

Emergence and Consolidation of Identities in the Narratives of *Chinnidad* in the literary works of Indo-Trinidadian Canadian writers

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Abstract

The history of the Indian diaspora is the transplantation of people from the different parts of India to the colonial plantations. The Indian indentured labourers, they were told by the arkhatists that Fiji was a place just next to Calcutta and Trinidad was Chinidad—a land of sugar, land of opportunities. Trinidad dominated the journey of Indo-Caribbean Canadian literature as it produced a significant number of literary writers who have created a perfect niche in the transcultural literary world. In Canada, Indo-Caribbeans formed a minuscule group of twice displaced people, first from India and second from Trinidad and Tobago. This article focuses on the literary outcomes of Indo-Trinidadian writers in Canada. Their diasporic dis(re)placement and (re)location unfolds the problems they faced in Canada. Their second migration formed a new language and literature consisting of

intermingled socio-cultural manifestations in Canada.

Keywords: Identity formation, Migration, Indo-Trinidadian Canadian Literature

Whoever were those mocking gods
who thought it fit to lead us
from the green wastes of the Indo-Gangetic
to the sweet swards of the Caroni
then in a new migration
to Manitoba's alien corn
never thought to state
the price to be exacted
or how or where it would be paid.
(Coopswami, *The Second Migration* 72)

Introduction

In the study of migration and its consequences, the notion of searching for identity has also attained considerable attention in the present scenario. Searching for identity is the most crucial problem that the migrant community has been facing since old migrations. Migrants' ethnic, cultural and linguistic identity becomes a major reason to confront the feeling of 'outsider' or 'other' in the host land.

Migration causes 'the conflict of two cultures . . . often painful', and 'search for cultural identity: the struggle to accommodate two selves and two cultural spaces into one integral identity' (Tiefenthaler, 1985: 1). The search for identity, thus, is a collective form of endeavour of an individual or community migrating to another country/nation. When identity is based on culture, language and ethnicity, the search for identity illustrates the journey of a specific cultural group or individual trying to find an authentic identity in the host land. During the course of migration and settlement in the host land, migrants face socio-cultural and linguistic variances. Therefore, for a migrant's identity, according to Kershen, 'is in a constant state of flux and can never, nor will ever, be static' (1998: 2). Because of different cultures and different languages, migrants can not easily assimilate themselves into the host culture. Moreover, due to racial discrimination and inculcated feelings of being an 'outsider', the migrant usually encounters feelings of inferiority and rootlessness. The problem of the search for identity arises from a sense of being cut off from the homeland.

The search for identity as a consequence of migration engendered the issue of self-transformation by moving from one place to another. In the case of female migrants, migration has spawned issues such as family fragmentation and social alienation. The consequence of female migration thoroughly uncovers the search for identity. For a female migrant, the issue of marginalization and maladjustment in the mainstream society of the host land leads her to search for her authentic self.

The search for identity, regardless of gender, is an inevitable consequence of migration. The migrant community, despite being in constant flux, is described as a community with a hyphenated-identity. Migration motivates and encourages migrant writers to depict their migratory experiences. Search for identity of a literary character is the resemblance of a migrant writer's journey. The feeling of migration and settlement in the host land prompts the writer to pen his/her experience of identity crisis through his/her characters' struggle with the hope of arriving in an authentic selfhood. Salman Rushdie, in his essay *Imaginary Homelands*, reminds us about his experience as a migrant writer and how the search for identity consequently widens the boundaries of a literary writer's imagination:

Our identity is at once plural and partial. Sometimes we feel we straddle two cultures; at other times, that we fall between two stools But however ambiguous and shifting this ground may be it is not an infertile territory for a writer to occupy. If literature is in part the business of finding new angles at which to enter reality, then once again our distance, our long geographical perspective, may provide us with such angles. (1982:18)

Migration, in the diaspora study, is one of the most important characteristics as it acts as an impetus for migrants that bring enormous changes to the world of diaspora community. As they move to various places, they face different cultures, languages, races and ethnicities which create nostalgia, displacement and a search for identity.

