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**“She took lovers as a ship takes rough sea”: Jahaji-bhain belonging and
coolie-gal sexuality in Rahul Bhattacharya’s *The Sly Company of People***

Who Care

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“She took lovers as a ship takes rough sea”: Jahaji-bhain belonging and coolie-gal sexuality in Rahul Bhattacharya’s *The Sly Company of People Who Care*

by

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Abstract

“She took lovers as a ship takes rough sea”: Jahaji-bhain belonging and coolie-gal sexuality in Rahul Bhattacharya’s *The Sly Company of People Who Care*

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Indo-Caribbean feminist scholarship and novels are largely invested in recuperating the figure of the Indo-Caribbean woman—the female Indian indentured labourer, or “coolie” woman, or her descendant—who has been simultaneously invisible in Caribbean nation-building narratives, and hypervisible as morally depraved in colonial discourse for her sexual transgressions. Such scholarship that highlights the subjectivity of a particular ethnic group becomes tricky in light of broader Caribbean studies, which tends to privilege a discourse of creolisation, or the interculturalisation of ethnic groups. Indo-Caribbean feminist discourse also frequently posits itself as a “minor literature” in opposition to Afro-Caribbean scholarship, which it identifies as the “dominant”; by attending exclusively to the Indo-Caribbean woman, the field often simply inverts the vertical relationship between the two, thereby preserving the structure that it aspires to dismantle.

This project uses Rahul Bhattacharya’s 2011 *The Sly Company of People Who Care*, and specifically the character of Jan, a Guyanese woman of mostly Indian descent,

to argue for new ways of understanding coolie women's subjectivities and sexualities that do not perpetuate a vertical relationship between ethnicities. I primarily investigate how the gap between the male Indian national narrator's understanding of Jan—as his love interest who he believes to share Indianness with—and Jan's understanding of herself as someone of mixed descent who disavows a pure Indian ethnic identity, enables us to find alternative models of belonging. Drawing on Indo-Caribbean feminist tools, this paper demonstrates how Jan embodies Shalini Puri's "douglia poetics," a poetics that calls for interculturalism and an enrichment of Caribbean feminism through the inclusion of Indo-Caribbean women's experiences. I argue that by easily changing potential sexual partners, who offer her the possibility of making new crossings, Jan creates belonging that does not rely on ethnic purity, but through others who have made or will make crossings, performing Mariam Pirbhai's idea of "jahaji-bhain" or ship-sisters. This project demonstrates how Jan's simultaneous channeling of the coolie woman, through her sexual transgressions, as well as her enactment of non-ethnic solidarities, provide Indo-Caribbean scholarship new ways of rescuing the Indo-Caribbean woman.

Table of Contents

Introduction.....	1
A Dougla Poetics in <i>The Sly Company of People Who Care</i>	12
Minor Transnationalism: Postcolonial Debates	15
Dougla Poetics	20
Coolie-Gal Sexuality and Rupturing the Bildungsroman	23
A Kala Pani Poetics and the Double Diaspora	23
Coolie-gal History and Colonial Discourse	27
Coolie Sexuality in <i>The Sly Company</i>	30
Jahaji-Bhain Belonging.....	35
Jahaji-Bhain Principle	35
(Trans)oceanic Studies	36
Jan's Lovers as Jahaji-Bhain	38
Conclusion	41
Works Cited	43

That is the basis of the Antillean experience, this shipwreck of fragments, these echoes, these shards of a huge tribal vocabulary, these partially remembered customs, and they are not decayed but strong. They survived the Middle Passage and the *Fatel Rozack*, the ship that carried the first indentured Indians from the port of Madras to the cane fields of Felicity, that carried the chained Cromwellian convict and the Sephardic Jew, the Chinese grocer and the Lebanese merchant selling cloth samples on his bicycle.

—Derek Walcott, “The Antilles: Fragments of Epic Memory”

“Look at you—a full-blooded coolie-gal!”

She laughed.

“Not all the way. My father got a lil Brazzo in him.”

We stood in the flush shade, surprised by one another’s Indianness.

