

Rosanne Kanhai, ed. 2011. *Bindi: The Multifaceted Indo-Caribbean Women*. Kingston: University of the West Indies Press. 251 pp. ISBN: 978-976-640-238-9.

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Editor Rosanne Kanhai advises the chapters contained in *Bindi: The Multifaceted Lives of Indo-Caribbean Women* aim to contribute to the understanding of “both the Caribbean and women in a global network” and as such they should be read. Divided into three sections appropriately labeled according to their related themes, and authored by a colorful group of scholars dedicated to the diverse fields of linguistics, anthropology, history, sociology, academia, religion, and gender and culture research, the book offers an array of interesting essays on religious, historical, political, cultural, linguistic, artistic and spiritual topics. Kanhai’s introduction provides detailed explanatory information on the significance of the very popular Indian bindi, a colorful dot of varied textures and designs pasted on the female’s forehead, and a cultural feature which made its way to Indo-Caribbean settings following indentureship. A feminine identification marker, the bindi categorizes its user according to certain roles. A scarlet bindi conveys the universality of a woman’s life cycle through blood shed: menses, deflowering and childbirth, whereas a black one is worn in solidarity for the fallen sisters who have succumbed to violence. Although of Indian roots, the bindi has transgressed racial barriers and has reconstructed itself to accommodate issues of womanhood any female can relate to. Exogamous womenfolk have not only adopted the bindi as part of their apparel, but have also included Indian and Indo-Caribbean fashion in their wardrobes, popularizing not only their garbs, but also bringing attention to more serious matters females face globally: domestic violence, gender inequality and human rights violations.

Section one subtitled “Religion in a Global Context” brings women to the fore in religious scenarios, both historically and at present. The feminine ideal to emulate in the Indian Ramayana legend, Sita and her male counterpart Rama were the figures young couples had to aspire to model as epitomes of virtue. Yet in this tale their virtuous conduct is far from rewarded as the couple is sadly separated never to be re-united again. As in many patriarch-dominant societies, the female figure must endure unjust suffering: A pregnant Sita is abandoned by her husband upon suspicions of impurity when kidnapped by a rogue who does not touch her. Rama comes to this realization much too late as Sita refuses to

take him back. Sherry-Ann Singh, the author of this essay, very aptly analyzes the current position and progress of women in a modern Trinidad vis-à-vis the Ramayana. Singh examines the inevitable transformations the primarily oral legend of the Ramayana has undergone to accommodate the ever-changing socio-economic and religious trends of the Hindu society and communities at large. Of pivotal importance is the 80s decade which brought a new wave of educated Trinidadian women who were moving away from the more domesticated roles they were bred into to explore the world of academia and accomplishment.

Halima Sa'adia Kassim thoroughly examines brides-to-be in her piece entitled "Rings, Gifts and Shekels: Marriage and Dowry within the Indo-Muslim Community in Trinidad, 1930 to the Globalized Present." Kassim concurs with Singh in her assessment of the transformations Indo-Caribbean women have experienced within their Muslim and Hindu upbringings in Trinidad. Both Kassim and Singh credit education with women's resistance to conform to patriarchal fixed rules to exercise their own decisional authority. Consequently, as Kassim states, educational pursuits have taken precedence over marriage vows, thus delaying motherhood. Socio-economic improvements in any society will bring forth changes however little they may be. Even Muslim women in Trinidad have developed and moved away from their fundamentalist doctrine of dependence and infantilization which kept them under the perennial wing of their men. They have joined the work force and have either contributed to their family income or have become solely responsible for their upkeep. Educated Muslim females have learned to challenge certain Islamic paternalistic ideas that subjugate them, however, they have yet to break away from subservience to men. The diaspora of Muslim communities is moving toward a re-negotiation of mutual respect and justice. In essence, feminism, Kassim suggests, looks towards the legitimization of women's choices [in marriage]. The Muslim community is faced with technological and social advances that cannot be denied or overlooked, forcing them to re-conform, re-adapt and make allowances for those new developments.

