

CROSSING DARK WATERS: A PERSPECTIVE ON INDIAN AND WEST INDIAN POSTCOLONIAL FICTION.

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This essay is an attempt to contribute to recent scholarship on postcoloniality that claims there is no easy dichotomy between the West and its other, but an overlap of histories and territories in ineluctable relationships. I explore contested meanings and values in the collusion of cultural idioms and literary genre in the work of five novelists: R.K Narayan (India), V.S. Naipaul (Trinidad), Wilson Harris (Guyana), Sonny Ladoo (Trinidad), and Arnold Itwaru (Guyana/Canada). I argue that in the quest for a postcolonial literary poetics, signs and images of Hindu female divinity emerge in a signification that varyingly disrupts the logic of the narrative in an attempt to counter the burden of history.



My title comes from the Hindi *kali pani* (black waters), a phrase describing the impurity that Hindus are said to commit by the act of crossing the seas or travelling. For those overseas Indian communities that grew out of the system of indentured laborers (1838-1917, after abolition), the “dark waters” has become a symbol of the abyss that separates them from Bharat Mata (Mother India) and describes their condition of exile. This sense of psychic disempowerment is countered in folk and religious culture by symbolic substitutions of Ganga Mai (Mother Ganges), and the sacred flora that has been transplanted on the landscape of these new world Hindu communities.¹ The motif of “crossing waters” has obvious parallels with the “middle passage” crossed by slaves from Africa and indicates a connection between the origin and destiny of the Indian in the Caribbean to those of the African. While there is an evident overlap in the African and Indian experience, both are colonial subjects in exile: difference and homogeneity have been varyingly over- and underemphasized either to assuage ethnic conflict, to exploit it, or to assert a distinct cultural identity in an instinct of preservation in the face of political and social alienation.

The creation of new cultural forms and the maintenance of old ones in societies such as those of the West Indies, where the population is composed of so-called distinctive races, and their “ethnic” cultures, is a complex process. In such a multicultural arena, the ethnic groups often have competing or differing international goals or allegiances and the ways in which the fractured or diverse elite within a postcolonial nation links its culture to the international arena is fraught with difficulty.

Anthropological studies of West Indian cultural forms reveal that cultural survivals in the diaspora are not always those that have demonstrated more tenacity in the face of modernization or westernization, nor can they always be simply reduced to a number of cultural characteristics or traits that can be identified with one or another cultural group. Brackette Williams in "Nationalism, Traditionalism and Cultural Inauthenticity" argues that the Moslem tadjah (taziyah) festival in Guyana did not survive because it had become unacceptable to the Moslem leadership in its creolized form. Williams points out that in the cultural arena of the post-indentureship period, Moslem transnational allegiances became stronger and more prestigious and were driven to reject the national local creolized celebration known as "rum tadjah."

Reversely and paradoxically we also find local creole forms that develop as affirmations of traditional orthodoxy. Karna Singh in his essay on "The Brahmin in the Sinhasan" shows how the introduction of a local feature into Hindu temple architecture is an assertion of traditional spirit. He points out that in Guyanese temple architecture, *the sinhasan* (lion seat) or seat of the Brahmin priest, is introduced as a way of elevating the pandit, replacing the traditional *garba griha* (sanctum). In this case the creole feature is an affirmation in the anxiety or threat of loss of a tradition in which the pandit is perceived as the custodian and most articulate extension of authentic Hindu India. An Indocreole feature therefore becomes an assertion of Hindu orthodoxy.

If there is no easy dichotomy between authenticity and creolization or modernity, then the impulse behind the quest for cultural forms is an anxiety for cultural arrival where culture is continually being molded as individuals confront their social world and try to reform it.

Central to the understanding of the poetics of postcolonial literature is recognizing how this discursive negotiation contributes to the process of redefining the colonial subject. If there is a confrontation between the imperatives of the nationalisms of the emergent postcolonial nations with traditional transnational allegiances, the English language adds another dimension to this cultural confrontation as the writer has to become engaged in writing within the possibilities that a particular literary tradition provides for him. In this scenario of "crossing" discourses where cultures are constantly being reinvented and rediscovered, literature constantly finds new narrative and poetic motifs. Literature, like modern anthropology, is required to view modern reality as a juxtaposition of alternative cultural viewpoints that interact as dynamic constructions (and do not simply exist simultaneously as static fragments).