—Rahul Bhattacharya, *The Sly Company of People Who Care*

Introduction

Caribbean studies has long been characterized by the inherent contradiction between the process of creolisation and cultural or ethnic retention: how can we flesh out a cultural or historical specificity, only made visible to then be smoothed over by creolisation? On the one hand, Caribbean discourse advocates for Walcott’s vision: a collective memory of fragmentation that articulates difference—like that between the indentured Indian and the enslaved African. Such a vision presupposes pure ethnic categories—the Indian or African—that can then collide in the Caribbean and enact horizontal solidarities between groups that do not configure either ethnicity as dominant. On the other hand, Caribbean theory is largely influenced by Édouard Glissant’s “poetics of relation,” his formulation that creolisation or interculturalization do not happen because “pure” cultures come into contact, but because cultures are always already hybrid and relational and because “each and every identity is extended through a relationship with the Other” (11). His conceptualization of culture demystifies the notion of “ethnic

pureness” and relies upon Deleuze and Guattari’s idea of a rhizome or “enmeshed root system,” which denies the idea of a single root or pure originary point. If cultures are always already hybrid, then creolisation becomes a process of constantly further hybridizing and interculturating, and Caribbean people are always “in the continuous process of becoming.”¹

This paper is primarily concerned with how Indo-Caribbean feminist theory, a field that has largely come into being with the emergence of Indo-Caribbean women’s novels in the late 1980s, can be situated between these two opposing ways of characterizing present Caribbean discourse.² What does it mean to need to redeem and explore the subjectivity of the figure of the Indo-Caribbean woman, in discourses that privilege creolisation? What happens when scholars and novelists attempt to make legible a figure with a single “root” and potentially an ethnic purity, against Glissant’s formulation? The tension between Indo-Caribbean feminist scholarship’s urgent project to make visible the Indo-Caribbean woman, and the difficulty of privileging her without falling into essentialisms and positing her as an Other to other ethnic groups in the Caribbean, plays out in a crucial moment of Rahul Bhattacharya’s *The Sly Company Who Care*, the novel this project uses as a case study. The narrator of this novel, a male national from India, meets Jan, a Guyanese woman whom he wants to identify as Indian;

¹ This is observed by Indo-Caribbean feminist scholar Rosanne Kanhai, in her discussion of Sergei Bramley, who points to Macumba shrines built at city intersections of Brazil as “symbols that Caribbean peoples are always at the crossroads where various cultural influences intersect, in the continuous process of becoming” (72).

² I am referring specifically to the Anglophone Indo-Caribbean women’s novel from Trinidad and Guyana. Most scholars, such as Miriam Pirbhai, identify Trinidadian Lakshmi Persaud’s 1990 *Butterfly in the Wind* as the first Indo-Caribbean women’s novel, while a few contend that Jan Shinebourne’s 1988 *The Last English Plantation* is the first. The ambivalence regarding the first novel is grounded in an authenticity debate, since Shinebourne is of mixed Indian and Chinese descent.

when he asks her if she is in fact a “full-blooded coolie-gal,” she laughs, as though the idea of ethnic purity is not something that can be engaged with seriously (198).

The urgency with which Indo-Caribbean feminist scholarship labours to foreground the figure of the Indo-Caribbean woman arises from the ways in which she is simultaneously invisible and hypervisible in Caribbean discourse. While erased from the Caribbean national imaginary, she tends to be rendered as hyper-sexualized or morally depraved in the Afro-Caribbean literary imagination, which Indo-Caribbean scholarship formulates as the dominant literature in the Caribbean. For instance, feminist scholar Brinda Mehta gestures towards the employment of the Indo-Caribbean woman as a negative trope in Jamaican Olive Senior’s short story, “Arrival of the Snake Woman.” Senior infamously names her protagonist of Indian descent “Miss Coolie” as late as 1987, an ethnic slur for people of Indian descent in the Caribbean and elsewhere. This paper looks to challenge the framework of Indo-Caribbean feminist literature positing itself as a “minor literature” that stands in opposition to the more “dominant” Afro-Caribbean corpus, and also argues for new readings of Indo-Caribbean women’s sexualities.

