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## Changing Patterns of Sexuality in Caribbean: Indian diaspora and popular culture.

Kalyani



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# **Changing Patterns of Sexuality in Caribbean: Indian diaspora and popular culture.**

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**Global Research Forum on Diaspora and Transnationalism**

**K-1/114, First Floor, C R Park, New Delhi-110019,**

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## Abstract:

Sexuality has always been a subject of hierarchically positioning one's identity by constructing a superior masculinity vis-à-vis a frail, docile and submissive feminine counterpart. Representation of sexuality and gender identity within Indian Diaspora was no exception to it. The identity of 'Jajhaji' women was more of a reworking within the Indian identity and Western Creole identity with which they constantly seem to struggle. However the very fact that women within diasporic culture were wage earners and that they displayed a sense of solidarity or 'sisterhood' by virtue of their fewer number and historical location (since majority of them were deserted women, practicing prostitutes and Brahmin widows), understanding gender within Indian Diaspora stands far more complex than understanding it merely as a 'dialectics of sex'. Poetry sung by these women thus often became a tool to capture their solitude and their struggle to construct their own spaces in a far destined and alienated land. Being an indentured labourer was newer space and experience that they were thrown open to. They did not have any relationship baggage (given the fact that their social composition explained the periphery of society they belonged to). This brought about newer dimensions with which they would associate themselves like motherhood, reworking of myths and even education towards the later half century as modes of their emancipation. Gender identity among Indian Diaspora also needs to be located within the larger discourse of wave of feminism in Caribbean as feminism that emerged within these spaces were unique and quintessentially focused on women's identity and issues for the reason engagement of feminism with Diaspora enabled feminism transcend ethnic or racial lines. The aim of my paper would be to locate the gender dimension among Indian Diaspora within the moment of history and also to understand its uniqueness in terms of how it influenced the larger discourse of feminism.

Keywords: Gender, Jajhaji-bahen, Indian diaspora and sisterhood.

## Author(s)

Kalyani is a Doctoral Scholar at Centre for the Study of Social Systems, School of Social Sciences (CSSS/SSS), Jawaharlal Nehru University, New Delhi. She is presently doing her Ph.D in Sociology. Her area of interest is gender studies, popular culture and identity politics. She has written her M.Phil on title "Representation of women's images in Print media: Understanding Mediatized space of women in India". Her doctoral thesis is on the topic "Forms and Practices of Resistance in Popular Culture: Exploring Sites of Gender violence in Uttar Pradesh". Email: kalyani.official.5@gmail.com

Statement: All the views expressed in the paper are of the author(s).

# Changing Patterns of Sexuality in Caribbean: Indian diaspora and popular culture.

## Kalyani

### Introduction:

Understanding Indo-Caribbean women and sexuality needs a critical engagement with the writers who have imagined the cultural and the political possibilities of the diaspora as it has flourished over time. Some of the major works done in understanding this tradition is by Joy Mahabir and Mariam Pirbhai, who have tried to unfold the female bonds of solidarity that were developed during indentureship. The term Jahaji-behen itself became the term to connote the female solidarity that was eventually developed under the plantation system. To understand the term and meanings that gets associated with the term 'Jahaji-bahen' one needs to revisit the historical juncture and conditions under which this term has emerged. Some of the reflections about historical narratives within which the term 'Jahaji-Bahen' finds its reference, have been reflected in literary works of poets and novelist like Janet Naidu, Peggy Mohan, Mahadai Das, Lakshmi Persaud et. el. Literary writing about women's history has a tendency to look at history of these women beyond statistical enquiry. This methodological shift has enriched understanding of gender dynamics by engaging with both public and private memory of women who had experienced these historical shifts due to colonial history and indentureship. Such writings have engaged with women in terms of their life stories and with their experiences as indentured labourers, servitude, colonialism and creolization.

### Objectives:

1. To understand Indo-Caribbean sexuality by looking into the historical processes of making and re-making of gender identity and sisterhood.
2. To understand the meanings and changing dynamics of Caribbean music by looking into genre like soca-calypso and its role in reconstruction of gender identity.
3. To look into and understand the uniqueness of Caribbean feminism and the role of popular culture in constructing it.

