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INTERROGATING "INDIANNES": IDENTITY AND DIASPORIC  
CONSCIOUSNESS AMONG SOUTH ASIAN TWICE MIGRANTS IN CANADA

by

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A Major Research Paper  
presented to Ryerson University

in partial fulfillment of the requirement for the degree of

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# INTERROGATING “INDIANNESS”: IDENTITY AND DIASPORIC CONSCIOUSNESS AMONG SOUTH ASIAN TWICE MIGRANTS IN CANADA

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Master of Arts  
Immigration and Settlement Studies  
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## ABSTRACT

The impetus for this study comes from the need to understand the differences across the migration and settlement experiences of various national and cultural groups commonly identified as “South Asian” in Canada. This paper insists, first, on recognizing that the perception of where homeland is and hence the terms by which diasporic identity and community affiliations are forged in Canada differ markedly between twice migrants and direct migrants; and second, that the politics of recognition in multicultural Canada has to contend with the differential histories within “South Asian” migrant groups. The research paper uses the examples of Indo-Caribbeans and Afro-Asians to argue for the social and political importance of recognizing the above distinctions and draws on two cultural productions that directly engage with twice migrant communities in Canada—Ramabai Espinet’s *The Swinging Bridge* (2003) and M.G. Vassanji’s *No New Land* (1991)—to demonstrate ways in which their members understand and articulate their own sense of self and place in Canada.

### Key Words:

Twice Migrants  
Homeland  
Identity  
South Asian

## Acknowledgments

This project is the coming together of questions that have always plagued me; “what does it mean to be an ‘Indian’ from Africa?”, “who is a South Asian?”, “what are my connections to India?” I am grateful to my parents and sister Nooreen who engaged in such issues with me, and were always willing and eager to tell stories that would help understand and answer these questions.

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## **Introduction**

The impetus for this study comes from the need to understand the differential migration patterns and settlement experiences across the various national and cultural groups commonly homogenized under the label “South Asian”<sup>1</sup> in Canada. The paper’s main argument is fuelled, in the first instance, by the insistence that how members of immigrant communities negotiate national identity and cultural citizenship upon arriving in Canada is greatly influenced by the relations they maintain with and where they identify as “homeland.” In the second instance, insisting on a “politics of recognition”—to borrow Charles Taylor’s term (1992) means that there will be less of a likelihood that the lives and realities of various “South Asian” peoples will be misrecognized, reduced, and distorted. Differentiating between and specifying the nature of the experiences of individual “South Asian” groups is important if researchers, policy makers, community service organizations, and others are to arrive at a more accurate understanding of “South Asian” peoples and so respond more adequately and appropriately to the social and political needs of members of these differentiated communities. As well, insisting on recognizing differences and distinctions across “South Asian” communities allows for a more nuanced approach to thinking through the complexities of affiliation and self identification in diasporic spaces.

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<sup>1</sup> Inverted commas are used around the phrase South Asian throughout the paper to distinguish it from its common use as an official geopolitical term.



## What's in a Name?: Contesting "South Asian"<sup>2</sup>

In contemporary Canada, the term "South Asian" is commonly used to refer to people – as well as their Canadian-born children – who emigrated from and belong to one of the ethno-cultural groups originating in the geo-political region of the world where countries such as India, Pakistan, Bangladesh, Bhutan, Nepal, and Sri Lanka are located. The fact that some academic departments specializing in studies of the region include Afghanistan, Myanmar, and Tibet as part of South Asia and the UN goes as far as to include Iran, is one of the first indications of how amorphous a designation the label is. "South Asian" is also used as an identifying term for communities with historical and ancestral links to India, Pakistan et al. but that have long since settled outside the region in other places such as the Caribbean and Africa. It is important, however, to note that "South Asian" has very little if any currency within such communities, indicating not only that the term gains significance in places and in circumstances where it is necessary to contain and control difference (a difference produced through being identified as being 'other' to something else) but also that it is a racialized term—one that differentiates and identifies through certain visible descriptors.

In the Canadian context, the term "South Asian" does not account for clear dissimilarities in language, religion, national and ethnic origins, in large part because the politics of difference (however benignly understood) that characterizes multiculturalism in Canada requires that specific histories and experiences be erased in an attempt to produce an easily knowable difference. As Arun Mukherjee (1998) has argued, "'South Asian' is a bureaucratic...umbrella term [used] to produce a unitary community that is

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<sup>2</sup> I am indebted to Hyacinth Simpson for the points raised and the wording of the analysis at this point in the Introduction.

not actually there” (29). Such productions of unitary identity revolve around simultaneously universalizing and essentializing constructions of “Indianness” signified in broadly defining markers such as saris and bindis, mendhi body art, and the very public celebration of festivals. Such simplifications allow for “South Asians” to be knowable and commodifiable within and to mainstream Canadian culture. That some members of communities so designated in Canada have uncritically adopted the term to self-reference and self-identify indicates just how powerful and central the label has become in maintaining unequal relations of power.

The use of the term ‘South Asia/n’ is fairly recent, emerging in North American and Western multicultural discourses in the 1980s and gaining currency in the 1990s. In Canadian academic circles, the term entered critical vocabulary with a number of developments that coincided with the launch of the first issue of *The Toronto South Asian Review*. In social and political vocabulary, the term was certainly not in use—at least not widely—before 1981 as indicated in the use of ‘Indo-Pakistani’ as opposed to “South Asian” in the Canadian census (Mukherjee, 1998). The current census does have a category for ‘Caribbean’, but the sub-categories allow for either ‘black’ or ‘other’ (Espinet, 2007). With the emergence of South Asian studies—especially in literature departments—in the mid-1980s, and with the growing numbers of people from the sub-continent entering Canada, the term seeped into popular usage. Clearly then, the use of the term in Canada emerged in response to an immigrant presence and denoted a migrant subjectivity, thereby bringing to the forefront of academic and public discussions and debate questions concerning belonging, identity and home/land.

## Multiculturalism: Complicity in the Naming Game

The construction of a “South Asian” identity in Canada is facilitated by the multiculturalism project that relies on simplifying heritage and origin to the extent that people with very different histories are often grouped together under the “South Asian” label and are then expected to forge alliances and cooperation based on such false, and imposed essentialist categories. Critiques of multiculturalism (Bannerji, 2000; Fleras and Elliot, 2002) assert that the language and practice of the policy emphasises cultural differences and diverts discussion away from race and racism, in such a way that they deny communities of colour real political and economic power. They argue that multiculturalism does not recognize power imbalances; rather, it masks them in the language of diversity which becomes a value-free, power neutral indicator of difference and multiplicity. This then leads, in the words of Bannerji (2006) to

a construction of a collective cultural essence and a conflation of this, or what we are culturally supposed to be, and what we are ascribed within the context of social organization of inequality ... Thus immigrants [are] ethnicized, culturalized and mapped into traditional/ethnic communities. Politics in Canada [is] reshaped and routed through this culturalization or ethnicization, and a politics of identity [is] constructed which the immigrants themselves embraced as the only venue for social and political agency (36).

Many activists and community organizers embrace the South Asian label not because they are unaware of the homogenizing uses and effects of the term but because they have consciously decided to de-emphasize differences across their communities in an effort to find common ground on which to organize for political change. They argue that such a move gives the various “South Asian” communities increased visibility in a positive way and gives them a sense of “belonging to a larger community” (Islam, 1993: 242) in the multicultural landscape of North America. Such visibility and membership

allows for a united and therefore much stronger voice in lobbying for legislative and other changes to combat the discriminations—such as racism—that individual members of different “South Asian” groups face but are unable to redress on their own. This strategy has proved effective on a number of levels, but one cannot help but see the limitations of adopting “South Asian” as a political identity. Such limitations become evident when one realises that because of differences of class, age, gender, sexuality, nationality, language, etc., people who share the same political identity do not experience discrimination in the same way. For example, all “South Asians” do not experience racism in the same way. Post-9/11 security measures at the Canadian/US border would affect a Pakistani Muslim in a very different way than it would a Christian Indo-Caribbean. This is another important reason why it is necessary to recognize distinctions across so called “South Asian” community. Organizing effectively for political change is possible only when the heterogeneity of “South Asians” is acknowledged within and outside these communities.

### Is There a Homeland?: Old and New “Indian” Diasporas

The discourse of multiculturalism also leads to essentialist notions and singular conceptions of “homeland.” Immigrants are attracted to and come to Canada because the country is actively promoted as a multicultural nation in which they will be allowed to retain many of their customs and traditions find upon arrival that they are expected to embrace a constructed identity that stems from fixed ideas in mainstream discourse about “Indianness.” Benedict Anderson’s (1991) argument that communities are imagined into being through complex processes of identification and affiliation rather than existing *a*

*priori* clearly opposes this tendency to fix and unify. As such, where twice migrants identity as “home/land” and how they see themselves in relation to India and the “Indianness” constructed around “South Asian” diasporas in the West begs for further critical analysis.

Afro-Asian and Indo-Caribbean communities in Canada are both twice removed from India. Hence, their relationship to India as a place and as an imagined community is complex. An important question, then, is whether or not the spectre of India haunts and has any impact on their sense of who they are and whether Afro-Asians and Indo-Caribbeans embrace or reject India and “Indianness” as the main signifier of self and community. One of the arguments made in this paper is that for twice migrants, India exists only as memory and is not actively incorporated in the ways in which they currently imagine themselves. This is in large part because the majority of such individuals have no direct connection to or experience of India. Their relations to India exist mainly through oral history, in the legacies of indentureship, and through recreations of India in East Africa and the Caribbean.

Focusing specifically on “South Asian” twice migrant communities, Vijay Mishra (1996c, 2007) has distinguished between what he calls “exclusive” and “border” Indian diasporas. The former refers to diasporas of twice migrants, for whom India is only a distant echo whereas the latter describes diasporas whose connection to India is sustained through transnational links such as family members still residing in the homeland, and through telephone and internet connections that reduce the psychological if not physical distance between “here” and “there.” The main difference between these two types of Indian diasporas is expressed in their members’ interaction with and mobility within their

adoptive lands. The “old Indian diasporas were diasporas of exclusivism because they created relatively self-contained ‘little Indias’ in the colonies” with very little if any contact with India whereas the new Indian diaspora’s “overriding characteristic is one of mobility” evidenced in its members’ ability to keep “in touch with India through family networks and marriage, [connections] generally supported by a state apparatus that encourage[es] family reunion” (Mishra, 1996c: 422). Within this characterization and classification of diverse India diasporas, Indo-Caribbeans and Afro-Asians within their diasporic communities in Trinidad and Tanzania are part of the “old” exclusive diaspora.