Writing the Indo-Caribbean into Caribbean studies is particularly tricky in the discourse of creolisation; Indo-Caribbean scholarship frequently gestures to Barbadian poet Kamau Braithwaite’s first contemporary use of “Creole”, which was originally coined in colonial discourse to describe anything island-born—people, animals, and plants—to distinguish them from all entities European-born. Braithwaite formulates “Creole” as the interculturalization of African and European elements to make up Caribbean culture, a definition that writes out Caribbean indigenous as well as any Indian or other ethnic groups participating in indenture, like the Chinese. The inherent irony in Indo-Caribbean scholarship always revolves around trying to find a place for the Indo-

Caribbean woman and her cultural and historical specificities, only so that she can be included in a discourse that is marked by creolisation, and the potential smoothing over of those specificities.

The history of the usage of “coolie,” as we see in Senior’s short story, in itself speaks to the need to re-inscribe the term and the figure with a positive valence. Originally appropriated from “kuli,” the Tamil term for “work,” by 16th century Portuguese captains to describe Indian dockworkers along the Coromandel Coast, “coolie” was eventually used more broadly and pejoratively by the British for Indian indentured labourers, sent by choice but often by force or deception, to other British colonies—notably Fiji, Mauritius, and parts of the Caribbean. Such labour was imperative for the Empire’s economic needs, particularly on sugar cane plantations, to replace the African labour lost when slavery was formally abolished in the British Empire in 1833. “Coolie” is still used as a slur for descendants of Indian coolies, and a term that shames and alienates the history of indenture from the Caribbean national imaginary.

Literature emerging from the “old” Indian diaspora has worked to rescue the term, most visibly through Mauritian poet Khal Torabully’s formulation of “Coolitude,” a literary movement that articulates the shared experiences of coolie descendants, celebrates the lived experience of indenture and locates the actual crossing and figure of the ship— rather than the country left behind— as an originary point of identity.³ What many male writers who re-code “coolie” are not necessarily invested in is the particularly subaltern position of the coolie woman, who Guyanese journalist Gaiutra Bahadur claims

³ I use “‘old’ Indian diaspora” to distinguish the descendants of indentured labourers who migrated from India in the 19th and early 20th centuries from the more recent Indian diaspora usually settled in the metropole and frequently a result of globalization.

embodies a “lost history within a lost history,” or a double subaltern (IndiaInk).⁴ Indo-Caribbean women’s writing has taken upon itself the project of recovering and retelling the indentured woman’s history through the imaginative space of the novel.

On one hand, the urgency to focus on the coolie woman performs classic postcolonial feminist critique: Indo-Caribbean women’s writing calls for new women-centered Caribbean historiographies, and a reconsideration of Afro-Caribbean but also Indo-Caribbean narratives of nation-building for more inclusive models.⁵ The Afro-Caribbean narrative largely erases the coolie woman and her labour, while the male Indo-Caribbean imagining prescribes Hindu-centric ideals of femininity onto the coolie woman’s body and only affords her the power to reproduce ideal diasporic citizens, who preserve patriarchal social structures from India. On the other hand, while the effort to insert women into nationalist narratives is important, I am more interested in the ways in which such a body of work enters broader debates in oceanic studies and transnational feminisms, and how women’s writing can invoke the coolie woman in order to rewrite understandings of her sexuality.

How, then, has the coolie woman historically been cast, that calls for a rewriting? Colonial discourse renders her as morally depraved; Walter Gill, a colonial overseer in Fiji, characterizes a coolie woman as someone who “took lovers as a ship takes rough sea” (Faruqee 64). Why might this be the case? The coolie woman may have had the freedom to sexually transgress as a consequence of the ship crossing from India to the site of indenture, by subverting the Hindu taboo of the *kala pani*, or “black waters”—the

⁴ I use “subaltern” as conceptualized by subaltern studies scholars, particularly Ranajit Guha, in the context of Indian historiographies: a subaltern figure is a member left out of the colonialist and Indian nationalist elite historiographies of Indian independence.

⁵ Much of feminist postcolonial critique attends to the ways in which the project of nationalism deliberately omits women, or inscribes particular ideas of reproductivity onto them to create suitable citizens of the nation—see *Recasting Women: Essays in Colonial Indian History*, edited by Kumkum Sangari.

belief that crossing an unknown oceanic expanse forces a Hindu to lose caste. This “loss” of caste also afforded indentured labourers other beneficial losses, like losing oppressive social structures and norms that could be reorganized or dismantled in a new home. A central concern in indenture studies is whether a kala pani crossing granted coolie women a kind of agency unavailable to them in India, and a new sexual freedom that was read as deviant by colonial and Indian male authority, or whether indenture simply “con[ne]d them into a new kind of bondage” (Bahadur 37).