### A Historical trajectory of Indo-Caribbean women:

The history of indentureship dates back to time when 'coolies' were deported to distinct land as plantation labourers. They belonged to a particular section and community so called as the 'untouchables'. Some of these communities were Dhangars (hill tribe), Kurmis, Lohars etc. (Tinker, 1974:54). The social and caste composition of these communities were reflected in some of the annual reports of British India which showed that majority of these communities belonged to agricultural caste and low caste artisans (ibid, 55). The European sugar plantation owners needed cheap and industrious labourforce which these section of society provided for. However later these communities settled and became part of what is called as Indo-Caribbean diaspora. From twentieth century till present, the Indo-Caribbean diaspora have faced both converging and diverging experiences of the African and creole culture. The diverging relationship is particularly witnessed in Indo-caribbean marriages that are still widely practiced with the traditional fervour. Arranged marriages imbibing Indian culture are still prevalent and it is also expected among the educated urban middle class (Samuel and Wilson, 2009: 97). However Samuel and Wilson (2009) while giving an assessment of the Caribbean marriages (particularly Guyanese) have talked about ways in which 'Arranged marriages' that are practiced in these societies did

had some digressions from the conventional Hindu marriage practice towards 1960s. For instance, the bride groom were permitted to see each other prior to the marriage, which the conventional Hindu marriage did not permit for. According to Mohammed (2002) Trinidad had 4.69 creoles per 100 unmixed Indians. Similarly for Port of Spain Indian Creoles constituted merely 21.37. However, there was a rise in Inter-racial marriages from last 20 years and have become what can be referred as a 'fairly common' (ibid, 98) practice.

However the cultural assimilation is also witnessed in forms of cultural fusion that has happened particularly amongst the popular forms of dance and music, about which paper will discuss extensively later. One can thus argue that the process of hybrid culture or salad culture as one may call, is eventually developing with gradual changes in cultural patterns.

### **Cultural Representation and identity:**

The cultural turn led towards 1960s opened up many newer dimensions to understand cultural dynamics. The question of representation and identity also underwent a change, as it had 'no unitary or continuous past' to draw from (Needham, 1970:36-37). Stuart Hall had tried to explain this cultural complexity through the ways in which identity and representation became meaningful through the process of consumption and production. When one looks into the Caribbean culture, the dimension of production and consumption looks well enmeshed within the popular cultural forms like Calypso. Calypso or the Chutney-Soca tradition emerged not only as the cultural genre but its popularity became very much part of the economic consumption pattern. These popular songs often have their own record companies like Jamician Me Crazy Records, Spice Island Records, Mohabir Records etc.<sup>1</sup> Draupatee Ramgoonai's popular Chutney Soca music "Roll up the tassa" alone gained much popularity through concerts and cassette culture.

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1 . <https://www.thebetterindia.com/60362/chutney-soca-indo-caribbean-music-fusion-bhojpuri/>

Besides the consumption and economic side to the Chutney-Soca tradition, the popular culture also played important role in reimagining the Caribbean women. Reyes (1986) argues that music became the language for women to speak out. For instance, in song 'Ah, Done Wit' Dat' the woman speaks aloud about her violent partner and that she could no longer tolerate him. Similarly other song like 'Run Away' openly expresses the discontent of women. Thus the cultural identity, which earlier had fixity of meaning, turns topsy-turvy with the newer cultural dynamics that penetrates through popular music like Chutney-Soca.

### **The Genre of calypso:**

The chutney-soca saw its huge success in 1990s within Caribbean music and was associated with the seasonal appearance of carnival. The genre witnessed influence of Indian music in terms of instruments like use of Dholak, Sitar etc. The music saw its close connection with sexuality as often the imagery of cooking, eating etc. would be well inserted within music with pun intended in it. The element of sexuality within soca/calypso is also rooted in 'chutney' tradition that was explicit in its overtones about sexuality. Niranjana (2006) argues the popularity of calypso music within Trinidadian space actually shows how Indians and Africans together have successfully dominated the postcolonial space of Trinidad (2006:122).

When one looks into contribution of Indian diaspora within it, one also needs to look into the thematic changes which it has undergone into calypso genre and how has East Indian polity and economy has played a role bringing about these changes (ibid,131). The gradual re-forming of feminine identity through its interaction with other cultures was a product of the cultural assertion that the Indo-Trinidadians and Afro-Trinidadians have constantly engaged with. In this assimilative process have emerged the creolization of

Trinidadians and a cultural unity often reflected through music.