Posing a successful challenge to essentialist constructions of the “South Asian” diaspora in places such as Canada can only be achieved by juxtaposing “stories and experiences that do not contain such privilege” of naming and normalizing certain notions of what “South Asian” is (Shukla, 2001: 558). The nature of the migration and settlement experience of different “South Asian” groups in Canada is affected by a host of factors, including whether they migrated directly from their “country of origin” or “homeland” in South Asia, or through another region of the world, such as East Africa or the Caribbean. An effective way of critiquing current uses and understandings of the term “South Asia/n” in Canada is to engage in an analysis of identity constructions within twice migrant communities—that is, communities whose members share a history of migration that did not bring them directly from the Indian sub-continent to Canada, but through either the Caribbean or East Africa. The term Afro-Asian is used for communities that migrated to Canada via Africa, specifically East Africa, and Indo-Caribbean is used to identify those communities that journey to and settled first in the Caribbean before moving to Canada. The use of these identifying labels does not,

however, suggest that these groups are homogenous in themselves. Gender, religion, caste, class and sexuality mark points of difference and contestations within these groups. However, for the purposes of this study, the emphasis will be on how their history and experience of being twice migrants affect their identity in the second diaspora in Canada. The questions raised by the study will be addressed not only through an assessment of existing critical scholarship on diasporas and the histories of twice migrant communities but also through an analysis of two novels, M.V. Vassanji's *No New Land* (1991) and Ramabai Espinet's *The Swinging Bridge* (2003), in which writers belonging to the Afro-Asian (Vassanji) and Indo-Caribbean (Espinet) diasporas in Canada address these questions.

### Twice Migrants: Situating the Debate

There is scholarly precedent for researching the impact double migration has on the nature of migration and the settlement process within diasporas in the West. Hasmita Ramji's 2006 study explores histories of migration and the importance these histories have on community identity in Britain. The study compares direct and twice migrant Gujarati Hindus now living in London, and thus contributes to an academic literature that highlights the heterogeneous composition of the "South Asian" diaspora in the West. Ramji suggests that twice migration is a useful 'skill' for settlement purposes in that twice migrants have a history of adaptation in East Africa and thus have built a strong community in Britain. Parminder Bhachu (1985, 1988, 1993) has conducted extensive research on the twice migrant Sikh community in England, exploring settlement issues such as marriage patterns, entrepreneurship, and the role of women in families and

businesses. Bhachu has also compared the experiences of direct and twice migrant Sikhs in Britain. Her main findings suggest that twice migrants maintain strong communal links and cohesive communities that assist them in settling in Britain. She also suggests that the lack of ties with India is a factor in facilitating settlement, as their lack of investment in a myth of return to an Indian homeland makes them better able to negotiate permanent settlement in Britain.

In regard to twice migrants from the Caribbean, research has generally focused on negotiations of Indian identity by second-generation Indo-Caribbeans in Canada, such as in the studies by Natasha Warikoo (2005) and Stephanie Cheddie (2005), although Simbronath Singh (1998) explores the nature and terms of the interaction and relationship between direct migrants from South Asia and twice migrants from the Caribbean in a Toronto Hindu Gurdwara. The conclusion is that for Indo-Caribbeans, this interaction allows for selectively identifying with their ancestral culture, resulting in the forging of even more complex and multifaceted identities within the “South Asian” diaspora in Canada.

Significantly lacking though in the literature is any discussion on twice migrants’ resistance to the homogenization of the “South Asian” diaspora in Canada, or the extent to which they identify with and attempt to make connections with India. Some of the studies identified above address these concerns to some degree, but only in relation to twice migrant populations in the UK. Studies that do address twice migrant communities in Canada tend to focus on issues of network building or undertake empirical socioeconomic investigations of the settlement and integration experience of these groups.



## Chapter Breakdown

In order to argue for the non-homogeneity of the “South Asian” diaspora in Canada, I propose to break down this research paper into three chapters. The first chapter will provide a theoretical grounding for the analysis presented in subsequent chapters. The uniqueness of the twice migrant experience will highlight the importance of migration patterns in the same way issues of class, caste, gender and sexuality have informed previous literatures on the settlement experience. An attempt will be made to theorize the position and nature of the migration experience of twice migrants, especially in regard to understanding where members of these communities claim as “home” and how they chose to self-identify.

The second chapter will address the specific histories of migration of the Afro-Asian and Indo-Caribbean communities from India to the Caribbean and East Africa, and then to Canada. The indentured labour system allowed for the importation of cheap labour to the British colonies in the Caribbean and East African in order to sustain sugar plantation and to build the railway system from Lake Victoria to the ocean, respectively. After the abolition of the indentured labour system in the 1920s about 75% of the Indian labourers remained in the Caribbean, though only about 20% of railway labourers remained in East Africa. Economic, racial and political instability in East Africa and the Caribbean, and the elimination of country of origin criteria for immigration to Canada in the 1970s stimulated the migration of people from these countries. Issues of identity and belonging to the wider “South Asian” and Canadian communities will be explored in the context of their settlement in Canada. An analysis of the role of ethnic presses and my personal experiences will be incorporated into the argument.

Finally, in order to fully address the above issues, it is important to look at how these twice migrant groups imagine themselves in Canada. This is where the cultural productions such as novels that come out of these communities prove invaluable. Chapter three will thus engage in an in-depth textual analysis of *No New Land* and *The Swinging Bridge* by Ramabai Espinet (2003) as these two texts explore in creative detail issues of migration history, identity, belonging and settlement that this paper seeks to address.



## **Theorizing Twice Migration and Diasporic Identity**

### **Conceptualizing Diasporas**

With the publication of the inaugural issue of the journal *Diaspora* in 1991, diasporas became a legitimate subject of study; and since then scholars have been theorizing the formation of diasporas and attempting to define the term. Despite the growing interest in the topic, or because of it, the term diaspora itself and the meanings and interpretations it implies remain very loose and fluid. The word diaspora is derived from the Greek word *diaspeirian*, which means “to sow or scatter seeds across” (Brazier and Mannur 2003: 1). Historically the term was used in reference to the Jewish experience of exile from Jerusalem, and later gained academic merit in reference to the black diaspora in North America, which resulted from the slave trade across the Middle Passage (Bauman, 2000). In the increasingly growing globalized environment in which we live today, the movement of people has become a more commonplace occurrence. That is not to say that the movement of people is a new phenomenon, but more so that this movement has increased in magnitude, frequency and facility. In this transnational world facilitated by information technology and ease of transportation, diaspora is increasingly being used in academic discourse to describe any form of movement and dislocation of people from their “homeland.”

The inaugural issue of the journal *Diaspora*, especially William Safran’s (1991) article “Diasporas in Modern Societies: Myths of Homeland and Return,” has in some regards set the standard for the understanding and definition of “diaspora,” which all other works refute or support. Safran states that the ideal diasporic community is that of the Jewish people, and presumably from this ideal builds a criteria of characteristics that

“expatriate minority communities” (83) express in order to constitute a diaspora. These are:

1)...they have been dispersed from a specific original ‘centre’...2) they retain a collective memory, vision, or myth about their original homeland...3) they believe that they are not – and perhaps cannot be – fully accepted by their host society...4) they regard their ancestral homeland as their true, ideal home and as the place to which they or their descendants would (or should) eventually return...5)... they should, collectively, be committed to the maintenance or restoration of their original homeland... 6) they continue to relate, personally or vicariously, to that homeland in one way or another... (Safran, 1991: 83-4)

Many of these points become problematic when thinking of the “South Asian” diaspora, especially twice migrants; and the idea that the ideal diasporic community is Jewish is in itself a problematic theoretical injunction. This paper seeks to demonstrate how twice migrants of South Asian ancestry disrupt this narrow definition of diaspora, specifically in its construction, memory, relationship and desire for the “homeland.” The specific question of homeland and how it is imagined in the diaspora will be discussed further on in this section.

Many alternatives to the above construction and understanding of diaspora have been presented over the past 15 years. Most notable is that of Paul Gilroy in his seminal work *The Black Atlantic* (1993). The model of diaspora that Gilroy presents (as do many others such as Avtar Brah (1996) and Stuart Hall (1990)) is one that opposes the idea of diasporas necessarily having a center from which a group or community has dispersed or a communal source of origin, a model that privileges the metaphor of “roots” (Clifford, 1994). Rather, Gilroy’s model of diaspora privileges a hybrid subjectivity, where the diaspora is no longer unitary, but based on movements, interconnections, and mixed references. The metaphor for this conception of diaspora would then be that of “routes,”

associated with “‘traveling cultures’ that break with the essentialism of the anthropological tradition, showing themselves to be diverse and unlocalized” (Chivallon, 2002: 360). This theoretical approach becomes useful when analyzing twice migrancy in that a fixed homeland, or a conception of “there” is not evident as a twice migrant subjects could look to both India and the Caribbean or Africa in the search of “home.” In a more generalized reading, the idea of hybrid diasporic subjectivity stresses the diverse possibilities of location, space and time.

James Clifford (1994) suggests that diasporic discourses articulate notions of “roots” and “routes” that invokes discussions of transnationality and movement, but also creates a space for discussions that define the local, a distinctive community that has come out of historical contexts of displacement. Thus the emphasis for discussion should be as much about “there” as about “here” when defining one’s place or identity within diasporic subjectivity.

### Imagining “Home” and “Homeland”

In any discussion of diaspora, the idea of homeland and the diaspora’s connection to it becomes an important point of reference. Homeland articulations are often the most significant in that the notion of diaspora to a certain extent implies homeland as a point of departure, be it as an imagined construction or an actual national location. In Safran’s definition of diaspora presented above, the homeland is somewhere fixed and tangible, a center from where a community has dispersed, and to which it eventually wishes to return. This is a problematic assertion because “homelands” are imagined by the diaspora in ways that are very different from the people of the homeland themselves; and in the

diaspora then India gets recreated and symbolized in objects and rituals. For example, the *Ramayana* is created in Fiji and the Caribbean as the Hindu religious text, when Hinduism has no one book (Mishra, 1996b). Similarly in East Africa, chapattis have symbolized Indian migration to the region so much so that now it has become a staple food of the local population. Because “homeland” is imagined, it then has the ability to change and be manipulated into a creation and location that satisfies the diasporic subject. bell hooks has written on how the idea of home changes with experiences such as slavery, indenture, migration and immigration, in that,

at times, home is nowhere. At times, one knows only extreme estrangement and alienation. Then home is no longer just one place. It is locations. Home is that place which enables and promotes varied and everchanging perspectives, a place where one discovers new ways of seeing reality, frontiers of difference (148).