Gaiutra Bahadur’s careful excavation into colonial archives suggests that the policing of women’s bodies has always been part of the project to legitimize colonial rule, and the coolie woman is understood to be always already sexually transgressive. This is evident in instances where the coolie woman is marked as morally depraved before the kala pani crossing and her opportunity to sexually transgress. One such instance of this is the 1883 Emigration Act, which attempted to stop women from volunteering into indenture to escape their husbands. Robert Mitchell, an indenture contractor responsible for labour exported to British Guiana at the time, claimed with frustration that the Magistrate must have wanted such a law because he believed that “female emigrants are so immoral they would desert their husbands for a sari...worth a shilling” (Bahadur 27). Curiously, Indian nationalist discourse of the early 20th century does not configure the coolie woman all that differently; while nationalists shifted the blame from the women’s loose morality to European overseers for the sexual exploitation of women, their protestations called for the same thing—female morality and chastity.

Such discourse explains the demand to challenge conventional stock literary representations of the coolie woman and to write back to moralizing colonial and Indian nationalist discourses that call for restrained sexualities. The emerging field of Indo-

Caribbean feminism also enters larger theoretical debates through its project: it troubles standard postcolonial understandings of “diaspora” as formerly colonized peoples situated in the metropole looking homewards. The field responds to present anxieties in postcolonial studies concerned with how we might imagine a transnationalism determined not by forces of globalization from above but one that relies on rhizomatic solidarities from below or across. By providing a pathway between India and the Caribbean, Indo-Caribbean feminism also calls for a new framework in oceanic studies that connects Atlantic and Indian oceanic studies, one we might call transoceanic.

While Indo-Caribbean feminist scholarship and literature claims to be making certain interventions, I will point to the ways that the theoretical framework of Indo-Caribbean feminism sometimes undoes the important work it strives to do. For instance, many Indo-Caribbean women’s novels use the narrative structure of “double displacement.” The Indo-Caribbean female protagonist narrates retroactively from the vantage point of a place she has left the Caribbean for—usually a metropole. Ramabai Espinet’s 2003 novel *The Swinging Bridge* illustrates this common trope: Mona lives in Montreal and returns home to Trinidad to attempt to buy back ancestral land. At home she becomes increasingly interested in locating her coolie ancestor Gainer’s story. Gainer and Mona’s exiles become parallel stories, and the coolie ancestor becomes a way for Mona to tell her own story and to provide her, as Brinda Mehta observes, “with a coming-of-age script to uncover the fragmented and dispersed genealogy of a mother history” (“Engendering History” 20).

The double diaspora framework is limiting in two ways: it runs the risk of sidelining the older indenture migration for the more recent one to the metropole, effectively undermining Indo-Caribbean scholarship’s work of destabilizing postcolonial

understandings of diaspora. The metropole immediately regains its status as a center. The other shortcoming, I argue, is that such a framework promotes the idea that departure becomes the only way of resisting different forms of oppression, and denies imagining futurities for women who perhaps cannot make a transgressive crossing.

It seems to me that the largest concern in Indo-Caribbean feminism revolves around how to shed light on the Indo-Caribbean woman and her histories against a discourse of creolisation and Glissant's poetics of relation. How can the field resist falling into ethnic essentialisms and a dangerous emphasis on racial divide? How can Indo-Caribbean feminism responsibly avoid inverting the vertical relationship that the field perceives between the dominant Afro-Caribbean and Indo-Caribbean? Are there ways of recognizing ethnic groups in the Caribbean as margins to the metropolitan center and relational to one another, as Glissant would advocate? Are there ways of imagining a horizontal solidarity across ethnic difference?