### **Calypso: History and Meanings.**

In this context it is significant to reflect upon some of these changing patterns that have emerged within the popular culture. The emergence of Soca/Calypso music itself reflects upon the hybridity of cultural pattern and also the changes these popular forms are making in the marriage patterns. Mahabir (2006) has described carnival spirit in 'Jouvert' where different cultures mingle together and new kinship patterns emerge in the process of intermixing of culture. These changing patterns opens up newer ways in which sexuality is both contested as well as liberated. Through the character Annaise (in his work 'Jouvert'), Mahabir explains the open-endedness and freedom she enjoys in carnival space like Jouvert. Such freedom was otherwise not available to women earlier who were stuck within the Hindu laws and tradition. Thus the process of assimilation in Indo-Caribbean diaspora has opened up dimensions were openness to sexuality and of making a 'choice' has somewhere widened its horizon.

One can also understand the changing patterns of family and kinship structure by looking into the transition from traditional Matkhor to the emerging popular genre like Chutney. Mathkhor is a ritual performed during the wedding ceremonies. Mathkhor, as Sooden (1999) points out is the sexual expression of women, which women within Hinduism were not permitted to express publicly, hence cultural symbolism was used as a method to express it. The ceremony is associated with instruments like Dholak, tassa (large drums) and Dhantal (long stick used for beating drums) and is also accompanied by music. It is performed within the private spaces. The ritual however is not static and differences in its performance have appeared over a

period of time. For instance, Tina Ramnarine points out that the ritual initially had involvement of men as well as women however over a period of time it became an all women activity performed within the private-sphere. The ritual involves digging up of earth, which represented fertility symbolism. The designation of private-sphere for ceremony symbolizing 'fertility' and sexuality shows the ways in which sexuality of women was considered as mysterious and denied a sense of 'publicness'.

### **The Changing Dynamics of Calypso:**

Over the time the dance forms and music has however got changed and it has reflected more as the blend of Indian forms with the calypso music. Popularly known as Chutney, the dance form had come into vogue particularly from 1990s onwards. The term was articulated by Indo-Trinidadian community and has become part of Indo-Caribbean diaspora. The term Chutney-soca was coined by Drupatee Ramgooni and is very much part of the popular music within caribbean culture. The popular form roots its origin not only in traditions like Matkhor but it is also borrowed from Calypso, Soca and Rap. The status of this genre (Chutney) is reflected in the economics which this form of music has tended to generate. This form is very popular during weddings. The cassette and recording of these songs increases manifold particularly during festivities like Divali, Phagwa and Hosay (Manuel 1998:30). The Chutney form as Barratt (2009) has argued is a more enabling for women in particular as they are able to shed out their inhibitions about sexuality through the enactment of this form of dance and music. Further the new fusion form of music has also developed a sense of solidarity between Indo-caribbean and black women. Thus, the music genre has become not only a way to shed-off sexual inhibition but also to blur the racial boundaries that existed between different

racial groups. This can be considered as turning point in understanding the flourishing of Caribbean feminism-

The dance of Chutney has a flamboyant style and involves sensuous pelvic rotation. Such bold form of popular style has changed the ways in which sexuality was traditionally asserted. From Mathkor to Chutney there has been gradual evolution of women from private to public sphere. Besides developing a sense of solidarity amongst black and Indo-Caribbean women, such forms of dance has also redefined the ways in which women might choose to enjoy without being judged for obscenity/lewdness or sexual promiscuity. It is significant to mention here that in most of the patriarchal cultures, the social control whether it be in forms of socializing, drinking or dancing is mostly applicable for women while men are freely allowed to surpass these socially determined constraints. In this context, the emergence of popular forms of Chutney have certainly enabled women to have greater control over public-sphere. It has also increased 'bargaining power' (Manuel, 1998: 33) of women as the newer dance form has enabled them to express and exhibit their sexuality beyond a private-sphere. It has not only loosened male control over women's sexuality but women now are free to be assertive of their sexuality. Draupadi Ramgoonai, for instance had released song like 'Pepper Pepper', 'Lick down mihNani' which is full of sexual innuendoes.

Critics to Chutney form have argued that this form of music tradition is a way to renounce Indian culture and tradition. However, such arguments are oversimplified as sexual innuendoes were never isolated from the cultural practice. Mathkor and its symbolism of sex and fertility was always present within the Indian society. One can even talk about the 'joking relationship' that exists within culture and has a social sanctity. However, female sexuality has occupied the domain of private

and has been expressed in a covert way. The opening up sexuality whether it is forms of popular genre has certainly opened up newer dimension understanding sexuality.