This creation of an imagined “homeland” is linked to a moment of trauma that represents having been wrenched from one’s mother land. In the case of twice migrants, these moments of trauma can be linked to the crossing of the *kala pani*<sup>3</sup> in the system of indentureship (Indo-Caribbeans) and the calls for repatriation of the Indian population in East Africa by nationalist post-independence governments (Mishra, 2007). In the words of Mishra, “the ‘real’ nature of the disruption is, however, not the point at issue here; what is clear is that the moment of ‘rupture’ is transformed into a trauma around an absence that, because it cannot be fully symbolized, becomes part of the fantasy itself” (16). India then becomes the loss of twice migrants, and thus is recreated and imagined in the various diasporic locations its migrants find themselves in: that of East Africa, the Caribbean and Canada (Ghosh, 1989).

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<sup>3</sup> Kala Pani is literally a Hindi word for “Black Water” and figuratively represents the waters of the Indian and Atlantic oceans, the route of Indian indentured labourers from India to the Caribbean.

Another aspect of the traditionalist definition of diaspora that this paper seeks to disrupt is that of return. Mishra (1996a) indulges the idea of the 'return to the homeland' within an analysis of the 'ideal' Jewish diaspora to show that this return even in the Jewish case is but a myth. He states that Jews looked upon ethnic enclaves that they had created in the diaspora as their homelands rather than to the Israel of the Torah. The return to the homeland of Israel was a creation of political myth rather than a real return, which has been presented as a basic characteristic of diasporas (Mishra, 1996a). In this sense then there is never a return. Going back to India is not a possibility, but always remains a desire. There is always the need to look back, but since it is not possible it fuels imagined creations of the "homeland." This point is well articulated by Salman Rushdie who argues that:

It may be that writers in my position, exiles or emigrants of expatriates, are haunted by some sense of loss, some urge to reclaim, to look back, even at the risk of being mutated into pillars of salt. But if we do look back, we must also do so in the knowledge – which gives rise to profound uncertainties – that our physical alienation from India almost inevitably means that we will not be capable of reclaiming precisely the thing that was lost; that we will, in short, create fictions, not actual cities or villages, but invisible ones, imaginary homelands, Indias of the mind (1991, 10).

In many of the novels of V.S. Naipaul, this tension between remembering India but not being able to return is evident. In *A House for Mr. Biswas*, Naipaul expresses the desires of older Indo-Caribbeans to return to India, though when they are presented with the possibility of repatriation they hesitate at the opportunity (Ramraj, 1992). This may be, as Roy Heath has suggested in his novel *The Shadow Bride*, that the language of India has been lost in the diaspora and life has started anew: children have been born of the "new" land and thus return is but an elusive attraction (Birbalsingh, 1997). Shalini Puri (2004) would suggest that in the case of Indians in the Caribbean return had been written



into the contracts of indenture, and thus indentured labourers and their descendants will always harbour a desire to return.

This desire for home but not necessarily a physical return is taken up by Avtar Brah, who describes this tension as a “homing desire.” This homing desire does not necessarily inscribe a return to home, but nonetheless does not dismiss home and, in the case of this paper, India becomes an important element of diasporic subjectivity. “For some, such as the South Asian groups in Trinidad, cultural identification with the Asian subcontinent might be by far the most important element” (193), though there is not a desire to return to South Asia. Similarly for the Ismailis<sup>4</sup> of East Africa, India is not necessarily a desirable place to return to or even to identify as home (Kassam-Remtulla, 1999), though their construction in the racialized societies of East Africa cannot deny their “Asianness” and their associations with an imagined India.

Another very important point that Brah (1996) raises has to do with the way in which inclusion and exclusion operate and are experienced under given circumstances and how this reveals and creates notions of home. She states that this is linked to the way diasporic subjects negotiate political and personal “belonging” in a given locality. Thus, a sense of exclusion in the host society can lead to the creation of an inclusion in what is imagined to be “home,” a space where it is easy to assert or imagine your belonging based on ambivalent affiliations such a race.

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<sup>4</sup> Ismailis are a sect of Shia Islam, and is likely the community that M.G. Vassanji’s ‘Shamsi’ community is modeled after.

## Diasporic Identities

Diasporic discourse is positioned, with its invocation of the subjectivities of place, history, and culture, to also question the rigidities of identity – religious, ethnic, gendered and national (Brazier and Mannur, 2003). “Diasporic movement marks...a nomadic turn in which the very parameters of specific historical moments are embodied and – as diaspora itself suggests – are scattered and regrouped into new points of becoming” (3). This reading of diaspora privileges the metaphor of ‘routes’ as outlined at the beginning of this chapter, where identities are formed not based on a definable rooted “homeland,” but rather formed through the experiences of migration and the routes that a migrant travels. These routes then produce and reproduce India (homeland) in their localities and prescribe identities based on symbols such as temples, languages, dress, ethnicity and lifestyle (Nair, 1995).

Stuart Hall (1990) presents two conceptions of diasporic identity; the first addresses similarities and common points of reference in the construction of identity and the second privileges and recognizes difference in the formation of identity. This first instance of identity is that which seeks to represent a collective identity that comes out of a shared history and re-telling of the past. This view imposes an imaginary coherence and account of the experience of dispersal. The second approach to identity recognizes that there are many points of similarity, though there are also critical points of deep and significant difference. Thus, identity is the process of becoming. It is interpreted by the past, but is not of the past. To quote Hall:

Far from being grounded in a mere ‘recovery’ of the past, which is waiting to be found, and which, when found, will secure our sense of ourselves into eternity, identities are the names we give to the different ways we are

positioned by, and position ourselves within, the narratives of the past (225).

### Narratives: Representing Diaspora and Identity

The final chapters of this paper focus on applying the above theory and the following history to the novels *No New Land* (Vassanji, 1991) and *The Swinging Bridge* (Espinet, 2003), both narratives of twice migrancy and the search for belonging and identity. The use of literature is an alternative approach to examining the experiences of twice migrant settlement in Canada. Literature reflects a particular construction of self (Nair, 1995), and thus emphasizes the subjectivity within the diasporic experience.

Literature and history both invent narratives, though literature reveals emotional and psychological dimensions of the sorrow generated through the loss of homeland and brings to life those who lived through them (Mohabir, 2006), an act missing from a historical approach to diaspora studies. Though, literature can not be interpreted and understood in isolation from history, as well as from the political, economic and social, and thus this paper seeks to place the chosen literatures in these contexts and emphasises that literature can be an ideal site for research into the operations of these contexts (Harney, 1996).

Ramabai Espinet has also suggested that literary production is as valid as historical accounts, as literature comes from a space that uses a unique architecture of its own that has been constructed out of certain experiences. She explains that this is the reason she uses real names of towns and events in her writing, instead of fictionalizing the names as is common in many literary works (Solomon, 2005).

## **‘Where They Come From’: Understanding Self Through History**

### **Indian Migration to East Africa**

The Indian migration to East Africa can be divided into two main mass movements: the first from the late 1800s to around the 1920s comprising indentured labourers brought from India to East Africa to build the railway linking Lake Victoria to the coast, and the second period comprising “free” immigrants who migrated from India to East Africa for economic opportunities under the influence and encouragement of the British colonial government. It is also important to recognize that trade and migration along the Indian Ocean trade route had allowed for the migration, though in relatively smaller numbers, of Indians to the East Coast of Africa, specifically to Zanzibar since the 1500s (Morris, 1956: 195).

The construction of the Ugandan railway brought over 39,000 indentured Indian labourers to East Africa from India. The majority were Punjabis, who decided to return to India after their labour contracts had expired (Brennan, 1999). These workers were not free immigrants, but were bound by a three year contract, and at the end were given the option of either renewing their contract, returning to their home village in India with all return expenses paid for by the colonial government, or forfeiting return to India and settling in East Africa. Those who decided to stay (the number of Indians that remained after the construction of the railway is disputed, but is estimated at 15 - 19%) mainly became traders and merchants along the railway line (Gregory, 1971; Ghai and Ghai, 1970; Mangat, 1969).

It is commonly believed that Indians in East Africa today are descendants of these indentured labourers, but this is not widely the case. After the majority of Indians working on the railway left East Africa, Indians continued moving to East Africa as “free” migrants, primarily through Zanzibar. In the early 1900s, both the Imperial British East Africa Company and the British Crown were in favour of inducing Indian cultivators and their families to settle in East Africa by giving them free passage and free grants of land along the fertile East African coast. The British also considered the possibility of inducing indentured labourers to settle in East Africa as cultivators after the expiration of their labour contracts by offering them free plots of land and passage money for the transport of their families from India. Through these policies, many Indians were tempted into migrating to East Africa as “free” immigrants, though the schemes for their settlement as agriculturalists in the East Africa were not implemented, where land best suited for agriculture was instead given to European settlers. The British government instead gave Indians offers of land in the Lowland areas which was not satisfactory to Indians, and thus they took on trade and commerce as well as service and clerical jobs in the British colonial government. (Chattopadhyay, 353)

In light of their lack of access to land in East Africa, this second wave of Indian migrants to East Africa were characterized as “traders who followed the railway,” in that the railway facilitated migration into the interior of East Africa and also provided new economic opportunities for those who had migrated on the promise of agricultural land. Indians set up shanty towns along the railway route and opened up shops and were referred to as *dukawalas*: shopkeepers. Originally, these shops were set-up to meet the needs of railway construction workers, though they later established trade with Africans

and European settlers. In addition to shopkeeping, Indians engaged in other occupations that generally ran along ethno-cultural-religious lines, as indicated in Gregory (1971):

It is the coolie (indentured labour) who has made the railways; the Indian artisan who fills the railway workshops; the Sikh who forms the back bone of the military force, and, in British East Africa, of the police; the Bengali and the Goanese who staff the railway station offices, the post-offices, and the subordinate posts in the Government departments; the Parsee and the Goanese who conduct the greater part of the retail trade.” (66)

The majority of Indians who migrated to East Africa as “free” migrants were from the Gujarat- speaking areas of Kathiawad and Cutch (Morris, 195). By 1963, the Indian population in East Africa had reached 352,300 (including Arabs), with more than 50% (180,000) residing in Kenya, 82,100 in Uganda and 90,200 in Tanganyika (current day Tanzania, not including Zanzibar). In terms of religious make-up, the majority were Hindus (150,000), then Muslims (50,000), Sikhs (20,000) and Jains (12,000) (Chattopadhyay, 356). The majority of Indians in Tanganyika and Zanzibar were Muslims - either of the Shi’is Ismailis, Ithnasheris or Bohoras sects or Sunnis.