Naipaul, Narayan, Orientalism and the Indian Diaspora

The discursive formation and practice of orientalism is significant for understanding the colonial representation of Indians in the West Indies and their postcolonial predicament. Anthropologist Philip Singer puts into contra-distinction in West Indian society the Christian Afrocreole (mimicking the west)

and the Hindu West Indian (representing a "little tradition") that evolves in dialectic with the Indian (Hindu) "great tradition" as its source of vitality. While many would dispute such a clear demarcation between the Hindu and the creole, his position is founded in certain realities of cultural history, colonial management, and psychosocial tensions that have given rise to certain ethnic stereotypes, some of which are of interest when examining subject formation and representation in West Indian literature.

A comparison of Naipaul's and Narayan's attitudes and concerns regarding the interaction between cultural tradition, novelistic representation and the English language will provide insight in this respect. Both have undergone the colonial experience, both write in English, and both discuss the resultant implications for their practice as writers. Narayan has always lived and written in India, whereas Naipaul's forefathers had crossed the *kali pani* to Trinidad where he was born and grew up. This last factor may partially explain the different attitudes of the two authors. The pressure of creole cultural discourse is always present in the West Indian experience though much may also be due to differences of sensibility between the two writers. Naipaul's comments on Narayan's novels in *India: a Wounded Civilization* are interesting in what they reveal about the two writers' different approaches to "crossing" a western language and genre with their Indian cultural experience.

For Naipaul, those who crossed the dark waters brought the Indian darkness with them: "with their blinkered view of the world they were able to recreate eastern Uttar Pradesh or Bihar wherever they went. They had been able to ignore the vastness of India; so now they ignored the strangeness in which they had set" (1972: 37). The theme of the Indian darkness, so prevalent in the discourse of western modernity, in which India came to illustrate as Halbfass shows "the theme of the eclipse and suppression of natural light through superstition and ritualism" (60).

His approach to novel writing and his judgments about what he believes to be the failure of Indian intellectual life and oriental thought are informed by this theme. Naipaul finds it difficult to bridge the gap between his Hindu background and the assumptions that he considers inherent in the novel form. Consequently, he also believes that Narayan (while conceding he is a natural writer) has difficulty with the novel form because he cannot shed a traditional oriental perspective. This seems to reveal more about Naipaul's own preoccupations with novel writing than a true understanding of Narayan's achievement. Naipaul, in his anxious self-consciousness, questions the relevance of the English language, and the literary tradition it brings with it, to his Hindu/West Indian cultural experience.

The language was ours to use as we pleased. The literature that came with it was therefore of peculiar authority; but this literature was like an alien mythology. There was, for instance, Wordsworth's notorious poem about the daffodil. A pretty little flower, no doubt; but we had never seen it.

Could the poem have meaning for us: the superficial prompting of this argument, which would have confined all literatures to the countries of their origin, was political; but it was really an expression of dissatisfaction at the emptiness of our formless, unmade society. To us, without a mythology, all literatures were foreign.

Every writer is, in the long run, on his own; but it helps, in the most practical way, to have a tradition. The English language was mine, the tradition was not. (1972: 23)

This implies that by the very act of writing a novel, Naipaul is immediately stepping out of the world he is writing about, because the language and form he has adopted embody judgments and assumptions at odds with the people about whom he is writing. While this raises interesting questions about the problem of applying the assumptions and resources of English literature to non-European societies, it begs the question of whether literary genre or judgment are inseparable from social (and political) assumptions. Landeg White, writing on Naipaul, also assumes that any exploration of a Hindu community within the novel form (whose requirements are to show individuals interacting with their environment) results in a gap between the assumptions of the novel and those of the characters with their beliefs about karma and predestination: "It is hard to see how this Hindu doctrine of karma, this belief that character is determined by events in a previous life, could be sustained throughout a full length novel" (16). This view ignores the possibility of intertextual play (if we also consider that culture is a kind of text) where alternative forms and viewpoints can parody each other and which has become so prevalent in literature arising from a context of cultural encounter. The parameters of the novel can be expanded to include new possibilities and worldviews. George Marcus and Michael M.J. Fischer also point out that one of the concerns of anthropology has been to elaborate a cosmology and philosophic mindset alternative to that of Europe, such as French cultural ethnography of West Africa in the 30's, that emerged in dialogue with surrealism.

