in the Caribbean.

Arati Jankie’s *Hush! Don’t Cry* is a rare example of fiction on contemporary India by an Indian-Trinididian author. Jankie, who was born in Trinidad in 1954, worked as a journalist in Trinidad, England and India and has written two other books, one a collection of stories and another a non-fiction work. In *Hush! Don’t Cry* Meera Roopnarine marries Kapil, an Indian doctor who repeatedly assaults her in Trinidad and has affairs with local Trinidadian women, one of whom dies from an attempted abortion performed by Kapil himself. This prompts the couple to move to India where, in addition to her husband, Meera is sadistically persecuted by Kapil’s family. There are numerous separations and reconciliations, but the couple’s marriage seems predestined to failure. Rather than predestination, however, the rapid and contradictory changes in the novel suggest that *Hush! Don’t Cry* is more a work of journalistic documentation, inspired partly by topical reports of bride burning and dowry deaths in India and partly by a desire to exercise Indo-centricity — unrealistic adulation of India and Indian culture by Indian-Trinidadians. Jankie’s ‘Introduction’, for example, speaks of ‘the common plight of a number of young [Indian-Trinidadian] girls seduced into marriage by lofty dreams while romancing their roots’ (*Hush! iv*).

The main achievement of *Hush! Don’t Cry* is its documentation of male violence towards women in India. Nor is it male violence only, since Kapil’s female relatives join in Meera’s persecution in India. This at least provides a context for the fury of Espinet’s crusade against violence from Indian-Trinididian men towards their women, who suffer more from cutlass attacks than any other community in Trinidad (and Guyana). But, as already mentioned, even if a tradition of sexist violence against women was brought from India to the Caribbean, it too has been creolised by an inherently oppressive cultural ethos inherited from slavery/indenture.

Creolisation and its twin, nationality, also appear in *Like Heaven* by Niala Maharaj, an Indian-Trinididian who studied creative writing in the USA and worked as a journalist and communications consultant before settling in Amsterdam. The title of *Like Heaven*, her only novel, is part of a quotation from Derek Walcott’s Nobel lecture ‘The Antilles: Fragments of Epic Memory’ which offers a sober meditation on Caribbean nationality and appears as an epigraph to the novel.

Walcott describes Port of Spain, capital city of Trinidad and Tobago, as ‘A downtown babel of shop signs and streets, mongrelized, polyglot, a ferment without history, like heaven’ (‘Antilles’ 71). His description is correct in so far as the West
Indian population consists of descendants of people from multiple cultures from Africa, Asia, Europe and the Middle East, who are continuously creolised by living together in loose association without having yet established a history of collective action as a single nation. To drive home this point, a second quotation from the same lecture appears as an epigraph to Book Two of the novel, claiming that the ‘basis of Antillean experience’ is ‘this shipwreck of fragments, these echoes, these partially remembered customs’ that ‘are not decayed but strong’ (Walcott, ‘Antilles’ 70). What seems problematic is that, despite acknowledging fragmentation and ferment as basic aspects of Caribbean experience, Walcott also detects positive qualities — ‘heaven’ in the first quotation and strength in the second.

Maharaj’s hero in Like Heaven, Ved Prakash Saran, displays dedicated entrepreneurial energy and insatiable ambition in building a huge business empire in northern Trinidad. He also acquires enormous wealth for his extended family and, through his success, inspires his ethnic group – Indian-Trinidadians — to gain political power. This political triumph bears a strong resemblance, in its ethnic make-up and timing, to the victory by Basdeo Panday’s party, the United Democratic Congress (UNC) in Trinidad and Tobago in 1995. But Ved’s triumph is pyrrhic, gained at the expense of intense turmoil in his personal life and tragic division in his family. Ved’s narrative, composed seventeen years after events in the novel, betrays awareness of the futility of his commercial success and remorse over ruptured relations with his wife Anjani (Anji), who divorces him after a tormented marriage. Anji is later murdered by someone apparently hired by members of Ved’s family, although not before she bitterly accuses Ved of blind greed, racism and sexism.