### Indian Migration to the Caribbean

The oppressive system of slavery ended in the Caribbean with the emancipation of the British Caribbean in 1833/34; however, this was not the end of the exploitation of migrant bodies in the region. Freed slaves refused to continue working on plantations even for wages, and thus the British-owned plantation class was in desperate need of cheap labour. It was under this circumstance that the system of indenturship was devised, where mostly Indian worker (workers from China and Portugal were also part of the indentured system) were brought to the Caribbean under contract before having the option to return to India (Birbalsingh, 1993). In Trinidad, the first ship carrying

indentured labourers, the *Fetel Razack*, arrived on its shores on May 30 1845 carrying 197 men, 28 women, and 1 infant. Between then and 1917 when the system of indentured labour ended, 143,900 indentured labourers were brought to Trinidad (Brereton, 1985). The vast majority remained in the Caribbean where today they form a sizable proportion of the multicultural Caribbean population, and significant proportions of the population in Trinidad (42%) and Guyana (51%) (Birbalsingh, 1993).

The system of indentured labour might have had a different name from that of slavery, but the conditions of travel and work have lead many to suggest that they were not too different, so much so that indenture was called “A New System of Slavery.” Europeans who were involved in the transportation of “coolies,” such as doctors or shiphands, made comparison with the Middle Passage (Tinker, 1974). The space on the ship allocated to each “coolie” was very small; single men and women were separated by a buffer of married couples, though privacy on the ships was non-existent. An 1855 regulation made accommodations for conditions on the ships and stipulated that an adult male was to be given seventy-two cubic feet of space, and that provisions for the care of the sick be made at hospital bays. Mortality on the ships crossing the *kala pani* were not uncommon; for example, between 1856 and 1857 707 emigrants to the Caribbean died en route out of a total of 4,094 on 12 ships (17%). The average time of travel varied over the years, with trips of 6 months not uncommon. For example, the *Bayard* took 188 days or 27 weeks (Mishra, 1996b). With the introduction of steamships at the end of the nineteenth century travel times were shorter, though the conditions on the ships remained relatively the same (Tinker, 1974).

The barracks where indentured labourers lived were designed and built for slavery, and thus even living conditions were similar to that of the system of slavery in the Caribbean. Eric Williams (1993), the first prime minister of Trinidad, in his book *History of the People of Trinidad and Tobago* noted the conditions of these barrack as follows:

The barrack is a long wooden building eleven or twelve feet wide, containing perhaps eight or ten small rooms divided from each other by wooden partitions not reaching the roof. The roof is of galvanised iron, without any ceiling; and the heat of the sun by day and the cold by night take full effect upon the occupants...A family has a simple room in which to bring up their boys and girls if they had children...There are no places for cooking, no latrines. The men and women, boys and girls, go together into the canes or bush when nature requires. (Williams, 1993, 105)

Vijay Mishra (1996b) has suggested that the two spaces mentioned above, that of the ship and the barrack, were fundamental spaces where the social relations of indentured Indians were re-sited and renegotiated. The ship was the space where caste ties and affiliations were lost, a system significant to a Hindu's progress in India. The ship was also the site for the construction of *jahaji-bhai* bonds, ship-brotherhoods, which redefined associations of kin and family:

Social interactions during these lengthy sea voyages began a process that led to the remaking of cultural and ethnic identities, to a critical self-reflexivity of the kind missing from the stratified and less mobile institutions of the homeland" (195).

The ship was also a space that created the break from familiar surroundings, the space that separated indentured labourers from eventual return and where fantasies about the "homeland" were created.

Mishra goes on to theorize that the barracks became the second space where other kinds of intercommunal and interpersonal relationships developed among Indian



indentured labourers in Trinidad. The barracks represented symbolically and literally the imprisonment of coolies on their masters' estates.

If the spaces of the ship and the barrack are any indication, life as a coolie on sugar plantations in Trinidad was not pleasant; indeed "indentured labour was...slavery plus a constable" (Williams, 1993: 195). Indentured labourers took solace from this harsh life in their own powers of resilience by recreating semblances of India in festivals and feasts. Others, in their attempts to forget the canefields, turned to the product of their labour, rum (Tinker, 1974).

### Afro-Asian Migration to Canada

There is a paucity of studies on Afro-Asian migration from East Africa to Canada; however, what is extensively covered is the refugee admission of some 6,000 Ugandan-Asian political refugees arriving in Canada in 1972 when they were expelled from Uganda by then president Idi Amin. Migration to Canada by Afro-Asians from Tanzania commenced on a large scale in the 1970s as the position of Asians<sup>5</sup> in independent Tanzania was becoming precarious.

During the colonial era, any solidarity efforts for political gain between Asians and Africans was met by British colonial resistance, as a non-white alliance in East Africa against the colonial infrastructure could have caused problems for the colonial government (Elder, 1979). This strategic stratification led to the racial sandwich common in pre- and post-independent East Africa, with white settlers occupying the top layer, Africans the bottom, and Asians in the middle (Brah, 1996). When political

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<sup>5</sup> I use the "Asian" here as it is the common term used in East Africa to refer to migrants from South Asia and their decedents.

control was finally won by the African population in the mid 1960s, Asians found themselves in a difficult position where their visible place of relative advantage in the economy was resented by the African population, who saw Asians as “parasitical, foreign, and standoffish” (Buchignani et al., 1985: 134). The Afro-Asians of East Africa, with their eventual migration to Canada, were basically creations of the British empire, their bodies being recklessly flung from one end of the empire to the other. Twaddle (1990) has explicitly noted this when he says, “it was British colonialism which in effect had invited South Asian settlers into East Africa and dictated their basically subordinate economic role there, and in time this role was bound to rouse black African [sic] hostility” (157).

This precarious situation that Tanzanian-Asians found themselves in during the 1970s, and the fear of an Asian expulsion (similar to that in Uganda in 1972) prompted many with the opportunity to do so to migrate to Canada. Nationalization and Africanization economic policies in Tanzania under the leadership of Mwalimu Julius Nyerere resulted in Asians losing property and thus harbouring uncritical animosity towards the country and also prompting migration to Canada and the UK.

The establishment of earlier Ugandan refugees in Canada facilitated the migration of Tanzania Asians, as community institutions and supports were available by those who had already made Canada their home. Through personal experience as an Afro-Asian migrant, I can say that many Tanzanian-Asians were sponsored by a family member already in Canada. Family reunification regulations at the time (late 1970s, early 1980s) were significantly more flexible than they are now, as Canadian citizens were able to sponsor their adult married siblings, whereas now you may only sponsor unmarried

siblings under 18. This chain migration under family sponsorship has allowed for a sizable Afro-Asian population in Canada, though because Citizenship and Immigration Canada only uses country of last permanent residence to collect statistical information, the exact number of Asian migrants from Tanzania is not known. We do know that there is a relatively larger Afro-Asian Ismaili population in Canada from East Africa who had relative ease migrating to Canada due to the tight and organized social structure of their community. Buchignani et al. (1985) estimate that there were roughly 30,000 Ismailis in Canada in 1985. Currently there is estimated to be about 50,000 Ismailis in Canada, although in the 1990s and in the twenty-first century most Ismailis migrating to Canada have come from India, Pakistan and Afghanistan. Thus it would be somewhat accurate to say there are about 30,000 East African Ismailis in Canada, and about 15,000 non-Ismaili Afro-Asians in Canada (Buchignani et al, 1985), although of these 45,000 it is difficult to say how many are specifically from Tanzania.

Since migration numbers of Afro-Asians to Canada are not readily available, it will come as no surprise that studies or analysis on the adaptation of these twice migrants to Canada is similarly unavailable. In addition, the tendency of Afro-Asians to be classified as “South Asians” means that their specific settlement issues are ignored in the bulk of academic work. Some focus has been given to the adaptation of the Ismaili community in Canada and thus is worth covering in some detail. The history of Ismailis is long and involved and comes out of a tradition of migration and movement which has allowed them to form the capacity as a community to adapt and assimilate with the people, cultures and institutions of the many nations in which they have settled over their long history under the guidance and leadership of their leader His Highness the Aga Khan

IV. The attainment of education and modernity have always been an important goal in the Ismaili tradition and still hold upon arrival to Canada, where students, both boys and girls, are encouraged by family and the community to pursue higher education (Jaffer, 1990). Due also to their varied migratory experiences, those who migrated to Canada from East Africa have a knowledge and ease in a variety of languages. For example, my mother speaks English, Katchi, Gujarati, Swahili, Hindi and Urdu. Challenges in moving to Canada were difficult, but not insurmountable, and allowed for a relatively smooth integration period from the changes of their African homes. Maintaining their social and religious cohesion in the milieu of the North American nuclear family structure was a challenge that the community did not face when their grand or great-grand parents migrated to East Africa, where the family structure was similar to that of India. Other issues facing the community were: the new role of women, life without domestic help, climate, and cultural identity. Encouraging youth to maintain traditional Ismaili ideals also proved to be challenging (Jaffer, 1990). From personal experience I would also say that balancing the many identities that present themselves “being Canadian,” African, India and Ismaili becomes a point of confusion and frustration. Having a variety of identities to call your own in a country where everyone else seems to be secure in their identities proved to be psychologically challenging and is still proving to be so even in my late 20s.

#### Indo-Caribbean Migration to Canada

After the system of indentureship ended in 1917, the promise of return written into the contracts of labourers for the most part was not honoured, where nearly 75% of

Indians made the Caribbean their home. The establishment of Indians in the Caribbean also meant a process of creolization over generations, where Indians were induced to shed aspects of their Indian culture, such as Indian language, religions and other customs, and assume Creole habits, most notably the use of English. Creole culture to a certain extent symbolized a level of 'progress', though Indians in the Caribbean have always been suspected of not fully being committed to the Caribbean (Birbalsingh, 2005).

Indians in post-indentureship worked mainly in agriculture, mostly on Europeans-owned plantations or more gradually on plots of their own which they acquired in lieu of return passage to India. This pattern of working the land invoked images of Indians as abjectly poor and dirty (Birbalsingh, 2005), occupying the rural landscape, and thus still being seen as 'coolies' brought to the Caribbean to work the land. In the words of Frank Birbalsingh (2005):

...there is not doubt about their [Indians] relatively late arrival on the Caribbean scene, deep sense of alienation by reason of their culture and customs when they first arrived, and their abjectly servile status as coolies within a colonial superstructure dominated by feudalistic values of race, colour and class, and by a legacy of slavery and exploitation. (20)

Despite this negative reputation or maybe because of it Indians thrived economically, mainly through agricultural or business. They made efforts to educate themselves mainly through the network of the Canadian Presbyterian Church school system set-up principally for the education of the Indian population on the island (Birbalsingh, 1997; Espinet 2007). Though they had established for themselves a life in Trinidad complete with political, economic and educational institutions, they felt like outsiders in the Caribbean, "interlopers, mere birds of passage, not fully committed to Trinidadian nationality" (Birbalsingh, 2005, 19). This outsider status was manifested in many ways,

for example in the civil service Indians in the 1930's and 1940's made up only 5% of the total public servants, and in 1989 increased to only 30% (Maharaj, 1993).

