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Revisiting Mythology through Women Writing from *Girmitiya* Indian Diaspora

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Abstract

After the abolition of slavery, several Indians were taken to different sugar colonies of Mauritius, Reunion islands in the Indian Ocean, Fiji, Trinidad, Caribbean islands such as Guyana, Martinique and Guadeloupe in order to meet the demand for cheap, unskilled labour between 1834 and 1917. This system came to be known as Indentureship and the people were referred to as Girmitiyas. Initially, the recruits were males but eventually recruitment for women was also encouraged, leading to a huge feminine presence on the islands. However, Colonial history, migrant discourse and nationalist discourses in India failed to pay attention to the fate of these women migrants who were both empowered and subjugated by this migration at the same time. The stories of these migrants are now narrated by their great granddaughters in "retrieval" narratives that recount their tales and become sites of archives with their recipes, songs and tales. In this article, I focus on Ramabai Espinet's The Swinging Bridge, to examine the rewriting of myths around the epic of Ramayana by women writers from post-indenture Indian diaspora in ways that allow them to challenge passive and stereotypical representations of women and find means to connect women across generations. I am particularly interested in understanding the evolution of myths far from the motherland within the diasporic context and how that informs our understanding of mythology and women today from the Indian perspective.

Keywords: mythology, Ramabai Espinet, Ramayana, post-indenture, rewriting.

History of Indenture Migrations from India

After the abolition of slavery several Indians were taken to different sugar colonies of Mauritius, Reunion islands in the Indian Ocean, Fiji, Trinidad, Caribbean islands such as Guyana, Martinique and Guadeloupe in order to meet the demand for cheap, unskilled labour between 1834 and 1917. This system came to be known as Indentureship and the people were referred to as *Girmitiyas*. Initially, the recruits were males as they were given harsh tasks of clearing the sugarcane fields etc. but eventually recruitment for women was also encouraged, leading to a huge feminine presence on the islands. However, Colonial history, migrant discourse and nationalist discourses in India failed to pay attention to the fate of these women migrants who were both empowered and subjugated by this migration at the same time.

Peculiar place of Indentured Indian Women

The indentured women have had a very peculiar position in the colonies. Due to lack of women on these islands, they did enjoy some degree of sexual freedom, they could choose partners, they could have multiple partners that allowed them intimacy with the wealthy and important and many could extract significant privileges out of these relations. At the

same time there were cases of domestic violence and even brutal wife murders mainly due to jealousy as wives were often shared amongst group of men. The scenario, however, changed dramatically later when the sex ratio got stabilised and people started asserting their identities based on their ethnicities. Women especially the Indian women then became the harbingers of culture and were once again confined to the walls of domesticity.

Writers such as Lakshmi Persaud, Ramabai Espinet, Peggy Mohan from Trinidad, Gaiutra Bahadur, Mahadai Das from Guyana, Ananda Devi, Nathacha Appanah, Shenaz Patel from Mauritius have all tried to register the feminine voice of resistance, dissent and disobedience to the restrictions placed on the women of Indian origin through their writings. One discerns substantial engagement with the problem of female subjectivity in these writings and presents women's struggle for agency and autonomy in conservative societies. Rather than reinforce stereotypical images of women as victims, these works pave way for future deliberations on female empowerment within repressive social structures. Bringing the forgotten history and stories of their ancestors is a strong preoccupation. In this article, focusing on novel *The Swinging Bridge* by Trinidad's Ramabai Espinet, I will examine the rewriting of myths around the epic of *Ramayana* in ways that allow them to challenge passive and stereotypical representations of women and find means to connect across generations. I am particularly interested in understanding the evolution of myths far from the motherland within the diasporic context and how that informs our understanding of religion and women today from the Indian perspective.

Importance of the *Ramayana* in Post-Indentured Context

The Ramayana, one of the greatest ancient Indian epics can be compared to the Odyssey from the Western world. Written in 24,000 couplets and divided into seven sections, it narrates the story of Rama from the time of his birth to his death. This sacred text has been performed throughout India and abroad mainly South east Asia for at least 2000 years and has been increasingly popular amongst Indian diaspora in Mauritius, Fiji, Suriname, Trinidad and Tobago.