It is not the assumptions of the novel that lead Naipaul to an indictment of his Indian cultural experience, but rather the idiom that Naipaul has chosen, which is fraught with anxiety about his own redundancy to the metropolitan gaze: "To be a colonial is to be a little ridiculous and unlikely, especially in the eyes of someone from the metropolitan country" (1972: 32). "To be an Indian from Trinidad is to be unlikely" (1972: 33). "So long as the real Indians remained on the other side of the world, there was little confusion. But when Indians in 1845 began coming over to some of the islands Columbus called the Indies, confusion became total" (1972: 34). "To be Latin American or Greek American is to be known. To be an East Indian from the West Indies is to be a perpetual surprise" (1972: 33).

The pressure of the racial gaze is apparent in the representations of such figures as the "miserly coolie" and the "irrational brahmin" at the beginning of the novel considered to be his masterpiece, *A House for Mr. Biswas*, revealing a

complicity between the idiom of the imperial past and postcolonial history. One wonders what Landeg White means when he says that in the first part of *A House for Mr. Biswas*, "Pastoral," Naipaul protects his characters who live in a world of religious myth, which cannot stand once he moves into the wider world of creole Trinidad. The gaze of the "wider world" is there on the first page. The representation of Biswas' father as a miser in the first few lines of "Pastoral" is a repetition of a stereotype of the Indian indentured laborer as a miser who saved all his money and bought gold, an image that can be found in 19th century descriptions of life in the colony.² It is also found in earlier literature, notably in the character Ramgolall in Mittelholzer's *Corentyne Thunder*. The historian Walter Rodney argues that the Afro-Creoles perpetuated the Indian stereotype Sammy (from the Indian "swami"), which was invented by the planter class and perpetuated by creoles, who felt they were more civilized because they had adopted the outward trappings of European clothing, language and general deportment (180). The "Sammy," as well as being miserly, is a mixture of self-contradictory attributes. We find such a figure in Pandit Jairam who assumes the task of training Biswas in the ways of a Brahmin:

He believed in God, fervently, but claimed it was not necessary for a Hindu to do so. He attacked the custom some families had of putting up a flag after a religious ceremony; but his own front garden was a veritable grove of bamboo poles with red and white pennants in varying stages of decay. He ate no meat but spoke against vegetarianism: when Lord Rama went hunting, did they think it was just for the sport? (50-51)

The humor privileges a metropolitan audience who may be ignorant of the debates that the above contradictory views embody: that there is a school of thought that considers Hinduism not just a set of religious practices, but a cosmology that also includes the possibility of atheism, and that the vegetarian tradition did not in fact originate in the Vedas, as the Indo-Aryan invaders were not vegetarian. This raises the question that a reader of any postcolonial text must ask: to which implicit readers is the irony directed?

The satire is also directed at caste issues of purity and pollution. Biswas develops stomach problems after being forced to eat an entire bunch of bananas that were given as a gift to the pandit. Having eaten one banana from the bunch, the pandit forces him to eat them all so as not to waste them; he can no longer eat them himself as they have been touched by Biswas. This leads to further impurities:

Ever afterwards, whenever he was excited or depressed or angry his stomach swelled until it was taut with pain. A more immediate result was that he became constipated. He could no longer relieve himself in the mornings and he was aware of the dishonour he did the gods by doing the puja unrelieved. (55)

In his critique of Narayan, Naipaul draws too sharp a boundary between the traditional (oriental) and the modern. He fails to see that writing and reading in India take place in a society that has gone through a colonial transformation that makes the set of oppositions he establishes inappropriate. Moreover, this misconception accounts for the expectation Naipaul himself has when he comes to read Narayan's novels.

Narayan is much more at ease about crossing these boundaries and does not reveal Naipaul's nagging anxiety over the use of western genres and the English language to explore his own cultural experience. He comments in "The Problem of the Indian Writer" that: "The English language brought with it not only a new type of literature but all the world's literature in translation. New forms such as the novel and short story came to be noticed, revealing not only new artistic possibilities for a writer but also stimulating a new social awareness" (14). Again on the language question, he comments:

Every writer has to keep in mind his own regional language, the national language which is Hindi, the classical language Sanskrit (this is often called a "dead language" but dead only as a mountain could be dead) and above all the English language which seems nearly inescapable. With the impact of modern literature we began to look at the gods, demons, sages, and kings of our mythology and epics, not as remote concoctions but as types and symbols, possessing psychological validity even when seen against the contemporary background. (19)