In the pre-colonial period relations between Indo-Trinidadian and Afro-Trinidadian populations were generally good, but following the independence of Trinidad and Tobago in 1962, the relations between the two began to sour based on political implications, where the deeply rooted combination of ethnicity with politics became apparent. From 1956 to 1986 the People's National Movement, an African based party, ruled the country. In 1986 the National Alliance for Reconstruction, a multiracial party, won the elections and formed the government until they were defeated in 1994 by the Indian based party, the United National Congress. It is evident from the fractured political lines based on race that Trinidad as a nation was in it self a society based on racial identity. The alienation felt on the social and political scene by Indians from their years of indenture to at least 1994 prompted Indians to engage in a second migration to 'developed' countries such Britain, the United States and Canada. One of Canada's most recognized Indo-Caribbean writers, Neil Bissondath (1985), also expresses in his short story *Insecurity* a similar sense of worry, frustration and insecurity that prompt the main character Ramgoolam to consider moving to Canada. What comes out most in Bissondath's writing is the view of the Caribbean as a stop-over, and thus making the move to Canada a natural course of action (Bissondath, 1985; Birbalsingh, 1997).

This sense of political and physical insecurity is a major reason for Indo-Caribbean migration to Canada and is expressed as the main reason by many researchers in the field such as Cyril Dabydeen (1989), Ismith Khan, Neil Bissondath and Ramabai Espinet (Birbalsingh, 1997). Though Ramraj (1992) would suggest that being caught

between traditional Hindu rural estate life and busy urban creole life, the feeling of not belonging to any of these worlds in Trinidad, prompted young Indo-Caribbeans to move to North America. He uses the literature of Samuel Selvon to support his analysis, referring specifically to Selvon's *A Brighter Sun* (1987) where the protagonist Tiger contemplates the migration of his friend to New York, and muses that "with little to hold him to his former [rural] and present [urban] societies, he himself will soon be migrating" (79).

Indo-Trinidadian migration to Canada had an early start, though migrants were very limited in number and came to Canada to meet the needs of Canada's labour market. From 1905-1965 fewer than 3,000 Trinidadians (Afro and Indo) had entered Canada, predominantly as domestic servants, railway porters and miners. After the changes in the Canadian immigration policy that eliminated country of origin as a basis for admittance into the country, the migration of Trinidadians to Canada had significantly increased. Immigration statistics do not collect racial information of migrants, but rather lists immigrants only by their last country of permanent residence and thus it is difficult to say with any accuracy how many Indo-Trinidadians are currently in the country. Frank Birbalsingh (1997) estimates that there are probably 100,000 Indo-Caribbean immigrants in Canada. He arrived at this figure by taking the Statistics Canada total population of Caribbeans in Canada since 1962 and factoring in that 60% of Trinidadians and 80% of Guyanese are Indian, which would give a total of 91,649 Indo-Caribbeans who came to Canada between 1962 and 1992. He also adds another 10,000 to account for natural increase and illegal immigration and arrives at a figure of 101,649. The percentages of Indians in Trinidad and Guyana are a bit higher than suggested by him in 1993, which

might be indicative of a growing Indian population in the Caribbean. In the 1970's the majority of Trinidadians migrated under the independent immigrant category, though in the 1980's a larger number of new immigrants came to Canada under the family reunification category. They settled prominently in the Greater Toronto Area, though some Indo-Caribbean communities can be found in Nova Scotia, Manitoba, Alberta and Saskatchewan.

The settlement process for Trinidadians in Canada is similar to that of other non-white immigrant groups to the country. Initially they have had a downward occupational mobility, as discrimination in hiring and labour practices and non-recognition of foreign credentials keep them away from potentially well paying and satisfactory employment, though by their second decade in Canada they return to their original status position. As probably a result of their downward mobility, Trinidadians have expanded their business opportunities in Canada, where they are increasingly becoming owners of small businesses. Nevertheless, the unemployment rate among Trinidadians is higher than that of Canadian-born with similar educational and occupational backgrounds (Ramcharan, n.d.).

As the population of Trinidadians has grown in Canada, the community has formed formal and informal organization and association to meet their needs, such as recreational clubs, church and other religious groups, youth groups and political and service associations (Ramcharan, n.d.). An example of this is Ram and Ruby Maharaj, an Indo-Caribbean couple who arrived in Canada in 1965 and were recently highlighted in the community magazine *Indo-Caribbean World* for their 40 years of operation of Ram's Roti Shop, one of the first of its kind in North America. Ram and Ruby remembered how



when they first arrived in Canada there was no temple and no pundit to meet their religious needs and thus they and other Indo-Trinidadians used the basement of a local building to hold their ceremonies with Ram stepping in to fill the role of pundit. Today this operation is the Hindu Prarthana Samaj on Fern Ave, with Pundit Lalman Sharma as the resident priest (Mohamed, 2007).

Indo-Caribbeans have also made a relatively large contribution to the literary scene in Canada, such as with the work of Neil Bissondath, Cyril Dabyeen, Ramabai Espinet, Shani Mootoo and Arnold Itwaru to name but a very few. Ingrained and evident in all these writings are question of identity and belonging. As these literatures have shown, probably the most important factor influencing Indo-Caribbeans in Canada is that of identity. This will be the focus of the last sections of this paper.

### **Negotiating Self and Place: Afro-Asians in M.G. Vassanji's *No New Land***

Ranked among Canada's best writers (having won the Commonwealth Writers' Prize in 1990 and the Giller Prize twice, in 1994 and 2003) and regarded as one of the country's foremost "South Asian" writers, M. G. Vassanji has written fiction in which he has explored how the lives of his East African "South Asian" characters have been affected by a second migration into places such as Canada, Britain, and the United States. Twice migrant individuals and communities appear in several of his works such as *No New Land* (1991), *The In-Between World of Vikram Lall* (2003), *When She Was Queen* (2005), and most recently in *The Assassin's Song* (2007). Although Vassanji has spoken lightly about *No New Land*, referring to it as "a novel without the historical weight of [his] other novels" (Rhodes, 1998), this work addresses in a number of instances questions of identity, diasporic community affiliation and social citizenship among Afro-Asians in Toronto, and sections of the narrative actively critique the political and social uses of the homogenizing "South Asian" identifier.

Born into the Ismaili community in Kenya and raised in Tanzania, Vassanji is himself a twice migrant, having moved first to the US to study before settling in Toronto with his family. Moving away from the "homeland," which for him is Tanzania, into diasporic spaces in North America has made him more acutely aware of his "Indianness" and Indian connections. As he puts it,

[The Indian diaspora] is very important...once I went to the US, suddenly the Indian connection became very important: the sense of origins, trying to understand the roots of India we had in us (Kanaganayakam, 1991: 21),

In interviews, Vassanji has emphasized the centrality of East Africa to his own self-perception and self identification:

It [Tanzania] is a part of my being. It is a tic, it is unconscious, it is a love. I remain strongly attached to Africa, the continent of my birth; its red earth, or its mighty Kilimanjaro, stir me to the core...Africa is my history and my memory. (Vassanji, 2002: 20, 29)

One of the things that Vassanji's explanations alert us to is the distinction between the Indian subcontinent (distinctions are rarely made between pre-and post-partition India in such conceptualizations) as a geographic entity and "Indianness" as an ethno-racial identifier in North American and its application to the "South Asian" label. As such, in order to understand how "South Asian" is produced in diasporic spaces like Toronto and (actively or indirectly) resisted by those who are made to wear the label, it is necessary to interrogate how India is imagined in public discourse and the attachment that members of the various "South Asian" communities have to India and a culturally constructed experience known as "Indianness."

*No New Land* tells the story of the Lalani family's arrival from Dar-es-Salaam, Tanzania and their settlement on Rosecliffe Park Drive in Toronto, an area close to the Don Valley renowned for its 'Asian' immigrant communities. The Lalani family comprising of father Nurdin, wife Zera, daughter Fatima and son Hanif are introduced as belonging to a "somewhat unorthodox, and hence insecure" (13)<sup>6</sup> Muslim sect called the Shamsis (loosely based on the Ismaili sect of Shia Islam), which is the first indication that Vassanji in this novel is interested in breaking down the monolithic category of 'Indian' to show the diversity that exists across "South Asian" peoples. The storyline also references and extends to include some of the Lalanis' neighbours whose diversity is underlined in the novel in the different cooking smells—Goan, Madras, Hyderabad,

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<sup>6</sup> Numbers in parenthesis in this section refer to page numbers in *No New Land*.

Gujarati, Punjabi and Caribbean—that waft through the hallways of sixty-nine Rosecliffe.

Nurdin Lalani's challenges of settlement in Toronto are told through stories of job searching, racism, friendship, temptation and community. When Nurdin finally finds a job at an Addiction Centre in downtown Toronto, he is falsely accused of attempted rape on a white Canadian woman, but is able to escape the charges with the assistance of a young and witty lawyer in his community, Jamal. Jamal and his friend Nanji, a quiet and thought plagued part-time professor, migrated to North America as university students and thus their settlement experiences are markedly different than that of Nurdin's though they are close in age. The story also tells of the friendship between Nurdin and his Indo-Caribbean co-worker Romesh, which by incorporating another twice migrant group Vassanji further questions the homogenization of the "South Asian" community in Canada. As Nurdin's wife becomes more devoted to religious life, Nurdin turns to the friendship of his old neighbour from Dar es Salaam, Sushila, who he runs into years later in Toronto. Sushila is Hindu and thus this character also serves to explore the construction of "South Asian" in Canada.

The novel allows for lapses of memory into the past, telling stories about the lives of Nurdin's father Haji, and the community of Asians in East Africa. This past penetrates the life that Nurdin is building in Canada when Haji's lifetime friend and respected religious mentor, Missionary, arrives in Canada to continue his guidance of the Shamsi community.

### De-centering the “Indian” Homeland

The main characters in this novel serve as perfect guides in the negotiation of homeland. India figures into the novel not necessarily as a physical space to which characters hold personal recollection or familiarity of experiences, but rather India is part of a historical collective memory, a presence that is not quite understandable but is undeniably present. This distinction can be seen through an analysis of India as an identity vs. an ancestry, where the latter perception is prevalent among the characters in *No New Land*.

Haji Lalani (Nurdin’s father) serves as the only connection Nurdin and his children have to India, as it was

Haji Lalani, who in his last days would sit at the ocean looking towards the land of his birth with only a twinge of nostalgia (“After all, we’ve brought India with us”) died believing he had found a new country for his descendants (30).