Vinay Lal, a professor of history at UCLA explains that one cannot think of a single *Ramayana* in India. Although the original composition is considered to be the one written in Sanskrit by Valmiki, there are many different versions in the 'vernacular' Indian languages. For instance, in the south of India, the *Ramayana* of Kamban, written in Tamil in the eleventh century and in north India, the Ramayana of Tulsidas, called the *Ramacaritmanas*, have become legendary. Even among the Hindus living in far-flung places of the Indian diaspora, such as Fiji and Trinidad, the *Ramacaritmanas* is the devotional text of Hinduism par excellence.

The Ramayana has tremendous sentimental and nostalgic value amongst the old Indian diaspora[1]. Mauritius is well known as the land of the Ramayana. When the *girmitias* first arrived on the island of Mauritius, it is said that they brought along with them the *Ram Charit Manas* and the *Hanuman Chalisa* in handwritten and published versions as well as in oral forms. Although with time things evolved and "typically Mauritian brand" of Ramayana chanting emerged, giving Ramayana in Mauritius a distinct tradition.

Sarita Boodhoo explains that *The Ram Charit Manas* written in Awadhi is ingrained in the Hindu consciousness throughout the Hindu diaspora not only in Mauritius but in all the former plantation colonies such as Trinidad and Tobago, Fiji, Suriname, South Africa. In Mauritius as elsewhere, it was this sacred text that the immigrants fell back on in moments of utter despair, hardship, repression and to survive the harsh conditions of that era. Both the new and the old Indian diaspora have told and retold the traditional version of *Ram Kathas* and *Ram Lilas*, creating and recreating their own new stories based

[1]Indian diaspora is divided into two categories- the 'old' and the 'new' diaspora in which the 'old' diaspora refers to Indians who moved to sugar colonies under the indentured system during colonial era.

on the surroundings where they built solid and resistant sacred spaces[2].

Sat Maharaj explains Ramayana's popularity in Trinidad and Tobago, "In T&T and the wider Caribbean, there is a single scriptural text which surpasses all in popularity, and which constitutes a formidable platform for transmitting every tradition of Hinduism. It is a religious text which resonates with every person and appeals to all temperaments and tendencies"[3].

Both *Ramayan* the epic and the mythological character of Sita appear in Ramabai Espinet's[4] *The Swinging Bridge*. It is a novel that came out in the year 2003 published by Harper Collins and was immediately shortlisted for the Regional Commonwealth Writer's Prize in 2004. It narrated the story of Mona who much like Ramabai Espinet lives in Canada, having migrated from Trinidad. Her brother Kello who is terminally ill asks her to visit Trinidad in the hope of buying back their ancestral property. This takes her back to her native country and a certain lost past. This work then becomes a retrieval narrative tracing the story of her great grandmother and other women who had boarded the ship from India. The work describes the near impossibility of reconstructing a past that has been ignored by many dominant histories but effectively uses other means such as recipes, family albums, songs folktales to bring out the lost past in order to give dignity long denied to the ancestors who crossed the *kalapani*. This discovery is also a personal quest for finding identity between different countries, cultures and languages. Espinet uses not only the West Indian dialect and lyrical descriptive passages, but her excellent evocation of the particular culture of childhood is also interesting.

The narrator of the novel, searching for the stories on her great grandmother, comes across the character of an old lady named Baboonie from the time of her great grandmother who like many others had taken the ship from India. Both the characters were fond of singing the *Ramayana*. Though heard many times the word *Ramayan*a didn't evoke much in the narrator's mind as she was unable to read Hindi or understand what was being recited as it formed a part of her very distant past: "The words had scant meaning to me at the time, solidly implanted as I was in my own family, for whom Hinduism had already become a relic. Save for the snatches gleaned from the kathas and bhagwats held sometimes on the hillside behind Grandma Lil's house, I knew the *Ramayana* in name only" (2003: 113). But she understood that the ladies who sung it were called for kathas from time to time and that it was a significant cultural marker for Indo-Caribbean identity on the island.