Trajectories to Trinidad- Crossing Kalapani

*They came in ships.
From across the seas, they came.
Britain, colonising India, transporting her chains
From Chota Nagpur and the Ganges Plain.
Some came with dreams of milk-and-honey riches,
Fleeing famine and death:
dancing girls,*

*Rajput soldiers, determined, tall,
escaping penalty of pride.
Stolen wives, afraid and despondent,
crossing black waters,
Brahmin, Chammar, alike,
hearts brimful of hope.*

(Das, 2006: 10)

John Gladstone, the father of Liberal British Statesmen, also the proprietor of two sugar estates in British Guiana, wrote a letter to Messrs. Gilanders, Arbuthnot & Co. for providing a labour force from India on his sugar estate. He also petitioned to Calcutta Recruiting Firm and East India Company. He exercised his colonial power and received authorization from both Colonial office and Board of Control of the East India Company. But Messrs. Gilanders, Arbuthnot & Co. assumed that the transplantation of people of India on the Caribbean islands might create some social as well as ethnic problems. They responded keeping in mind the consequences of the transplantation of the men as indentured labourers.

Notwithstanding the disregard of the mass movement of the Indian people, Gladstone, with the help of the colonial power, exercised his private means for transporting Indian 'Coolies' to his sugar plantations on the Caribbean islands. For transportation, a ship named *Whitsby* was hired. It carried 246 indentured labourers, leaving Indian for the shore of British Guiana in 1838. Along with *Whitsby*, another ship, *Hesperus*, also arrived with a load of 150 Indian indentured labourers on the new soil. In Trinidad, the first ship named *The Fatel Razak*, with 227 Indian indentured labourers, left India and arrived on the shore of Trinidad on 30 May 1845. The route to Caribbean islands from India was long and perilous; it increased the death ratio on the way. Additionally, the ill treatment of Indian indentured labourers was also reported. They were told of a short excursion but as the journey went on, it reinforced boredom and fatigue in the poor innocent 'docile coolies'. Moreover, due to malnutrition and a lack of medical treatment, many labourers died on board while some of them were bewildered and committed suicide by jumping overboard. To them the ship was a metaphor of no escape as they were surrounded by water everywhere.

The subsequent people movement included other Caribbean islands like Jamaica, St. Lucia, St. Vincent, and Grenada. The system was also extended to French, Dutch and Danish colonies in the Caribbean. Between 1856 and 1865 nearly 1,600 people were taken to St. Lucia; a second phase of migration of almost 4,427 Indians arrived on the same island (Samaroo, 1987: 29).

The first shipload of Indian Indentured labourers arrived at Jamaica on May 10, 1845. By 1917, approximately 36,000 Indian indentured labourers were shipped to Jamaica. They worked mainly on sugar and banana estates of the colonisers. 'By the time the Indentureship system ended in 1917, about 400,000 Indians came to the Caribbean colonies, most of whom chose to settle in the islands in the New World' (Kumar 2009: ix). Initially, Indians on the Caribbean islands faced social and racial discrimination but with the sheer resilience and endurance, and through hard work and sacrifice, Indians survived and established themselves as communities.

Rerouting Routes and Roots

*This honey-flowing milk and maple-syrup land
Promised a new beginning.
No longer sure of friend or foe
They fled in hope.*

(Coopswami, 1986: 73)

Since their arrival on the Caribbean islands, Indians were detested by the former inhabitants of the islands and not given any assistance from the colonizer. Therefore, they developed affinity towards the newly arrived Canadian Missionaries. Canadian Presbyterian Missionaries helped them to gain access to a western life style. In 1864, the Canadian Missionary named, John Morton visited Trinidad with the aim of looking after the health and social lives of the people on the Caribbean islands. At that time the Colonial government showed flexibility and allowed Canadian Missionaries for community services on the British colonies in the Caribbean islands. The Canadian Missionaries, in the initial stages, looked after the health related issues but with the support and interest of the Indian indentured labourers and their descendants, they started establishing Presbyterian churches on the Caribbean islands.

The visit of John Morton resulted in the establishment of Presbyterian Church in Trinidad in 1868. Apart from Trinidad, his visit became frequent to other Caribbean islands also. Consequently, churches were also established in St. Lucia (1884), Guyana (1885), and Jamaica (1894). These Presbyterian churches exclusively concentrated on the Indo-Caribbean people. Opportunities were on both sides; for Indo-Caribbeans it was a chance of westernizing themselves and gaining entry into civil service jobs and subsequently improving their livelihood, while for the Canadian Missionaries it was a chance to convert the non-believers, as well as to maximize their work of community service of which the colonial government was supportive. Since then the mis-

sionaries worked not only to establish churches but also schools and colleges. Moreover, they also offered training centres to train teachers for schools.