Naipaul fails to see the imbrication of the traditional and the modern in Narayan, probably because Narayan presents a more favorable evaluation of the Indian cultural experience than he would himself concede. Naipaul takes *The Vendor of Sweets* as one example of Narayan's failures as a novelist. He perceives the novel as a "fable" that is "so elegiac and simplistic, exalting purity and old virtue in the figure of Jagan, [it] is a confused book; and its confusion holds much of the Indian confusion of today" (37). Naipaul's reading is bewildering unless we see it as another Naipaulian discourse anxious about the fragility of the oriental world from which he originated. There is indeed a deep affinity with the Hindu spirit in Narayan, but this is much more an exploration of the imaginative possibilities this offers for living and understanding human life than it is a dogma or metaphysics. It is also an exploration of cultural habits, reactions, and modes of perceptions, told with a close attention to the details of everyday life, which are so characteristic of the novel as a genre. In the very first lines of the novel *The Vendor of Sweets*, there is comic irony directed at Jagan's (the sweet vendor's) limited intellect: "Conquer taste, and you will have conquered the self," said Jagan to his listener, who asked, "Why conquer the self?" Jagan said, "I do not know, but all our sages advise us so" (5).

Further incongruities are revealed a few lines later, when Jagan lights incense for the goddess Lakshmi. Jagan preaches suppression of the senses; around him the atmosphere is "charged with the scent of jasmine and incense and

imperceptibly blended with the fragrance of sweetmeats frying in ghee, in the kitchen across the hall” (5).

Then the conversation passes on to experiments with new sweets and the price of sugar. Whereas intellectual failure would seem so intolerable to Naipaul, human limitation and incongruity are both comic and celebratory in Narayan as an expression of the multifariousness of life and the naiveté of being human.

Naipaul’s indictment of this novel is largely based on the novel’s conclusion. Jagan renounces the world in reaction to his spoilt son and withdraws into a retreat with a sculptor of religious statues where he hopes to see the goddess come out of a stone statue. Naipaul sees Jagan’s withdrawal as reflecting the smallness of the Hindu world that easily shatters as soon as it expands when confronted with modernity, an act of despair from a shattered world “a retreat to magic and incantation, a retrogression to an almost African night. It is the death of civilization, the final corruption of Hinduism” (39). This rhetoric against Hinduism tells us much more about Naipaul than it bears resemblance to Narayan’s text. Naipaul recoils in terror at the idea that the excessive signification of the oriental goddess and her ecstasy might disrupt the logic of his western text. The sculptor’s words to Jagan remind us that the extent of her divinity is contained within the imagination of her author:

But where is that block? Where is it? The two-foot square one? It could not have grown limbs and walked off – although, let me tell you, if an image is perfect, it cannot be held down on its pedestal. I always remember the story of the dancing figure of Nataraj, which was so perfect that it began a cosmic dance and the town itself shook as if an earthquake had rocked it, until a small finger on the figure was chipped off. We always do it; no one ever notices it, but we always create a small flaw in every image; it’s for safety. (85)

This imperfection brings the divine into the realm of the human and ensures the continuity of the flow of life, implying that renunciation may never be complete. As Jagan prepares to enter his new *janma*, Narayan carefully balances his text between the lightly comic, as Jagan fastidiously ties up his business and everyday affairs before retreating, and a tender lyricism, as we feel his loneliness while his life is drawing to a close and he tenderly recalls his marriage and early married life. If there is a hint of the divine in human consciousness, there is also a prevalent sense of a continuing ancient tradition that gives meaning to human experience. It is the sense of the continuous flow of life that gives texture to his writing and places him firmly in the tradition of the novelistic genre. There is not a monolithic Hindu oriental reaction to modernity as Naipaul would have it, but a sensitive and skilful interweaving of a western narrative genre with Hindu religious and poetic myth. The satire of modernity that we see in Jagan’s son is not simply crude as Naipaul would like us to believe; it is a recognition of the complexity of a civilization that is five thousand years old, and which cannot

easily admit the adolescent quality of the modernization that Jagan's son represents.