The narrator however discovers on keen observation that the *Ramayana* Gainder, her great grandmother sang was " not the real *Ramayana* you know. She used to sing the kind village women would sing" (2003: 251), thereby indicating the shift that mythological narratives undergo with time and space. As Roland Barthes explains that mythological narrations have multiple versions and the possibility of the narrator to see himself or herself in the story, they can even modify the story according to the audience and the place or according to their desires. Explaining the reason why Gainder was not allowed by her husband to continue singing *Ramayana*, Muddie, the narrator's mother states that some of the

[2]http://www.mauritiustimes.com/mt/sarita-boodhoo-59/ consulted on 24th Nov. 2021

[3]https://www.guardian.co.tt/article6.2.400287.886decba57 consulted on 22nd Nov 2021.

[4]Ramabai Espinet was born in San Fernando, Trinidad and Tobago, in 1948. She moved out of Trinidad to work in Canada in the 1970s. She has a doctorate from the University of the West Indies in Saint Augustine, Trinidad and Tobago after masters from York University in Toronto, Ontario. Currently she works as a professor at Seneca College. She is known to be very active with different social movements related mainly to women issues. In addition to *The Swinging Bridge* she has other works to her name such as *Beyond the Kalapani*, *The Princess of Spadina* as well as *Ninja's Carnival*.

words in the songs where objectionable to Jamsie, the narrator's great grandfather who asked Gainder to stop singing completely. Gainder was a widowed prostitute who had boarded the ship from India to Trinidad. Although she marries Jamsie after reaching the island, it was difficult for the narrator to find any history of this ancestor in her family photo albums. The narrator comes to know about her great grandmother through sources outside her family and had to excavate her story through other women on the island as well as through her grandmother's recipe and shop list books. She is able to retrieve many of Gainder's songs that were forgotten/ hidden from the family, excluded from the familial history: "All of it was there everything about us, where we came from, our connection to despised women like Gainder Beharry, like Baboonie, the journey on this ships of indenture in the nineteenth century" (2003: 274). This itself symbolises the strong hold of patriarchal norms in the Indo-Trinidadian families that silenced or erased "unwanted" women from their family archives. The need for a "good disciplined" wife existed not only within the Trinidadian Indian societies after the big displacement but even in the present day. When the narrator translated some of these songs and asked her cousin Bess to put Gainder's story at the festival organised on the occasion of Diwali to showcase indenture history, Bess refused stating "Mona, the grand picture is still what everybody wants. The righteous Indian family, intact, coming across the kala pani together. Not a journey of young widow looking for new life. Wife-murder? Beatings? You must be mad, they would say" (2003: 297). This clearly indicates how little has changed on the island when it comes to women of Indian origin.

Baboonie is another such character who is seen singing the *Ramayana* in the novel. The narrator explains that Baboonie was abandoned by her family. Alone, she lived like a destitute attacked often by men at night. The narrator describes her life:

> I waited full of fear. Silent deadly figures stalking through the night intent on one thing. At nine I knew what that one thing was, and it was terrifying, cursing to protect herself. Baboonie, subjected to the inevitable, a grunting, groaning man, a whole procession of them, I imagined, a procession of villagers walking strong and tall in the morning dew holding their brushing cutlasses firmly, ready for the day. … Baboonie, a bundle of sticks and stones, whose bones remained unbroken. (2003: 112)

When a glorious epic like the *Ramayana* is sung by destitutes like Gainder and Baboonie, it acquires new meanings and interpretations as it becomes a means to carry forward new tales of the down trodden, tales of misery and songs of untold unexpressed sorrow and resilience:

> …the whole world grieving in unison, crying tears into the river that flowed inches from my head, threatening to carry me in its rushing waters down to the sea … I listened to music and a story, till then unknown to me, coming through the wailing voice of an old beggar woman, crying through the rain, breaking up the classical words of the Ramayana with her own tale of exile and banishment, and in the broken chords and unexpected riffs telling the story of a race, of racial and tribal grief, of banishment, of test of purity" (2003: 113).