What sustains Like Heaven is not only Anji’s eloquent and idealistic insight into the rise and fall of Ved’s career, but the narrative of the novel itself with its captivating humour, sardonic wit and barbed, vernacular speech from eccentric characters like the narrator’s mother Ma, whose comments, for example, on the Catholic church in Trinidad are typical: ‘Once they [the Catholic church] smell money, they will excommunicate Lucifer himself to get a share of it’ (Maharaj 184). Ethnic fragmentation is rife, expressed through the very language of the novel in which African-Trinidadians are sometimes described as ‘niggers’, and Ved’s affair with one of his African-Trinidian employees is marked by strong words and physical injury. Nor does the political triumph of one ethnic group over another qualify as the democratic verdict of a genuine nation.

The action of Like Heaven implies that Trinidad is a sea of crime, corruption and chaos, and corroborates Walcott’s previous description of the island as a ‘shipwreck of fragments’. This judgment is boosted by a quotation from Walcott’s poem ‘The Spoiler’s Return’ that forms the epigraph to Book Three of the novel: ‘Hell is a city much like Port of Spain’ (Maharaj 344). Walcott’s comparison of Port of Spain to both heaven and hell seems contradictory or paradoxical. So is Maharaj’s choice of ‘Like Heaven’ for the title of her novel about a society stewing in corrupt and lawless ethics. But when Ved defends his spectacular business success by claiming ‘I was a serious contributor to society, not a volatile hooligan’ (Maharaj 397), he ironically confirms the hooliganism of his carnival culture. For Ved’s success is not his whole story. Others have made important contributions to his career, notably Nerissa, whose patient loyalty and selfless service from the very start sustain Ved through testing moments, and are finally rewarded when Ved marries her. Anji, meanwhile, reminds Ved of moral values which he ignores and for which she pays the ultimate sacrifice. Thus the Caribbean context considered by Walcott and Maharaj is mixed, partly heavenly and partly hellish — truly paradoxical.

The final author considered in this essay, Lelawattee Manoo-Rahming, has so far written two volumes of poems, Curry Flavour and Immortelle and Bhandaar Poems. Although born in Trinidad, Manoo-Rahming now lives in the Bahamas, where she also writes stories and essays and produces sculpture, drawing and painting. Concern with identity/nationality is a prominent theme in Manoo-Rahming’s poems which probe her role as a Hindu woman who is born of Indian parents in the Caribbean, but feels cut off from contact with her ancestral homeland. In ‘Footsteps in this Land’, for instance, the stark plight of the persona is laid bare: ‘I am alone/without a story/in this land/where my children/... refuse to be born///in this land/where I have/no umbilical cord’ (Manoo-Rahming, Curry Flavour 23). The persona’s umbilical connection is with India and painful separation leads her to implore the indigenous Caribbean goddess Atabeyra, ‘Great Mother of the Caribbean Sea/Goddess of childbirth’, to build a tunnel through which her children can cross and bring her a cry, a footstep, even a voice from ‘my ancestral spirits/in that faraway land/in the east’ (Curry Flavour 24). In some poems, the persona appeals for help from other indigenous Caribbean deities, for example, the sea goddess Coatrirsch, suggesting that the poet’s original Indian culture has been greatly modified (creolised) by her family’s long residence in the Caribbean.

Evidence of this modification is seen in poems which celebrate such features as Caribbean music, food or the sheer beauty of the physical landscape. For example, Manoo-Rahming’s first volume has an Indian-centred title, Curry Flavour, but her second – Immortelle and Bhandaar Poems – mixes the unmistakably Caribbean immortelle tree, formerly planted as a shade tree in cocoa plantations in colonial Trinidad and Tobago, with the Hindi word ‘bhandaaraa’, a Hindu ceremony or ritual performed twelve or thirteen days after someone’s death.