Naipaul, Wilson Harris and a New Poetics

I do not wish merely to restate the case for the widely discussed "Naipaul fallacy," but rather take on Sara Suleri's challenge in *The Rhetoric of English India* and explore whether the new generation of postcolonial writers should make a pact with V.S. Naipaul (like Ezra Pound vis-à-vis Walt Whitman) and affirm: "V.S. Naipaul, I have hated you long enough, let there be commerce between us." Narayan does not feel threatened about exploring his own cultural experience (he is aware of the mountain-like presence of Sanskrit) through the eyes of another's language and literature, whereas Naipaul, looking at himself as "other," is reminded of the disappointment of his own history. Kenneth Ramchand recognizes that Naipaul is caught in that colonial moment when a world is in decay and a new world not yet born (192). If there is a cosmogonic yearning in Biswas' desire to own his own house, and whether the acquisition of a house signals a cultural arrival remain rather dubious within the void of the colonial society he depicts. The failure of cultural arrival may be perceived in the feeling of sexual barrenness and sexual disappointment found in his novels.³ In contrast, in Narayan's *Waiting for the Mahatma*, set in the pre-Independence years of the Quit India campaign, the beautiful woman (called Bharati, feminine form of Bharat or India) who is Gandhi's protégée, is the spiritual bride of fantasy for the protagonist Sriram. Her inspiration leads him to deeds and misdeeds of which she does not approve, yet she holds the promise of hope for the future. To marry Sriram, Bharati waits for the Mahatma's approval, which is given just before his assassination.

It is left to West Indian writers other than Naipaul to seek fertile ground for new poetics. The Guyanese novelist Wilson Harris argues that Naipaul is guilty of "persuading" his readers to identify with the assumptions of individual status and historical context and of "consolidating" his preconception of humanity. Harris seeks a new poetics of fiction that attempts to open the individual's scale of choices and possibility of fulfillment by undermining the illusory authority of static identity. In a previous essay on Harris' novel *The Far Journey of Oudin*, I argue that the writer seeks to undermine the pressure of a negative historical legacy by drawing on a repository of discourses from Tantric lore and the Hermetic tradition, which reveal symbolic and structural parallels with the healing ritual and dance drama of the Kali puja practised in the region of Guyana where Harris was born. The *pujari* (folk priest) aims at attenuating the effects of a devotee's *karma* by inspiring hope for a better life. The ritual invokes ecstatic union with the Mother Goddess, enabling the devotee to re-enact his sense of origin and self and to imaginatively perceive his bodily experience and the specificity of his temporal experience as *maya* (or fiction). Oudin in Harris's text is an agent of the unconscious or of the original rhythm of the mother:

He looked across the river and into a distance, as into a timeless womb and unconscious landscape. He realizes that his fears were the faces of ancestral hate and killing turning weak and insubstantial in himself. There was no shadow of disquiet he could not overcome once he accepted his immateriality and nothingness; (210-11)

If history is otherness, then it must be consumed for life to be renewed. Upon Oudin's death, Beti, the mother of his child, devours the contract between Oudin and Ram and saves the inheritance for her unborn child; though she was illiterate "any kind of mysterious paper and appearance was to be swallowed" (1985: 135). Like Kali, the Goddess of Death, she devours all, even *kalika*, time itself, and thus renews her promise of fulfillment and regeneration. While she represents the dark age, *kaliyuga*, she is also the promise of the golden age to come. Beti's devouring of the contract represents the end of the negative historical legacy: "Pro-notes, transports and property, invaluable documents and contracts had been concealed in the belly from time immemorial, and fortunes were thus overthrown or mysteriously razed to the ground, cruel promises broken or repudiated" (136).

If, for Naipaul, cultural tradition gives rise to problems of evacuation, for Harris the solution is to consume the authority of history. In a talk on "Literacy and the Imagination," Harris describes Oudin as a guide born of unconscious reserves. For Beti "he's like a dead man at a certain stage whom she has to carry, whom she has to sustain, even as she reads him, writes him into herself in a new way" (1989: 22). Oudin, who bears an uncanny resemblance to the murdered half-brother and heir of the Mohammed family (which is related to Beti), becomes a link between the past and the future. As she becomes susceptible to a past that she has apparently lost, a replay of forces opens the way for new possibilities. It seems that Harris might concur with Sara Suleri's suggestion that a different generation of postcolonial writers put Naipaul's body in the canonical pot so that his language may function as an event of evocative decay for the postcolonial body to assume similar ironies of enablement (173).