If Sita exiled herself for the sake of her husband to carry the responsibility of his oath and could return home by walking in fire, these women are those successors of Sita who were denied the possibility of moral resurrection through fire, denied the possibility of returning 'home'. They were either run away satis or abandoned widows who could not be placed on their husband's pyres due to the British law that banned the practice of Sati. These women then became perfect labourers who could be sent to the sugar colonies that were undergoing huge crisis due to lack of women, as explains the narrator:

> What *Ramayana* could these 'unburnt' and therefore impure Sitas who are exiled forever not only from their motherland but also from all domestic life narrate ? Would their stories be that of grandeur or un-recountable resilience? The narrator comes to understand that their *Ramayana* is far from a relic from the past, it is a very lived experience of sense of solidarity

that ties these Sitas together in an unbound sense of sisterhood, a space that allowed them to narrate their tales of survival and incredible resilience:

> And in the face of renewed opposition to their freedom, women like Baboonie, like my great-grandmother Gainder, sang songs, stringing together with bawdy humour, tenderness, pain and honesty the scattered beads of their new lives. "Singing *Ramayana*" they called these nights of singing, when women would get together to listen. Like the Vaishnavite women of Bengal they sang the words of love and loss, they sang moral tales and stories of surviving their new life. Gainder sang these songs and Grandma Lil hid them for her safe-keeping in the back of her shop books. Lily recorded them for her daughters, for my cousin Bess, for my sister Babsie, for me, for all the women to come, for my film that would tell Gainder's story. (2003: 298)

Their songs not only bring them together but they hold significance even to contemporary generations as they reveal to the present generation the facts that accounts of history, be it official or familial, have tried to erase. That is precisely the reason the narrator sees them as blessings:

> …but now, … pieces of the puzzle began to fall into place. How Baboonie must have had no real name and how much cruelty must have gone into naming her Baboonie, meaning young girl. How she was singing *Ramayana* alone in Toolsie's hut, singing of such abandonment that words lost their power and only raw sound could capture it, pelting the broken shards of that holy text into the night, singing her grief. And I listened again, as though to a blessing, hearing Baboonie's strong voice, washed in rain" . (2003: 114)

Gainder's songs that find their way in the novel need a special mention to understand how their *Ramayana* instead of a space of absolute devotion and submission becomes a site of resistance and resilience.

II

> Your hands that burn me
> Touch me, touch me again
> Your eyes that see through me
> Turn to me, turn again
> Your lips I never knew
> Press me, kiss me again
> On the rock, black against the sky
> On the rock, there until you die
> Touch me, burn me,
> Press me again
> Your hair so black
> Your skin so dark, my lord
> Your touch like fire and salt
> Your eyes that burn, my lord
> I reach the black rock in my dreams
> Sweet sleep take me away
> On the rock, my love until I die
> Touch me, burn me
> Burn me, burn me again (2003: 295-296)

Here the singer who escapes the pyre of her husband repeats burn me again and again showing her eagerness to be burnt alive but not for the fake pride of the patriarchal society that sees no worth in the life of a wife whose husband is dead but for one who is willing to be burnt in the fire of love. She then reverses the semiotics of the fire walking or the fire test of purity that Sita had to undergo in order to return to Ayodhya or the test of purity that Indian women have to undergo throughout their lives. In another song Gainder says

> Faithful like Sita
> Virtuous like Lakshmi
> All the gods and goddesses
> Will light our house, my lord
> You will swim through sea
> You will walk through fire
> Throw away your ball and chain
> Walk, walk to me
> I will be your household light
> I will offer flowers, my lord (2003: 296)

This song like the others ends in the words "burn me , burn me again". Here she asks the partner to walk through fire for her, demanding a sense of equality

between the two and it is then that she will be like Sita and Lakshmi, filling his house with divine light.

The inclusion of these songs in the novel by the author indicates her strong intention of not only giving place to the forgotten or deliberately erased stories of resistance of her ancestors but also the fact that she find their tales relevant for women in contemporary societies. That is precisely why in most of these novels we find that the stories of great grand mothers are intricately intertwined with the situation of the protagonist and the discovery of the lost history becomes instrumental in the self-discovery of the narrator or the protagonist.

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