For Indo-Caribbean women the experience of 'diasporic dislocation' created a 'double displacement'- (Mehta, 2004: 3) and it would be too simplistic to club their experience with the overall Indian diasporic experience at large. By 'double displacement' it means that the women like men who were transported to these lands were widows, low caste women, destitute etc. They belonged to the periphery of society. Secondly, their movement to far of lands not had only uprooted them from their native lands, but the very fact that crossing the 'kala-pani' as taboo within hindu tradition had alienated them further from their cultural belongingness. The cultural and familial alienation was also faced due to the presence of dominant Afro-Caribbean culture. However, the women's experience of diaspora had been a dynamic process instead of being static. Rossane Kanhai through her reading of two novels 'Lucy' and 'Jasmine' has tried to capture the layers of multiple experience woman goes through as part of a diasporic community. "Jasmine" has shown how women have changed and transgressed some these boundaries and have assimilated themselves within the Creole culture.

### **Locating Indo-Caribbean Feminism:**

Within the post-colonial studies Mohanty has criticised the monolith of 'Third world feminism' and the need to break-up this monolith which the western feminist have construed. This breakdown of 'third world feminism' is indeed apt even in the Caribbean context, where the history of indentureship and eventual assimilation of cultures has generated an experience for woman that is unique in itself. The ways in which Afro-Caribbean and Indo-Caribbean women have interacted in the

period of history and changes in the interaction pattern that have happened over a period of history needs a deeper meditation. The sense of sisterhood that women of different ethnicity and race have developed over a period of time reflects upon the solidarity that they have developed over a period of time to overcome an alienating environment.

The history of Indo-Caribbean women can be first traced from 30th May 1845, when ship *Fatel Rozack*, carrying twenty-one female first landed on Trinidadian shore (Rhoda Reddock, 1998). These women called as 'Jahaji-bhain' accompanied each other singing songs and developing a sense of solidarity with each other. Joy Mahabir has argued that even if the blood relatives were not found 'they recreated families with their Jahaji and estate relations allowing the deep roots of kinship to flourish' (Mahabir, 2006:142). The women taken through indentureship would often have spiritual cohesiveness- and cultural continuity. The rituals like *Matikor* were the examples of the patterns of cultural continuity which they were often part of.

The impact of Caribbean-feminism is also witnessed particularly within the Indo-Caribbean writings. Within the Indo-Caribbean writings major shifts have been witnessed after the writings changed hands from male writers to female writers. While male writers (Sam Selvan, V. S. Naipaul, Shiva Naipaul et. al.) wrote about women generally referring to mythologies, women writings have shown a reflection upon their own selves and involvement of their subjectivities. The coming up Indo-Caribbean women writers like Espinet, Lakshmi Persadet. al. saw a major shifts in the ways in women were perceived within the literary discourse. Mahabir and Pirbahai (2009) have argued that literary practices of some of the writers Rossane Kanhai, Sheila Rampersad et.al. have tried to unsettle the 'racial and cultural subversion' by bringing in the dimension of

newer spaces created as a result of inter-mixing of cultures. For instance, Kanhai talks about the 'dougla' as a new form of poetics that have emerged over a period of time due to inter-mixing of Indo-Caribbean and African identity. It is significant to mention here that the word which once had a derogatory meaning and was used to refer to a 'bastard' had undergone change with an entire newer set of meanings representing hybridity of cultures.

Caribbean writing as Dash (1989) talks about is an engagement with 'terrain of unspeakable' (Dash, 1989: 297). It engages with questioning of a controlled and totalising structure and instead engages with the formlessness, plurality and latency (ibid, 297). This sense of plurality in particular has enabled the women writers to develop a sense of bondage with spaces that earlier were more restricted. Birbalsingh while exploring some of the works of ShaniMootoo has tried to highlight the sense of fluidity which has gone into works like 'Valmiki's Daughter'. The works reflects the dynamics of ways in which gendered identities are engaged in a constant negotiation with the newer identities. For instance, the novel highlights the cultural milieu of contemporary Trinidad where an upper class Hindu family is depicted. However, the family has undergone changes in terms of values that they imbibed as Biharis. The family undergoes churning of values as newer generation (the daughter of the family) is more inclined towards the Caribbean culture instead of the Indian culture. However, the generational gap is posed through the narrative of her mother who remains in the dilemma of accepting the changes. Thus, the gender relationship and sexuality has layers of complexity of acceptance as well as divergence which needs to be mediated upon. It has not been static rather acceptance of cultural plurality as well gender relations between different cultures have witnessed a series of changes.