The arrival of the Canadian Presbyterian Missionaries on the Caribbean islands during the colonial period laid the foundation of the migration of the Indo-Caribbean people to Canada. The Indo-Caribbean people were encouraged by the Canadian Missionaries to pursue higher education in Canada by offering them scholarships. Lokaisingh-Meighoo notes:

The current wave of Indo-Caribbean migration might be considered as a double diaspora because less than 165 years of indentured workers left India for the Caribbean and now just a few generations later their descendants have departed again in pursuit of better opportunities and mobility in Canada (1997: 9)

The tense political situation of Trinidad since independence accelerated the migration of Indo-Trinidadian people to Canada. The tumultuous political atmosphere of the Caribbean islands created social insecurity in the Indo-Caribbean people. Even after their settlement of more than a century Indians were often regarded as second citizens of the Caribbean islands. Economic condition of the Caribbean countries, especially during post indenture period, compelled Indo-Caribbean people to migrate for the better life prospects and opportunities. This trend continued.

In Canada, Indo-Trinidadian people achieved a better living standard. The underlying aim of these people was to overcome the sense of double displacement and to sustain their unique identity in a multicultural environment. Thus, despite the sense of double displacement and duality Indo-Trinidadian people in Canada created a conglomeration with anew multiculturalism.

Emergence of Identities

*Now lounging in our bite-sized backyards
and pretending that we do not see
the curling vapours of our neighbour's burger feast
(the third this week)
wafting across the picket fence
we know that careless of our birthright
we have sold it for
a mess of pottage.*

(Coopsammy, 1986: 72)

In Canada, Indo-Trinidadians formed a minuscule group of twice displaced people. Indo-Caribbean Canadians is estimated to be around 200,000

people residing in various parts of Canada. Among them approximately 125,000 have their roots in Guyana and 50,000 have their links with Trinidad and Tobago, while a smaller group belongs to other Caribbean islands like Suriname and Jamaica. Migration, thus, is an act of moving from one geographical place to another where an overwhelming feeling of rootlessness and alienation, with nostalgia infused at the initial stage of stay in the host land. Paul White, introducing the collection *Writing Across Worlds: Literature and Migration*, remarks:

Migration therefore changes people and mentalities. New experiences result from the coming together of multiple influences and peoples, and these new experiences lead to altered or evolving representations of experience and of self-identity. Such representations are then manifest in cultural artefacts of many kinds—new forms of dress, of food cultures and of consumerism, new styles of music and of poetry, new political ideologies, new forms of literary production (1995: 1).

The study of Canadian Indo-Trinidadians, represents a story of the Indo-Caribbean people who are regarded as double diaspora. Their diasporic dis(re)placement and (re)location unfolds the history of migration of Indo-Trinidadian people in Canada. The socio-cultural linguistic duality of Indo-Trinidadians thwarted them in becoming a homogeneous community in Canada. Their second migration gave rise to a new language and literature consisting of intermingled socio-cultural manifestations. The emergence of identity for Indo-Trinidadian Diaspora, on the one hand, reflects their acclamation and acculturation of food, religion and music that their ancestors carried since their arrival on the Caribbean islands. On the other hand, in Canada, their link to the Caribbean way of life passed(s) through a variety of new changes and challenges.

On the side of challenges, Indo-Trinidadian migrants have been frequently confronted to mistaken identity in Canada, referred to as ‘Caribbean’ and ‘Asian’ because of their Indian ancestry and Caribbean bringing up. Their belonging to both the cultures, Indian and Caribbean, consequently led to ‘Chameleon Syndrome’ in Canada. Their resilience and attempt to establish authentic identity may not be to establish homogenous identity but to unleash the phenomena of ‘mistaken identity’. Indo-Trinidadians in Canada have remarkably become accustomed to Canadian main stream culture along with their hyphenated ‘Indo-Caribbean’ identity through their sheer sense of adjustment attitude in the host land. Singh remarks:

[S]ome Indo-Caribbean Hindu communities in Toronto are reconstructing their traditional Indo-Caribbean religious and cultural

identity by aligning strongly with their South Asian counterparts in order to create a new diasporic Indo-Canadian ethnic identity - a syncretism between the West (the Caribbean) and the East (India). Other groups are simply replicating their old Caribbean identity and cultural way of life right here in Canada (1998: 16).