The re-presentation of the colonial subject that Harris is hoping to achieve is perceived when Ram the money-lender, or "miserly coolie," at the end of the novel shows faith in the future and relinquishes his miserliness: "Surrender everything, if need be, the administration of his business, all the labour that had to be done and had been once done, if the one bargain for the future could be struck" (1985: 237).

In his quest for a new narrative poetics of renewal and in the process of disembodiment the bodies of static identity, Harris does not achieve the rich texture and flow of everyday life that one finds in Narayan, where the characters constantly delight and surprise as the plot unfolds. Religious and poetic myth are blended into the surface of ordinary life in Narayan, whereas in Harris they become emblematic of their mythic and spiritual functions. There is however a powerful exploration of narrative and poetic motifs that allow eclipsed voices and cultures to enter the narrative. There is also a poetic evocation of a drama of

consciousness yearning for new birth expressed through tropologies of ecstasy. In *Tradition, the Writer and Society*, Harris compares the writer to the entranced dancer in vodun, whose limbs express the involuntary theme as he externalizes the inner drama, or like Odysseus tied to the mast, daring to listen to the wild, sweet voices while the vessel flees the muse of death and his crew (the community) block their ears to her music.

In the *Far Journey*, the repository for tropes of ecstasy is Hindu culture itself, of which Harris has first-hand knowledge (he was born in New Amsterdam in the predominantly Indian province of Berbice, Guyana). Nonetheless, one is left with the feeling that these tropes reflect his larger literary scheme as opposed to being interwoven in the life of the people themselves.

Like the early orientalists, who, as Rocher demonstrates, looked for “fine specimens” of Indian tradition that coincided with the principal concerns of liberal undogmatic Anglicans, Harris has found in the image of Kali, which is alluded to in his text, a means for engaging in semiotic warfare against the preconceptions of the colonial story. As early orientalist intervention has had an impact on the importance of the Gita in the Hindu religious canon, Kali worship has increasingly become one of the thriving forms of Hindu cultural expression in Guyana and Trinidad, though this is not due to Harris’ intervention. It is interesting however, and to Harris’ credit, that his quest for a new literary poetics in tropes of ecstasy has parallels with the growth in vitality of traditional ecstatic cultural expressions in the post-independence period.

In “Prologue to an Autobiography,” Naipaul recounts an earlier colonial moment (1930’s) when his father sacrificed a goat to the goddess Kali. After accusing villagers of superstition for their religious beliefs and practices, he is told that the goddess will take his life and he must do penance. Naipaul says he was staggered on learning about the event. As in “Biswas,” there is a filial anxiety that denies any dignity to his own history. Yet there is a kind of reversed irony in the recalling of this event; if we read it with a Harrisian perspective, we hear an “eclipsed voice” in which the claims of the ancestral past encroach on the claims of creole modernity. His father (a journalist) writes an apologia for his action in the *Trinidad Guardian*, which is summarized by Naipaul (son) as follows: “He will never sacrifice again, he says; he knows his faith now. And he records with a little triumph that he didn’t wear a loincloth: he went through the ceremony in trousers and shirt” (1985: 70).

Contemporary Indo-Caribbean Literature

The Far Journey of Oudin was first published in 1961, as was *A House for Mr. Biswas*, virtually at the end of colonial rule. Along the spectrum of possibilities offered to the new generation of postcolonial writers, Naipaul and Harris represent opposite poles. To conclude, I will refer to two novels of the contemporary period, and discuss where they found their discourses as they steer between the disappointment of history and the original rhythm of the mother.

The claim of the ancestral mother's rhythm is heard in the grandmother's drumming in *No Pain Like This Body* (1972) by the Trinidadian Sonny Ladoo. The forces of life and love are represented in the novel by Ma and Grandma, whose life-enhancing drum beating is heard throughout the novel. The narrative of Ma's heroic struggle (and its doubtful triumph) against the cruel natural and social forces of an entrapped plantation society are told with morbid and macabre detail, arousing pity and horror but often verging on black humor. Perhaps this arises from the writer's shame at his own complicity in a discourse where the possibility that compassion might prevail seems unlikely. Ladoo's originality is that although horror, pity, and despair are aroused in the reader, the Goya-like elements of the grotesque and the black humor engage the reader's indulgence in a language of decay, and simultaneously a complicity in the decay and corruption of Pa's rum-drinking world. This is evinced in the wake and funeral of Ma's dead child, a death in which the cruel forces of nature and Pa were instrumental:

The village women were putting on a show. They held their breasts and rubbed their bellies and cried; they cried and cried; rum made them cry, they cried blood, loud and blew their noses tort tort tort. Jasso jumped as a monkey and said, "Look at de poor little chile."