The title poem ‘Immortelle’ is dedicated to the memory of calypsonian Ras Shorty, aka Garfield Blackman, who invented a new genre of music, ‘SOCAH’ (more commonly ‘soca’), which blends Indian music and musical instruments with African rhythms. The female Indian-Trinidadian persona in the poem openly confesses her love for soca: ‘I emerged black/Hungry for your SOCAH/Music, your blending/Of India and Africa’ (Immortelle 35). Such is the persona’s hunger that she introduces both a religious and sexual element in direct address to the calypsonian: ‘Lord Shorty I wanted to be/Your Indrani — your East Indian Chick/To follow you into Piparo Forest/Like Sita accompanying Rama/Into his forested banishment’ (ibid). The persona elevates Ras Shorty to the status of the Hindu god Rama, while she becomes his divine consort. A later stanza has the persona asking Shorty to dress her naked body in ‘ropes and ropes/Of your greying
dreadlocks’ (Immortelle 36). The persona betrays total devotion by standing naked before Shorty, pretending to protect her modesty, although she notes with sly wit and titillating sexual innuendo: ‘I was no celibate Sita/You were no Rama’ (ibid). Other poems celebrate musicians including the Indian-Trinidadian Sundar Popo, who was the leading singer of Hindi songs with a fast rhythmic beat. In ‘Bhandaaraa Puja for Sundar Popo Uncle’, also celebrating diversity and mixing, the persona thanks Sundar Popo for ‘Mixing Bhojpuri Hindi and creole’ (Immortelle 32).

Signs of Manoo-Rahming’s practical, almost clinical approach to female sexuality have already appeared in quotations from her poem on Ras Shorty. There is little emotion when she writes explicitly and fearlessly about women’s bodies or their role in the world. For example, in ‘Vaginal Scan’ in Immortelle, the persona reacts to being examined by a female doctor, but it is impersonal and clinical. ‘My Coontie’ is less so, however, when the vagina rather playfully objects to being called titillating names like ‘coochie, cave, slit or clit’ (Immortelle 89) and demands ‘I am Vagina/ And I just want to be called/By my right name!’ (ibid). Pleasure in sexual activity is celebrated in many poems, always with equal participation from men and women. Equality is not explicitly asserted, rather, it is implied in the complementary roles played by both sexes, one with the other. Five sections in her volume Immortelle are each dedicated to a goddess, the fifth being the Hindu Shakti, which is described as the concept or personification of divine feminine creative power, sometimes referred to as ‘The Great Divine Mother’ in Hinduism. Yet Shakti ‘surrounds and animates the energy of the male god’ (Immortelle 95), suggesting less a feminist than a womanist approach that stresses sexual equality within a context of complementary relations between male and female.

The revolutionary nature of the works discussed in this essay is obvious; already mentioned are timid and uncertain Indian-Trinidadian literary heroines who, as largely secondary characters, meekly fulfill dutiful, martyr-like service to husband, home and family. Not only are the women characters discussed in this essay primary or leading protagonists, they are also mostly university-educated, independent professionals invented by authors who are beneficiaries of a modern movement of women’s liberation that originated in the 1950s and ’60s. Independent, ambitious and self-motivating female Indian-Trinidadian characters like Mona Singh, Viveka Krishnu or Anji Gopaul are a new breed. The family structures of childcare or conventions of work in which these modern women characters can flourish may not have emerged as yet, which is why Viveka’s marriage is unlikely to last and Anji is first divorced, then murdered. No doubt the unselfish caring of characters like Nerissa, and complementarity from authors like Persaud and Manoo-Rahming may be part of the future. What the writers discussed in this essay imply, meanwhile, is that Indian-Trinidadian women, both in fiction and real life, have turned over a new leaf.

Works Cited
———. Immortelle and Bhandaara Poems. Hong Kong: Proverse Hong Kong, 2011.