Traditional theories of diaspora would dictate a certain level of desire for return, that Haji should have a longing to cross the ocean and return to India in a search for completeness and belonging. Though, Haji had no such desire, believing he had found a new land for his people. Thus not only is Haji the connection to India, but he is also the character who dismisses this notion of return, where “homeland” becomes an imagined desire. The myth of return is clearly overstated in diasporic theory, and is not relevant to all communities. Aly Kassam-Remtulla’s (1999) study of the Ismaili community in Kenya reveals that the longing for India and return is not present in people’s consciousness, so much so that most can’t even name the regions or villages in India where their parents, grand-parents or great-grand parents are from. India as an identity is so absent from Haji’s construction of himself, his family and his community, that Haji saw himself as a

British subject (16), not Indian or even diasporic Indian. In this sense then a desire and longing for India is also absent from the subsequent generations, where neither Nurdin nor his children have a longing or desire for India as the “homeland.”

Nurdin represents the transition, being caught between the typical ‘here’ and ‘there’, the sense of not belonging anywhere anymore. Nurdin also represents another battle of sides, that of individual and community. In the end Nurdin is not able to escape either ‘there’ or the community in his quest for ‘here’ and individuality. As Vassanji himself has said,

all people should have a sense of themselves, a sense of where they come from, and it just happens that people in East Africa – I think Indians as well as Africans and especially in Tanzania – don’t have that sense, a historical sense, of where they come from (Nasta, 2004).

In Canada, Nurdin is provided with liberation, a liberation from his controlling father and a constraining community, and he is presented with the possibilities of pulling away from these, and the novel basically is asking; can he take on these possibilities (Nasta, 2004).

“The answer is its not possible because he is essentially where he came from and that puts certain restraints or constraints on him and he cannot do everything that he would have liked to do; he cannot break free from the past” (Nasta, 2004).

Many critiques of the novel have situated Missionary as the force who is able to cut Nurdin from his past, pull him away from the weight of his father and his life in Dar (Malak, 1993; Thorpe, 1996). However as the quote above has stated, one can not break free from the past, the past is what shapes the future. In effect Missionary did not exorcise the ‘past’ per say, but more so the fear that the past had on Nurdin. In this sense then Missionary has given permission for the community to build a life in Canada, but has reminded them that they can not forget where they came from. Nurdin and his

negotiations of India and Tanzania thus decentre the configuration of “homeland” constructions in diasporic subjects in Canada.

This negotiation of homeland and quest for identity is a common challenge among newcomers to any country. Heightened by official multiculturalism, this quest is especially challenging for twice migrants. Vassanji himself has pointed to his own experience of coming to Canada and having to deal with the question of whether he is Indian or African, both of these identities being under threat with his presence in Canada. Vassanji tentatively concludes that:

I now have realized that what I am is simply the sum of what has gone into me. I am happy to live with several identities and with the contradictions that that implies; in fact I thrive on them, they feed my creativity...there is no resolution, no real, single essence of me. But this realization has not produced any calm, no unifying tranquility, but instead a field of felt tensions that defines me. (Vassanji, 2002: 28, 29)

This experience of wandering and searching for identity is replicated by Nanji with his arrival in North America. During his university days in America, Nanji engages with Indian history in order to situate himself within the anti-imperialist struggle at a time when the university campus was embroiled with the anti-Vietnam war movement. His choice to engage with Indian nationalism instead of the African decolonization struggle that was taking place at the same time would suggest that Nanji foregrounds and expresses an Indian identity and situates himself within that struggle and not an African one. Further on in the story, this engagement with Indian nationalism seems to recede as Nanji moves to Canada and goes “from Gandhi-ism to a loss of faith, and to replace that, the constant search, which is what living had become for him” (100). This would thus suggest that grounding oneself in a static notion of a “homeland” is blind faith, that the search for identity and belonging is life-long and fluid and never complete.

All of the main characters in one way or another are negotiating the mythical “homeland” and the desire or need to return. Resulting from this negotiation is a decentred sense of “homeland” that finds its legitimacy and identity within the physical boundaries of Canada, in sixty-nine Rosecliffe, with its “common corridor with its all too real down-to-earth sights, sound, and smells...And you realize that you’ve not yet left Dar far behind” (60). Insights into the de-centering of “homeland” also suggest the Shamsi identity as being the centre of the community’s identity and thus their conception of “homeland.” The most predominant sense of identity and attachment in the novel would have to be the Shamsi community; in fact, the main theme of the novel is Nurdin’s negation between communal and individual belonging (Alexander, 2003). The Shamsi community arrives at a sense of belonging by going beyond national or racial identities. Their Shamsi identity, however is not necessarily rooted in their religious beliefs, but reflects a common bond among migrant people. For the Lalanis and others in the Shamsi community, being Shamsi is a marker of acceptance, above race, class or nationality.

### Not the Same ‘Indian’

As discussed in the introduction of this paper, multiculturalism requires that immigrants have a strong sense of self, a clear idea of where they have come from, and what that culture can contribute to the “mosaic” that is Canada. Twice migrants of Indian ancestry living in Canada are in constant negotiation as to how these will be defined for them and their community. The narrow-minded understanding of multiculturalism and the desire for knowing and naming by the mainstream places extreme importance on racial identification, thus questions of “where are you from” are not referring to identity



of place, but rather to a racial identity. Thus, for twice migrants from East Africa, this means they are reluctantly pushed into identifying and belonging to the “South Asian” community in Toronto.

Representations of “South Asians” in mainstream discourses in North America dismiss diversities of histories and struggles for distinct identities by specific groups.

Monika Fludernik (2003), in her introduction to *Diaspora and Multiculturalism:*

*Common Traditions and New Developments*, states that:

Bangladeshis, Indians and Sri Lankans would certainly assert their difference on Indian territory, but they are happy to join together as South Asians in the USA because they see themselves as different from East Asians and Chicanos (xiii).

This generalized view that dismisses the heterogeneity of the “South Asian” community in the west is clearly challenged in *No New Land* as the twice migrants in the novel try to maintain their distinct cultural identities within the “South Asian” population in Toronto. There are many instances in the novel where the characters negotiate their uniqueness within the signifier “South Asian” and assert that not all Indian looking people fall under the same race based category.

Nowhere is this negotiation of identity more obvious than during the discussion between friends that takes place at the Lalani household after the racially motivated attack on Esmail, a fellow Shamsi who was pushed onto the subway tracks by a group of white youth. The vivid discussion shows the characters’ negotiating between fitting into the wider “South Asian” community and being able to distinguish their unique identity as Afro-Asians. References to Sikhs and Pakistan solidify the claim of heterogeneity within the “South Asian” diaspora in Canada and how an overarching identity does not fit their

needs. In the end, it is settled that they can only claim to be East African, when a woman cuts in impatiently and asks:

Why doesn't someone tell these Canadians we are not Pakis. I have never been to Pakistan, have you been to Pakistan? Tell them we are East Africans! (103/4)

This concern is also raised during the “Paki rally,” a rally organized by the wider “South Asian” community in support of Esmail after the racist incident in the subway. The fact that the Dar immigrants called the rally a “Paki rally” clearly demonstrates that they distinguish themselves from other “South Asians” in Toronto based on their migration from East Africa and not the dominant understanding of direct migration from the sub-continent. The Rosecliffe Dar immigrants did not feel they belonged to this gathering because they were from Africa, and again foregrounded their Shamsi identity by stating that important events were announced at the mosque. This is clearly demonstrated in the following quote;

A Paki rally was not really their cup of tea – weren't they from Africa? A few of them went to the meeting, to see what it was all about. It seemed they were being forced into an identity they didn't care for, by the media and public, and now by these Paki Asians who meant well but couldn't keep their distance. None of them seemed to realize, or care, that Esmail belonged to them, their particular East African Asian Shamsi community (109).

Their reluctance and resistance to conform to these homogenizing descriptors and identities is also seen through the wearing of the Kaunda<sup>7</sup> suits by the male Dar immigrants as an effort to set themselves apart from other “South Asians.”

The heterogeneity of the “South Asian” diaspora and the configuration of the community's diversity in Canada is again represented in the character of Sushila and her

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<sup>7</sup> A Kaunda suit is an outfit with short sleeves and a four-pocketed jacket popularized by founding Zambian President Kenneth Kaunda.

relationship with Nurdin. The sexual undertones and insinuations are evident in this relationship, although the fact that Sushila is Hindu also reveals another aspect of the relationship. While shopping for groceries, Sushila buys a vegetable that Nurdin does not recognize and he reflects that this “pointed to her different upbringing, of course. To be Hindu you have to know your vegetables” (174). Although Vassanji falls back on superficial dietary distinctions between Hindus and Muslims, this relationship subtly resists the designation of “South Asian,” and further distinguishes between two groups of Afro-Asian migrants in Toronto.

The Canadian urban space allows for the coming together of people from all over the world, but what is more revealing is that twice migrant “South Asians” from East Africa and the Caribbean are able to come together and negotiate their belonging to the wider “South Asian” diaspora. This is cleverly captured in the novel in the relationship between Romesh, Mohan and Nurdin. This relationship is claimed and built on many bases; that of class (Romesh and Nurdin both being orderlies at the hospital), their status as immigrants, and being ‘Indian’ as an ancestral designation. The first time Mohan met Nurdin he asked if he was Indian. Nurdin thought “India or Pakistan, what difference” (117) thus suggesting at this point that “Indian” was not a nationality, but rather a racial identity that brought these two men together, as neither one of them is from India. When Missionary meets Romesh, he asks him about how blacks and Indians got along in Guyana. Again the similarity of “Indianness” is evoked, and in this instance the racial status of Indians in the Caribbean and East Africa as a point of solidarity between these two different communities of twice migrants is foregrounded. In these instances

“Indianness” or “South Asisanness” becomes a point of recognition and solidarity, rather than a point of contention.



**Indian/Caribbean/Canadian?: Identity and Home/Land in Ramabai Espinet's *The Swinging Bridge***

Ramabai Espinet is a writer, a professor, a poet, a dramatist and most recently a novelist, with the release of her debut novel, *The Swinging Bridge* in 2003. Espinet was born into an Indian family in Trinidad and migrated to Canada over 25 years ago.

Espinet's life in Canada mirrors many issues similar to that of the protagonist of her novel, that of Caribbean culture, community affairs, writing, activism and the search for lost histories. She describes this engagement as a "complicated discourse, marked by conflicted points of view, denial and irresolution" (Espinet, 2004: 2).

*The Swinging Bridge* was very well received in literary circles as it was shortlisted for the 2004 Commonwealth Writers' Prize in the Best First Book category for the Caribbean and Canadian region and longlisted for the 2005 International IMPAC Dublin Literary Award and was selected for mention by Robert Adams in his annual "Modern Classics" lecture series.