## Conclusion:

Overall, the understanding of gender and sexuality within Caribbean context needs a broadening up by looking into the gender dynamics. The transition from Jahaji-Bahen to contemporary creole culture, gender has been a subject of constant contestation as well as negotiation. While some of these changing dynamics are visible in the changing cultural practices, like from Matikor to Chutney, others are witnessed through the changing dynamics of Marriage and Kinship structures. The methodological engagement to capture this dynamics through writings and through engagement with narratives of these women have helped one to understand the very subjectivity of women themselves in constructing these gender identities.

The paper has tried to locate Indo-Caribbean feminism by re-looking into the dynamics of popular culture like Chutney-Soca tradition. The sisterhood within Indo-Caribbean can be traced back to 'Jahaji-Bahen' when the solidarity of women made them come together into newer space with newer identities. The Caribbean culture as it stands today is however more than this. The coming together of Afro-Indian identity has unsettled the traditional genderidentity, as it had existed. In this reworking of identities also lies the language of reassertion of gender identity. Popular music like Calypso has thus become important sociological tool through which changing patterns of Caribbean sexuality and gender dynamics can be understood.

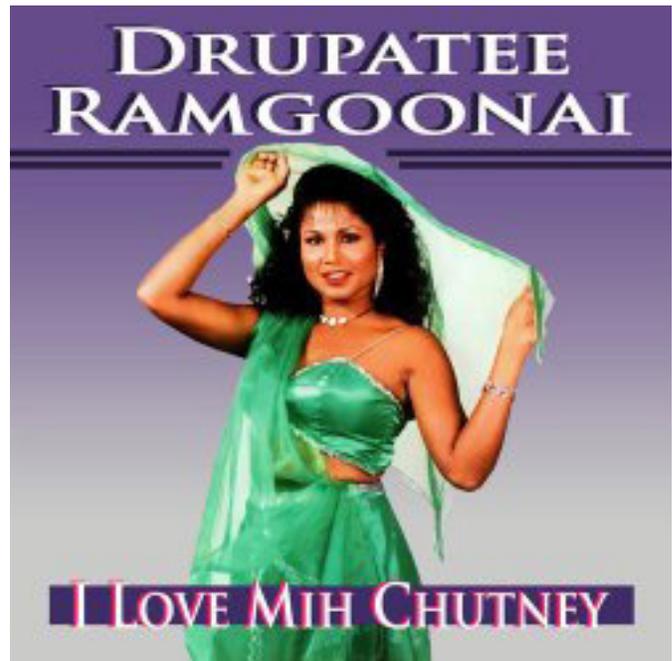


Image 1

(Source: <https://www.beatport.com/artist/drupatee-ramgoonai/550482> )



Image 2

(Source: <https://alchetron.com/Drupatee-Ramgoonai> )

About image:

DrupateeRamgoonai is popular Chutney-Soca musician. She is the pioneer to the term 'Chutney-soca' which has now become popular music genre in Caribbean culture.

Some of her popular tracks are 'Pepper', 'Hotter Than a Chulha', 'Doh Beat Yuh Wife' etc.

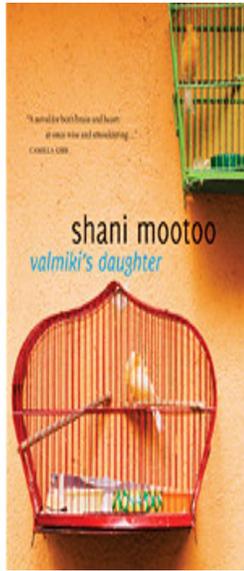


Image 3

(Source: <https://www.goodreads.com/book/show/6044931-valmiki-s-daughter> )

About the Image:

The popular work of ShaniMootoo's 'Valmiki's Daughter' is about the Trinidadian family and the changing gender roles and identity with time.

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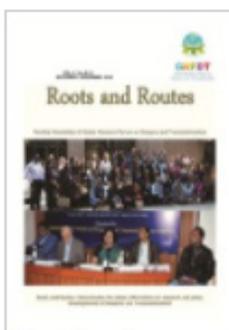




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Global Research Forum on Diaspora and Transnationalism (GRFDT) is a consortium of researchers and policy makers drawn from national and international universities, institutes and organizations. GRFDT is presently based in India and is shaping as the largest such group focusing specifically on the issues related to diaspora and transnationalism.

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