Pulbassia scratched her behind and groaned.

The one-legged villager rubbed up against Jasso saying, "I in de mood gal."

The village priest was getting on like a madman; he pulled his white beard this way and that way; he shook his thin body this side and that side; then he farted and said, "bring de chile in de house." (85)

At the end of the novel, grief-stricken Ma disappears into the riceland in her madness and though "Nanny beated the drum with life; with love; she beated the drum with all her strength and the drum sounded loud as if a spirit was bawling in the forest" (134), the ambivalent image leaves us uncertain as to whether the drum rhythm will bring solace and compassion or invoke unexpected spirits and further horror stories.

Perhaps Ladoo's narrative strategy breaks "the mould of authoritarian author controlling, governing, rigging the sentiments of a constituency of realism" (Harris, 1989: 23). This becomes more involuted by the perspective of the children's imagination, where the realm of the living and the realm of the dead become confused. The writer and reader are implicated in such a way that we see neither a direct indictment of a community and history, nor any certain signals of rest for the postcolonial body as is suggested in the quote from the *Dhammapada* at the beginning of the novel:

There is no fire like passion;
there is no losing throw like hatred;
there is no pain like this body;
there is no happiness higher than rest.

Perhaps the irony of the text's horror at its own power of replication signals the possibility of new signification.

Notable among more recent Indo-Caribbean novels is Arnold Itwaru's *Shanti* (1989). This Toronto-based Indo-Guyanese writer presents his narrative within new diasporic confrontations and cultural alternatives resulting from emigration to North America, adding new dimensions to the transnational process and the interplay of discourses these give rise to. The novel begins with emigration to Canada and past life in Guyana is told in retrospect. Canada reveals new material possibilities and new constraints on spiritual growth. The novel however mainly focuses on life in Guyana, through Shanti's recalling of her past. In the remembrance of her past, the discourse reveals an imbrication between two conflicting discourses. We have the anxiety of the Indian female body wishing to hide her pigmentation and sensuality from the racial and sexual gaze: "Shanti did not dream of India. She wished she were invisible. It seemed the only way. It was easier to be alone, not looked at, not seen, hidden, Shanti did not dream of India" (7). And the multiplying attributes of an ancestral landscape complete with sacred waters and sacred groves transforming or disrupting the natural and social landscape piling sign upon sign, image upon image of oleander, mango, neem, jasmine, chamaylee, hibiscus, guava, carrion crow bush, peepal tree bush in an aspiration to obtain the sublime fertility of the Hindu feminine divine. The excessive signification of this sacred presence threatens to devour Latchman (Shanti's lover and later her husband), perhaps in a moment of self-questioning after his betrayal of Shanti, which reveals his complicity with the colonizer's invasyory gaze:

Latchman was suddenly engulfed in the world beneath the river's blackwater mirror, the deep trees plunging towards another sky, their familiar leaves inverted in a familiar light, the ground under him grown fertile in this disconcerting direction, drawing him away, pulling him from himself, and he was terrified. He screamed and fled from the riverbank, and, momentarily freed, he stood behind the assuring trunk of an ancient mango tree, but was drawn, despite himself, to look at the river's face again. But it had changed. There was no trace of the world under ... Several times, particularly on bright moonlit nights and in the sun after midday, his shadow tried to swallow him ... His shadow would suddenly change into a terrifying presence which he could only escape by closing his eyes and running into the shade under the house. (52)

Latchman's obsession with the goddess's ecstasy is temporarily repressed in the logic of the narrative but again revealed on the surface of the text when Latchman relents and experiences a moment of redemption:

"Shanti ... Shanti ... " Latchman wept, "Shanti ... " and the warm earth sighed and opened in its places of reception, its primeval needing and unneeding. "Shanti ... " and the jasmine filled the moment in the urgent welling of Shanti's dance, and Latchman's dance, in the drumming of an ancient drum ... (75)