Indo-Trinidadians in Canada, however, are not acknowledged either in the political or social mainstream though they contribute to the Canadian phenomena of multiculturalism. Indo-Trinidadian diaspora are the stakeholders of Canadian multicultural mosaic because they possess multiculturalism. In a globalised world, the emergence of an identity, however personalized, is a formation that depends on socio-political ambiance of the host land. To confront such diasporic phenomena, Indo-Trinidadian diaspora provides a secure and significant perspective of looking back (past) in the ‘rear-view mirror’ as well as future through the ‘windscreen’. They possess the perceptions of a perilous journey of their ancestors and are also aware of their new prosperous life endeavours in Canada.

Consolidation through Literature

The study of the Indo-Trinidadian writers in Canada examines thematic angles of the literary works of the writers who attempt to cope with the literary mainstream of Canada while attempting to sustain their distinct identity and establish themselves among multicultural identities in Canada. Indo-Trinidadian writers in Canada have also contributed to the main stream literary traditions of Canada. They have formed a new body of literature consisting of socio-cultural linguistic duality. Indo-Trinidadian-Canadian literature emerges as a distinct body of literature. It focuses on the diasporic experience, double displacement and manifestation of ethno-cultural linguistic duality exploring themes like the effects of colonialism, post colonialism, migration, hybridity and a search for individual identity in a diasporic context.

The writers have formed a significant body of literature, of which Harold Sonny Ladoo was probably the pioneer who migrated to Canada. Ladoo migrated as an established literary writer while other writers presently living in Canada, had migrated for higher studies or migrated with their families.

Harold Sonny Ladoo’s first novel *No Pain Like This Body* (1972) illustrates the conditions of the indentured labourers during post indentured period, especially their persistent fight with the diseases they were exposed to while working on the ricefields and the violence in the society that constantly inculcated a phobia of loss of culture, and identity. His second novel, *Yesterday*, fol-

lowed a unique narrative technique of describing the conditions of Indo-Caribbean migrants in Canada.

In the Indo-Caribbean-Canadian diaspora, Shani Mootoo also emerged as a distinct writer. She brought new issues and themes among the Indo Caribbean writers to Canada. Her collection of short stories, *Out of Main Street* (1993) delineates the experiences of various Indo-Caribbean immigrants, especially Indo-Trinidadian immigrants in Canada.

Apart from the issues of diasporic consciousness, Mootoo presented ethno-cultural and linguistic disharmony between the Indians migrated from the Caribbean islands to Canada and Indians migrated from India to Canada. In the story *Sushila's Bhakti*, Mootoo depicts the journey of a *Brahmin* girl who strives to arrive at a place which she can consider as a final destination in life. Sushila's Indian name and actions like *mehndi* making, *puja*, *roti* making, are questioned in a hybrid society of Canada. Protagonists' trans-gender negotiation and corporal fulfilment is the chief characteristic of Mootoo's writings. Mootoo's stories pivot around the theme of lesbianism, homosexuality, cultural and gender identity crisis. Krishna Sarbadhikary in her book *Surviving Fracture—Writers of the Indo-Caribbean Diaspora*, remarks:

Shani Mootoo's gender bias manifests itself in some of her short stories, where heterosexual relationships are invariably unsatisfactory and incomplete. But her voice is never strident; rather the unhappy female figure is often a gentle, sensitive one, who nonetheless finds a way to deal with her loneliness in alien space (2007: 245).

In her novels *Cereus Blooms at Night* (1996) *Valmiki's Daughter*, *He Drown She in the Sea* (2005) Mootoo deals with issues like gender identity, multiculturalism and hybridity which reveals personal search for 'self'.

On the literary canon of the Indo-Caribbean Canadian diaspora, Rabindranath Maharaj appeared with his collections of short stories *The Interloper* (1995) *The Writer and his Wife and other Stories*, *The Book of Ifs and Buts* (2002). These deal with immigrants' experiences in Canada. Maharaj wrote five novels; *Homer in Flight* (1997), *The Lagahoo's Apprentice* (2000), *A Perfect Pledge* (2007), *The Picture of Nobody* (2010) and *The Amazing Absorbing Boy* (2010).