*The Swinging Bridge* tells the story of Mona Singh and her family, following the family's generations through their history of migrations from India to Trinidad to Canada. Mona lives in Montreal and when her older brother Kello becomes terminally ill, her family comes together father Da-Da, mother Muddie and sister Babs to comfort him in his last days. Kello's dying request is to ask Mona to return to Trinidad and buy back their grandfather's land. Mona is reluctant to make the trip, although when she does she fully engages in the discovery of her great-grand mother Gainder's indentured migration story from India to Trinidad, and also Gainder's lost songs, created to ease the pain of indentureship. Immersed in this discovery, Mona begins to explore her own identity and belonging simultaneously to the Caribbean, Canada and India.

I was an Indian, an Indian from the Caribbean, an Indian long out of India, for generations now (188).<sup>8</sup>

Mona muses on this thought late one night while in New York, as she lies in bed Bree, her lover from her teenage years in Trinidad whom she meets again years later while on vacation. Although this seems to be but a passing thought, I use it as the central question in the following analysis of *The Swinging Bridge*. Making sense of her Indian identity, and the hold that her Indian past has on her, mediates the journey of discovery that Mona undertakes throughout the novel. Not having a solid sense of who she is, Mona often refer to herself as a Nowarian, not only in Canada, but also growing up in Trinidad. This opens up the possibility of questioning her identification as a “South Asian” in Canada which she rejects in favour of embracing her Caribbean connection. It may seem contradictory that Mona negotiates her “Indianness” within the Caribbean but also defines the Caribbean as Indian and African, but this struggle is one that is unique to the twice migrant experience. Furthermore, discussions of “homeland” and the myth of return support the idea that India is part of Mona’s construction of the Caribbean and thus alienated from the identity of “South Asian” in Canada.

#### Nowarianness: Resisting Indo-Caribbean Marginality in Canada

A Nowarian can have a variety of different meanings, and is a common expression used in Trinidad to describe someone who seems to fit nowhere. As Ramabai Espinet (2007) points out the word is “used both disparagingly and it’s used sort of defiantly.” She continues to explain that Mona uses and identifies with this term because “she doesn’t feel at home in any particular place or in any particular setting; she’s at odds

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<sup>8</sup> Numbers in parenthesis in this section refer to page numbers in *The Swinging Bridge*

whereever she is. She's not a misfit, but she does not fit in... And for Mona she likes the defiance of it, she likes the defiant kind of identity that it confers on her as not being trapped within any kind of prescribed or codified behaviour" (Espinete, 2007). Seeing this Nowarian identity as a central characteristic of Mona's existence, I would like to spend the next couple of pages engaging in understanding first where and how this sense of Nowarianness comes from, both in Canada and in Trinidad, and then explore the implications of Mona's understanding of this and how it leads her to search and imagine her past in Trinidad in order to claim her identity within the narrative and in the construction of Trinidad and her subjectivity within it.

Mona is a film researcher. Although she aspires to be a filmmaker, she never quite achieves this goal, and her creativity is never fully recognized. For example, she pleads with the filmmaker she is working for to include the story of Cecile Fatiman in the film on the Haitian revolution they are working on, but in the final cut this idea is not included (Espinete, 2007; Solomon, 2005). This situation is indicative of Mona's sense of not belonging, her 'Indian' feminine experiences in Canada and Trinidad not fully acknowledged.

Mona and her family immigrate to Canada with the prospects of a better life, a life of a promising future of prosperity and success. It does not take long for the Singh family to come to the understanding that they do not fit in the landscape of Anglo-white Canada. As Mona puts it "Why did people leave the place they were born for an illusion of a better life?" (26). Mona's white immigrant boyfriend Roddy has found a better sense of home in Canada than her or her family could hope to establish and he tries to pull



Mona “into a home of his invention” (26); however, Mona knows early on that she must invent this for herself.

Moments of not fitting in as an Indo-Caribbean in Canada are apparent throughout the novel and have also been expressed in the writings, both fictional and non-fictional, of other Indo-Caribbean Canadian writers. Not only does Mona feel a sense of not fitting into the Anglo norm of Canada, but she also experiences not fitting into the “Caribbean” or “West-Indian” identifiers as they are constructed in Canada. Indeed “West-Indian” or “Caribbean” identity in Canada is seen as representing the African population of that region, “since West Indians were mostly of African descent, the term ‘West Indian’ became synonymous with ‘African’” (Birbalsingh, 1997: xi). For Mona, this becomes clear when she visits Bree in New York, where he had “established himself solidly as a West Indian man in New York” (188), though Mona was still in the position of negotiating her belonging to North America.

For Mona although the Caribbean is an African and Indian space, where creolization or douglarization<sup>9</sup> indicate that Indian and African experiences and identities are intertwined in the formation of “Caribbeanness,” this is not how the region and its people are perceived in the mainstream Canadian discourse. The ethnic mix of Trinidad is evident when Mona’s father writes in a letter to the editor that “the south of this island [Trinidad], sir, is the Indian heartland” (75). Another indication of this is Mona’s cousin Bess’s mixed race boyfriend Rajesh, “a Rastafarian with almost floor-length dreadlocks” (290), the only surviving son of Soomin and her creole husband. Mona reflects on the relationship between Bess and Rajesh, on how she “loved their grace with each other...how simply and freely they belonged inside each other’s world” (292). The

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<sup>9</sup> Douglar refers to a person of Indian and African ancestry in the Caribbean.

coming together in harmony of Creole and India in this personal relationship is symbolic of the way in which Mona and Bess envision and experience the Caribbean. As Bess asserts:

The real problem is how we fit into life here. You know people talk about Trinidadian culture and another culture called Indian culture? So Trinidadian culture don't have place for Indians too?...It's so ridiculous (285).

As Mona sees it, the Caribbean for her is "Patois words and Hindi words" (5).

In Toronto, Mona associates herself with West Indian spaces where her Indo-Caribbean identity is defined and negotiated through her affiliations to West Indian and Caribbean signifiers. For example, Mona's sister Babs urges her to come to Toronto every summer to play mas in Caribana, but she dismisses the festival as a watered down version of the real Carnival in Trinidad. Mona also identifies Toronto growing to include her experiences by referring to the increasing number of West Indian cultural signifiers such as roti and patty shops and "West Indian accents everywhere" (104).

Mona's negotiation then becomes between her "Caribbeanness" and her Canadianness, and her Indian identity is negotiated within her sense of belonging to the Caribbean. Nowhere in the book is this more evident than when Mona's estranged cousin Horatio visits the family in Toronto. Horatio is the Canadian born son of Mona's Uncle Baddall's unwed union with a French Canadian woman when he first arrives in Canada. Neither Mona nor the rest of her family had ever met Horatio until he visits them in his late 20s after his father's death, both in hope of rekindling family ties, and also because he is planning a trip to Trinidad and wants to find out about the family history as he himself had never been to Trinidad nor had he been raised by his Trinidadian father. To the shock and amusement of Mona and her family, Horatio

reveals that he is visiting Trinidad to uncover hidden treasures that apparently his father had buried in a small village there. Horatio was under the impression that his father was “descended from a line of Rajput princes who had moved their whole dynasty to the West Indies in the nineteenth century to escape the British Raj” (227). Mona and her family find this story completely absurd but do not let Horatio know this. They even go to the extent of providing contacts in Trinidad of people who could help him with his “search”. This encouragement and acceptance of Horatio, although he is seen as white (Mona’s mother was worried he would find the Trini pelau she cooked too spicy), is based on their common Trinidadian affiliations. Thus, regardless of the time and space (and even race) that separates Mona and Horatio, in the end it is their Trinidadian connections that bring them together.

The food that Mona’s mother serves for Horatio’s visit is symbolic of the tension between their Canadian and Trinidadian identities:

The mismatched meal Muddie [Mona’s mother] planned suggested that my mother was also ambivalent about inviting this person with the unlikely name of Horatio. She prepared French Canadian Pea soup and pork tourtiere, jerk chicken, a real Trini pelau, avocados, and plantains. (221)

The uncertainty over what kind of meal should be served is indicative that the struggle here is between being Canadian and being Trinidadian, where within the construction of Trinidadian the Afro and Indian elements are inseparable. “Caribbeanness” is not in question.

### Resisting a “South Asian” Identity

The racial basis for the construction of “South Asian”, that is the grouping of people that appear to conform to essentialist notions of “Indianness”, is disrupted by Mona’s confidence in her Caribbean and Trinidadian identities. Although Mona is still actively negotiating her links to India through the stories and history of her great grandmother Gainder, she is not interested in recovering some essential “Indian” part of herself. Rather, her purpose is to understand how her Indian ancestry has helped shape her Caribbean/Trinidadian identity.

It is hard to say whether Indo-Caribbeans have been rejected from the “South Asian” signifier by direct migrants or whether this comes from a strong resistance by them to the term. Ramabai Espinet is clear and very strong on her analysis of this issue, in that

by agreeing to that term, they [Indo-Caribbeans] would lose the very essence of their Caribbean identity, which was far more important to them than an active South Asian identity. And the other thing is that they did not, Indo-Caribbean people don’t exactly feel welcome in South Asian circles. (Espinet, 2007).

Similarly, in a study conducted by Steven Vertovec of young Indo-Caribbeans in the UK, he concludes that there is a sentiment among Indo-Caribbean that direct migrants from South Asia see them as a kind of pariah group who do not “fit-in” to the construction of a “South Asian” identity in the UK (Vertovec, 1994).

Falling outside and resisting “South Asian” identity is very subtle in the novel, and often goes unnoticed. For example, Mona reflects on how her father’s keen sense of style, surely influenced by Creole and western cultures from Trinidad, goes unnoticed in Canada. Da-Da had become “an elderly South Asian man...that’s all this country can

ever make of him” (79). It is apparent then that Da-Da is seen strictly as South Asian in Canada. The language here becomes an important point of analysis; when speaking of their own identities and experiences ‘Indian’ is used as a signifier, but when describing the perception of mainstream Canada, “South Asian” is utilised. Thus not only does Da-Da’s style go unnoticed, but so does his family’s history and struggles of migration and experience in India, Trinidad and Canada.

As a response to the homogenizing categorization of Mona and her family by mainstream Canada, there are strong points of resistance exercised by the characters. The way in which Da-Da and Uncle Tristram consciously switch between their ‘Trini’ creole accent and ‘the Queen’s English’ asserts their connection and belonging to a specific history in the Caribbean, and solidifies their Indian presence in the creolization of Trinidad. The conscious decision in choosing between these different forms of ‘English’ depending on the environment and situation they find themselves in, allows for a certain level of self definition in the Canadian landscape.

#### Indian Women claim a belonging to Trinidad

Mona’s Nowarian identity leads her on a quest of self-discovery and self-investigation, retracing the matrilineal genealogy and history (Mehta, 2006) of her family in order to definitely insert her feminine presence into the Trinidadian landscape. As was discussed in chapter 2, Brah suggests that home is linked to processes of inclusion and exclusion (Brah, 1996) and thus Mona’s sense of exclusion or confusion as an Indo-Trinidadian in Canada, leads her to the history of Indian women in Trinidad as her place of inclusion; as home.