The same excessive signification of the other that is desired but cannot be read is perceived in the English schoolmaster who desires but cannot possess Shanti. His rhetoric reveals the hysteria of the eye that cannot unveil the goddess's matriarchal ancestral gaze: "And then there was Shanti. The backwardness and ungratefulness of the lot of her people, this madness which kept them in their mudhuts and hovels, this ancestral evil they enacted in their barbaric Kalimai puja every year" (88). Just as the schoolmaster is invaded by the desire for the other that he cannot read, Shanti is threatened with invisibility (extinction) by the gaze of the English literary canon on her life: "Her evil worked insidious presence in the doomed hours of his dreaming to torture him in agony of desire no prayer of his could relieve" (88). And in another instance: "She was condemning English literature on the nonsensical grounds that it taught her nothing since nothing in it addresses her life. Her life? What was her life? Who would write literature about her life?" (61).

The imbrication of voices and perspectives (the author's, the schoolmaster's, Shanti's) reveals a collusion of contested values, echoes and ironizes Naipaul's own self-questioning about the dignity of his ancestral culture and the relevance of the English literary canon to his Hindu and colonial cultural experience. The novel's final words raise a question: "And Shanti?" (103). Is her arrival in Canada a new disjuncture in the possibility of cultural arrival or will Shanti's inner landscape proliferate her fertility in this new and unfamiliar landscape? Perhaps to her own unseeing eye, the English literary canon has invoked her with T.S. Eliot's final mantra in *The Waste Land*, "Datta, Dayadhvam. Damyata. / Shantih shantih shantih," so that she may turn "unspeakable rites" into a speakable language whose fertility is able to immediately retrieve what it has to give.

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NOTES

1. Karna Singh's fine monograph *Temples and Mosques* is a study of Indian architecture in Guyana, but beyond that it is an appraisal and evocation of the poetic impulse of Indian immigrants in their cultural and religious expression. His monograph describes the transplantation of the Indian landscape with sacred groves (neem, peepal, and mango) and symbolic substitutions for the Ganges for ritual ablution. The cultural context of this essay is partly based on my own field work on Hindu cultural expression in the West Indies. Some of the results of this work are available to researchers on video at the Smithsonian Institute's Human Studies Film Archives, Washington D.C., with the title *Hail Mother Kali Project*.
2. 19th century writings that provide insight into life and culture in the West Indies include the work of the Methodist missionary, the Reverend

Bronkhurst. Though half-Indian himself, he was fervently opposed to non-Christian religious expression and disliked the Brahmins for intensifying the resistance to the efforts at Christianization: "all the good impressions made on the bulk of the coolie population of the colony, in favour of Christianity, are very easily caused to be set aside by those wretched imposters" (79). The Portuguese diplomat, Neves e Mello, has a more favorable view of the forms of Indian religious expression, though he reiterates the stereotype of the miserly coolie: "Working as much as possible and spending as little as possible, it is not surprising that they save large sums of money in a few years" (my translation from the Portuguese text).

3. For a study of sexuality, cultural aesthetics and power in Naipaul, see papers by Geoffrey Robinson and Jonathan Small.

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Η παρούσα εργασία επιχειρεί να συμβάλει στη σύγχρονη μελέτη της μετα-αποικιοκρατίας, η οποία θεωρεί ότι δεν υπάρχει μια απλή διχοτόμηση μεταξύ της Δύσης και του άλλου της, αλλά μια μερική επικάλυψη και αναπόφευκτη συνάφεια των ιστοριών και των περιοχών τους. Διερευνώνται οι ανταγωνιστικές σημασίες και αξίες κατά τη σύγκρουση πολιτισμικών ιδιωμάτων και λογοτεχνικού είδους στο έργο πέντε μυθιστοριογράφων : R.K.Narayan (Ινδία), V.S.Naipaul (Τρινιντάντ), Wilson Harris (Γουιάνα), Sonny Ladoo (Τρινιντάντ) και Arnold Itwaru (Γουιάνα/Καναδάς). Προτείνεται ότι στην ανάζητηση μιας μετα-αποικιακής ποιητικής, τα σημεία και οι εικόνες των Ινδουϊστικών θηλυκών θεοτήτων εμφανίζονται έτσι ώστε να αποδιοργανώνουν τη λογική του αφηγήματος, σε μια προσπάθεια να αντιμετωπισθεί το βάρος της ιστορίας.