The second section "Constructing Self" has three interesting essays about women finding their place in the world. Shaheeda Hosein's essay "Unlikely Matriarchs: Rural Indo-Trinidadian Women in the Domestic Sphere" includes a series of interviews of women in their 80s in attempts to analyze the lives of Indo-Trinidadian women in the rural sector. Once again the domestic role takes precedence over any other in these women's lives; the chief purpose of a woman being that of homemaker. The interviewees mainly confess they had very little say in the selection of their spouses. The respect owed to their elders' judgment, their parents or grandparents, was far greater than their will. Yet, they managed to

survive and succeed in becoming matriarchs in their domain and raised their children to be productive citizens of society. The subsequent essay “Finding Self in the Transition from East to West” by Valerie Youssef analyzes the linguistic features of three young women to determine their Trinidadian identity through the analysis of their speech patterns, repetitions, tag questions, pauses and hedging devices which she uses to draw her conclusions. Youssef’s subjects express deep-seeded cultural ties to their Indo-Trinidadian heritage and make no strong claims to the Indianness of the mother country. The language analysis in this chapter is significant in tracing what phrases, slang, and verbal constructions have survived and/or what linguistic transformations persists in their current verbal repertoire. Also in this section of the book, the former Ms. Bastana Bahar, Gabrielle Jamela Hosein’s “No Pure Place of Resistance: Reflections on Being Ms Mastana Bahar 2000” uses her anecdotal piece in the self-evaluation of what it means to be an Indo-Trinidadian woman. Although the sarees, jewels, bangles, colorful shawls, beads and other decorative feminine articles that clad the female are representative of their culture, Hosein surmises they do not by themselves identify what a Trinidadian woman is. After being accused of not “being Indian enough” and of not depicting the Indian woman legitimately when she was crowned the winner of the beauty pageant, she reconsiders all suppositions of Indo-Trinidadian womanhood, and decides to look within herself for answers. She is still grappling with those definitions but finds solace in selfdom.

The final four chapters in the third section of the book focus on woman as healers, artists, writers and hybrids. Anthropologist Kumar Mahabir’s “Survival and Creativity,” provides valuable information on old remedies adroit healers, masseuses and midwives practiced in the treatment of different ailments available to low-income families. After the 1950s these occupations have become less popular, having been replaced by modern medicine and hospital staff treatments. However, low-income communities continue to have faith in their healing abilities and home remedies and seek their services in emergencies. Some of the treatable conditions Mahabir describes are female sterility, pregnancy and prenatal tests, abortion, assistance with deliveries, aches and sprains and respiratory illnesses.

The last three chapters center on the creative talents of female writers and artists. Brenda Gopeesingh studies Indo-Guyanese artist Bernadette Indira Persuad’s ethno-political oppression paintings in “Identity, Activism and Spirituality in the Art of Bernadette Persuad.” Following her whimsical and politically motivated dismissal from a teaching job, Persuad takes up painting to decry the injustices of the Forbes Burnham regime, and the racial bigotry that ensued which spurred senseless

crimes. Anita Baksh's "Breaking with Tradition: Hybridity, Identity and Resistance in Indo-Caribbean Women's Writing" examines the novels of two generations of Indo-Caribbean writers Lakshmi Persuad and Jan Lo Shinebourne and their successor Shani Mootoo. According to Baksh, the senior authors employ Hindu mythology in their work and break with the tradition of male tellers of the oral epics and myths and replace them with female authors and story tellers. If Persuad and Shinebourne are emboldened to replace the male teller for females in their novels, Mootoo follows in their footsteps by challenging heterosexual identity in her novel *Cereus Blooms at Night* by transforming her characters' gender and ascribing new sexual identities for them, thus creating hybridized personalities. Paula E. Morgan discusses three Indo-Trinidadian writers: Niala Maharaj, Ramabai Espinet and Joy Mahabir in "Beyond Fragile Homes: Indo-Trinidadian Women Constructing Habitable Narratives." Faced with the racial multiplicity of Trinidadian society these novelists negotiate what home is. Indo-Caribbean peoples had suffered alienation and marginalization in the Caribbean by the Afro-Trinidadian community who resented their arrival during indentureship as they competed with the liberated slaves for jobs; hence the need for the quest for home. For Espinet, as Morgan suggests, home is where the same language is shared, the same food is consumed and whereby non-verbal expressions are understood. For all three novelists "home is rooted in the land" regardless of their point of origin.

In closing, the essays in the book are a must-read for any scholar of Indo-Caribbean studies. The book covers all significant aspects in a woman's life: betrothal, marriage, motherhood, education, talents, conflicts and challenges they face daily. The varied portraits and diverse scenarios in which women are placed are not far from what other females confront worldwide. Although focused on Indo-Caribbean female communities, their universal topics attract the attention of a wider audience.