This process of inclusion and exclusion is highlighted at by Espinet when she states that:

I think for the population there [in Trinidad], there is a kind of impermanence that is always there as a whole, for the whole population. For migrants [from Trinidad to Canada] however, who can do well in the diaspora, Trinidad then becomes a more permanent location in their imagination, you know because then the Caribbean becomes a more permanent location, it is a real homeland because it is something they've lost and nostalgia plays a large part of forming that idea. (Espinete, 2007)

Mona returns to Trinidad initially to take care of her brother's business of buying back their grandparent's land, but she then turns to her cousin Bess in order to reconstruct the history of the women in her family on the island. She says, "I was alive again. In the excitement of discovering all this information about the woman Gaider I forgot my earlier anxiety" (277). Mona's persistent and joyful search for the stories and songs of her forgotten great grandmother Gaider illustrates Mona's need to inscribe this history into the Trinidadian imagination (Mehta, 2006). In a similar way Bess's effort in constructing a museum of Indo-Trinidadian history also serves this need, though the form of artefacts and nick-knacks amounts to relegating Indo-Caribbean existence to the past, or emphasising 'roots'. Mona's choice of using Gaider's songs as her connection to Trinidad reaffirms the fluidity that this medium provides, that of 'routes'.

Mona's visit to a rand<sup>10</sup> reveals the meanings of one of Gaider's songs. She soon realizes that this song is used in a contemporary chutney love song whose composer has long been forgotten. Chutney music is a popular musical form in Trinidad today that uses Indian folk tunes, Bollywood and bhajans (Hindu devotional songs) over calypso or soca beats (Ingram, 1997) to create a fusion of music unique to the island. The fact that Chutney is popularly accepted as part of the Trinidadian cultural nation and Mona's

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<sup>10</sup> Caribbean Hindi word meaning widow.

reclaiming and identifying Gainder's songs as an integral part of contemporary popular Chutney re-inscribes Indian women's lost history into the common narrative of Trinidad.

### Redefining "Homeland": The Crossing of the Kala Pani

Gainder's crossing of the kala pani in *The Swinging Bridge* is the moment of trauma and loss that is associated with the homeland of India being imagined and recreated in the diaspora. The crossing of the kala pani by Gainder as an indentured labourer brought much sorrow and pain and is demonstrated in the novel by the loss of Gainder's love Jeevan, who was left behind on "The Rock", an island in the South Atlantic en route to Trinidad. Jeevan can be seen as an analogy to India, as the homeland being left behind, abandoned but still remaining in the imaginary, as Jeevan resonates in Gainder's songs. As Mishra (1996c) has argued, imaginary "homelands" are constructed from the space of distance to compensate for a loss occasioned by an unspeakable trauma.

The crossing of the kala pani also allowed for the recreating of identities and families, thus further severing their connection to India, and cementing their belonging to Trinidad. The construction of *jahaji* brotherhoods on the ships is symbolic of letting go of family in India in order to create new bonds of kin in Trinidad. The shedding of caste and the reinvention of mostly casteless Hindu societies in Trinidad is also symbolic of how India has been reinvented in Trinidad.

The title of the story also underlines the trauma of the crossing of the kala pani. "The Swinging Bridge" can have several meanings and several interpretations. It can refer to the uncertainty of the terrain on which Mona finds herself once she is forced to

reflect upon the meanings of her past and present life (HarperCollins, 2007). It can serve as a metaphor for the “indeterminate timelines in which the past mediates a future-inspired present in the form of multiple diasporic dislocations and exilic relocations” (Mehta, 2006: 25). I would read the title as the gangplank bridge on the *Artist* ship that carried Gainder and other indentured workers like her to Trinidad. “The gangplank clack and swings precariously as the women scramble up onto the deck...Finally, once they are all on board...the rickety bridge swings up and this ship is on its way” (3,4). The swinging up of the bridge symbolized a final departure from India, though is occasionally allowed to swing back down in memory, as with Mona’s search for Gainder’s past.

#### India Imagined and the Myth of Return

A return to India in the lives of indentured people and their descendants can only be a mythical one that is inscribed in the contracts of indentureship. But, for the most part, it is a return that is never realized (Puri, 2004). This mythical return is especially distinguishable between the old and new Indian diasporas (Mishra, 1996c) when they come together in Canada or the UK, where return in a physical sense is possible and conceivable for direct migrants (Bhachu, 1993). For twice migrants the link to India has been destroyed by the crossing of the *kala pani*. This impossibility of return is exemplified in *The Swinging Bridge* when Mona’s Uncle Peter attempts to reunite with their long lost family in India. He is disappointed to find that there was no excitement of reunification by his long lost cousins. There was “no invitation to return...nor did they ask to see his children. They were satisfied. The circle has been closed” (91). This circle does not represent the traditional understanding of diaspora (as prescribed by



Safran (1991) for example) where there is movement between two spaces, and the desire and possibility of return (Mehta, 2006). Rather, this circle represents a closing, a point of finality that “maintains the sanctity of Indian history without the ‘contaminating’ stains of indenture” (Mehta, 2006: 31). Thus the “return” can never be to India, and can only remain in the imagination of its migrants.

The myth of return to India is also prescribed in the formal aesthetic of the novel. When the stories of Gainder and her journey from India are told, they are written in italics, indicating their belonging to the novel, but also the ambiguity of this belonging to Mona’s identity. Referring back to the distinctions between India as ancestry and India as identity, the italics would represent India as an ancestral linkage, but not necessarily that of identity, and surely not within the possibility of return. It also indicates that the life Gainder creates on the island of Trinidad is not Indian per se, but rather the coming together of India and African to create something that is unique to the island of Trinidad.

Canada can also be seen as the return in the journey of leaving India. The return need not be to India but to Canada, where the initial quest for a better life continues (Espinet, 2007). When Mona is leaving Trinidad after her trip to recover her family land and also her family’s history on the island, she leaves “with a mixture of sadness and excitement. In a strange way, I felt I was leaving home for the first time” (304). After her discovery of Gainder and the affirmation of her history within the Trinidadian narrative, Mona does not feel the need to remain in Trinidad, but finds that Montreal is where she needs to be,

I am part of this city I live in, and right now I want no other place. Like any other migrant navigating new terrain, I bring my own beat to the land around me” (305).

Mona thus returns to Canada not with a stronger understanding and recognition of her “Indianness,” but rather with a confirmation of her “Caribbeanness,” an identity that is created in the Caribbean out of Indian and African ‘routes’. As the writing of Cyril Daybydeen, another Indo-Caribbean writer living in Canada, inscribes the possibilities of multiple homes, multiple identities, and multiple possibilities for belonging (Simpson, 2001), so does *The Swinging Bridge*. Canada, Trinidad and India become Mona’s return and her sense of identity and home, where home becomes where you are (Hall, 1990).



## Conclusion

What this paper has tried to achieve is twofold: first, it has been preoccupied with examining the term “South Asian” which, as a simplifying category, has over the past two decades increasingly gained widespread usage in Canada to homogenise people of diverse national, ethno-linguistic, religious and cultural backgrounds who have different migration and settlement experiences. Although this homogenisation creates a seemingly unified racial/ethnic group that is easily identifiable in bureaucratic contexts, it is, as has been demonstrated *inter alia*, very problematic as it erases various histories and experiences which have been homogenised under the label “South Asian.” Using the histories and experiences of twice migrants from the Caribbeans and East Africa (Indo-Caribbeans and Afro-Asians) I have demonstrated how the “South Asian” community in Canada is heterogeneous and fragmented, and made up of diverse peoples of different histories and experiences of migration and settlement. Similarly, although not a subject of this study, I have also tried to draw attention to the differences in terms of culture, gender, race, class, and religion that exist in the broader “South Asian” community, all of which get lost when ‘South Asia/n’ is problematically appropriated and deployed in the way it has been done in Canada.

Second, by examining two novels which deal with the experiences of twice migrants in Canada, the notion of “homeland” was interrogated. Immigrants coming to Canada, especially under the project of multiculturalism, are essentialised and made to construct their identity based on a fixed “home/land.” As shown in this study, twice migrants not only disrupt the idea of a homogeneous “South Asian” community, they also destabilise the entire idea of a fixed “homeland” on which such problematic constructs as

“South Asian” are necessarily based. The experiences of Indian migration to East Africa or the Caribbean and then to Canada pose very serious challenges to the problematic notions of identity, belonging and imaginations of “homeland,” and contest traditional understanding of diasporas.

In *No New Land*, sixty-nine Rosecliffe Drive becomes a space where Nurdin Lalani constructs “home,” but also a space where this notion of home and belonging is explored. The novel reveals strong moments of resistance where Afro-Asians refuse to be lumped into a “South Asian” signifier so that their experiences and memories of migration from India to Tanzania to Canada inform the basis upon which their subjectivities are constructed in Canada. The multigenerational stories and characters show how India became less of a physical space in the minds of Nurdin and his community, though India still remains in the memories and longings of the characters.

*The Swinging Bridge* tells the story of Mona Singh and her matrilineal ancestry in India, Trinidad and Canada. Mona struggles with a seemingly contradictory tension of belonging, where she explores the significance of being “Indian” in Trinidad, but then also asserts the construction of Trinidad from the roots/routes of India and Africa. This tension is further complicated by the way Mona negotiates her belonging in Canada. Mona’s familial history and experiences lead her to resist the classification of “South Asian” in Canada. When she claims Canada as home, that sense of belonging is brought about by her strengthened understanding of her imagined India and douglarized Trinidad.

The insights gained from these two texts, which have not received the academic attention they merit, fill an important gap in the literature on the South Asian migration, and opens up the field of twice migrant diasporas to include literary critique. Moving the

discussion on twice migrancy away for empirical and socio-demographic findings has allowed for the exploration of the unique identity construct of twice migrant subjects.

The importance of migratory roots/routes, especially in the way they relate to twice migrants, still needs to be more critically analyzed in academic discourses of diaspora, although this paper does provide a starting point for discussion. Future studies that address identity formation with actual twice migrant subjects would be of particular interest, especially with the Afro-Asian community, a community that has too easily been swept into the category of “South Asian.” A good starting point in this exploration would be an in-depth analysis of race relations in East Africa and analysing how this has carried over or changed in Canada. Investigations of this nature have been conducted with Indo-Caribbean subjects, although specific links and constructions of India are lacking.

Twice migrancy has revealed many important sites of contestation over identity and negotiations of “homeland” that are lacking from mainstream discussion on the “South Asian” diaspora. Attention must be paid to the unique experiences of communities within this grouping so that we may reach a better understanding of how immigrants experience Canada, and how their ability to resist essentialisms and provide alternative constructions of self and community is a strength.



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