Homer in Flight deals with the journey of the protagonist, Homeward Santokie's experience in Canada. It unfolds the fundamental issues and conditions of Indo-Caribbean immigrants in Canada. Maharaj describes the doomed conditions of his protagonist:

No one is conscious of their frailties than a black or brown person in a white country. Every day you see new vulnerabilities exposed,

weaknesses you never knew existed. You are constantly forced into secrecies and illegalities because the courtesies granted to others are withheld from you. We reduce ourselves all the time (1995: 90).

In the literary works of female Indo-Trinidadian Canadian diaspora writers, Ramabai Espinet emerges as the torchbearer of female immigrants from the Caribbean islands. She has written several collections of poetry, short stories, children stories and a novel. Her debut collection of poetry *Nuclear Seasons* published in 1991 manifests Ramabai's clear and defiant female voice against the injustice towards women in society. Ramabai focuses on the description of familial activities, geographical description of landscapes and realistic picture of the conditions of women indentured labourers in Trinidad. Apart from poetry, Ramabai's short stories also provide a great range of themes and forms. The protagonists of her short stories are reenergized with gems of wisdom and fortified with enduring power.

Ramabai's first novel *The Swinging Bridge* encompasses the socio-political milieu of pre-independent India, post-indenture Trinidad and Canada of the 1990s. This multidimensional novel focuses on the prime issue of (re)construction of the identity of Indian women. Ramabai's characters drift in the memories of their past and present experiences in the adopted country. Along with her Caribbean concern, Ramabai has also manifested a female immigrant's voice to establish her distorted 'self.' Thus, in her literary writings, there is a strong, outspoken, bold voice of a female writer who does not only write for the sake of writing but desires change in the society such as in image and status of Indo-Caribbean women s in Canada.

Madeline Coopsammy is among those Indo-Caribbean writers who migrated to Canada from Trinidad during the 1960s. Coopsammy's manifestation of the themes of acculturation and migration recounts the history of cultural hybridity in the Caribbean islands and Canada. Coopsammy published her first collection of poems titled *Prairie Journey* in 2004. This debut collection of poetry records experiences of her youth in Trinidad, and of second migration to Canada, searching for identity and multiculturalism. In this collection, the poem *The Second Migration*, is widely acclaimed. In her other poem, *The Birth of Roti*, she celebrates 'Roti culture' and describes how this admired cuisine becomes an identity not only in the Caribbean but also in Canada. She feels privileged in narrating the history of *Roti* in the Caribbean and Canada. She describes how *Roti* started among people of Indo-Caribbean Canadian diaspora community:

Today our Roti-loving culture is everywhere
Carried to the farthest corners of our multicultural earth

this global village
 free-trade zones
 the refugee-filled metropolises
 of New York, Winnipeg,
 London or Miami (2004: 7–8).

Thus, Coopsammy introduces a new issue that also plays a crucial role in marginalization and cultural discrimination of Indo-Caribbean people. Through food habit, Coopsammy attempts to reveal the differences in culture and status.

Clyde Hosein is a new name to Indo-Caribbean Canadian diaspora literature. He is known for his collection of short stories titled, *The Killing of Nelson John and other Stories*, which appeared in 1980. The description of colonial Trinidad in most of the stories in the aforesaid collection is a graphic and encompassing social reality presenting heart rendering narratives of the indentured labourers.

Ishmael Baksh is another Indo-Trinidadian writer in Canada who has contributed with his single novel *Black Light*. The novel depicts racism in the academic field, demonstrating how contemporary issues relate to attitudes of professional life. Baksh's main idea is to present the bare reality and racism prevailing in the society.

Conclusion

The literature of the Indo-Trinidadian writers in Canada presents a kaleidoscopic view of the doubly displaced Indian diaspora community. It reflects various experiences and perceptions of the writers during their journey of migration and settlement in Canada. It also inscribes the change in socio-cultural and linguistic aspects. While they have faced many challenges, including the identity crisis which almost all writers reflect on, their migration to Canada has also benefited them. Canada has played a vital role in providing a proper stage for the Indo-Caribbean diaspora writers. As many of the Indo-Caribbean diaspora writers came to Canada for their higher learning, Canadian educational policies and socially secured atmosphere helped them. As a result, in Canada, Indo-Trinidadian diaspora writers have accomplished a wide range of successes in their literary production. Canadian multiculturalism and hybridity benefited in the form of new themes and topics in the literary work of the Indo-Caribbean Canadian writers.

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