Some tools have been created by Indo-Caribbean feminist scholars to promote what Benedict Anderson conceives of as imagined communities of horizontal comradeship, such as Shalini Puri's formulation of "douglapoetics." This poetics calls for the interculturalization of African and Indian elements in Caribbean spaces, and argues for the enrichment of Caribbean feminism through the inclusion of Indo-Caribbean women's experiences, so that Indo-Caribbean feminisms do not simply displace Afro-Caribbean work.⁶ Unsurprisingly, "douglapoetics" fails to manifest in much of Indo-Caribbean scholarship; the urgency to foreground the subaltern Indo-Caribbean woman inhibits the possibility of offering an alternative model to the binary of major-minor. One

⁶ "Douglap" derives from the Bhojpuri term for illegitimate child, while "douglapoetics" stands as metaphor for interculturalization, Rosanne Kanhai proposes that douglap in its literal form— mixed offspring— can serve as a productive inclusive feminist space.

of the largest shortcomings of Indo-Caribbean feminism is its ongoing struggle to situate itself without identifying as a “minor literature” that must depend on resisting the major or dominant in a binary.

This paper strives to use Rahul Bhattacharya’s 2011 *The Sly Company of People Who Care* to make new interventions in Indo-Caribbean feminist scholarship, transnational and (trans)oceanic studies. I argue that the character of Jan performs in ways that destabilise or point to the inadequacies of the field of Indo-Caribbean feminism, and help to realize an alternative model of conceiving the coolie woman, her sexuality, and her place amidst Afro-Caribbean feminist discourse and transfeminism.

Bhattacharya’s novel concerns an unnamed male cricket journalist from India, who spends a year in contemporary Guyana (2006) for no reason made much clearer to the reader than “feeling enlivened” by the Guyanese landscape and architecture, and who serves as our narrator. In the third section of a novel with no continuous narrative arc, our narrator meets Jan, a Guyanese woman of Indian descent but not a “full-blooded coolie-gal” and has a short-lived romance, which is ruptured by her unceremonious departure. She seems to leave the narrator for another lover, channelling the stereotype of the coolie woman’s sexual depravity and propensity to “take on many lovers.”

I first assert that *The Sly Company of People Who Care* presents us with an imagining of what Puri’s dougla poetics looks like, through the character of Jan, who refuses any direct affiliation with “Indianness” and distances herself from performing any kind of Indian authenticity. In also distancing herself from Afro-Caribbeans, she embodies racial ambiguity and invites us to think through alternative forms of belonging, that contrast greatly with the narrator’s tendencies of constantly imposing “Indianness” onto her, and perceiving her as his diasporic counterpart.

Secondly, I argue that Jan's sexuality enables us to read coolie women's sexualities in a new light. The novel resists the standard double diaspora bildungsroman structure, which excavates a coolie woman's history to provide the protagonist with a coming-of-age script. Instead, *The Sly Company of People Who Care* allows for the coolie woman to grant Jan a script to rupture the protagonist's own bildungsroman narration. This script calls for us to read coolie women's sexual transgressions or freedoms as obvious resistance to male fantasies and narratives, but also resistance to the master narrative of teleological development.

Finally, this project asserts that Jan has the capacity to simultaneously channel a coolie woman's sexual transgressions and disavows herself from a rigid and ethnically pure Indo-Caribbean identity. Instead, she uses her sexual choice to "take on many lovers" as a way of locating belonging and creating a version of jahaji-bhain, or ship-sisters.⁷ By feeling a solidarity with others who identify with travelling or leaving, she shifts the originary point from one that dictates ethnic purity—like India—to the ship or crossing. Even without any friendships in the scope of the novel, apart from the narrator and her new potential lover, Jan becomes a way of imagining alternative models of horizontal solidarities that we hardly witness in Indo-Caribbean scholarship, and that are sought in fields of oceanic studies, transnational and postcolonial studies.

While Bhattacharya is a male Indian national, I consciously write him into a tradition of Indo-Caribbean women's writings to advocate that a novel from the outside can still work productively to enrich Indo-Caribbean feminist thought. Espinet believes that Indo-Caribbean women are only a "phenomenon of invisibility" and a projection of

⁷ This is a principle formulated by feminist scholar Mariam Pirbhai to draw attention to undoing the dehumanization of indentured labourers and to call for community through the shared experience or postmemory of crossing. I elaborate upon this later in the paper.

male fantasy in Indo-Caribbean men's work (Diasporic 49). While Jan, our main female character initially does play out as male fantasy, she disrupts this narrative and affords the Indo-Caribbean woman a particular liberatory potential; the novel asks for a more inclusive model of Indo-Caribbean feminist thought that does not need to rely exclusively on Indo-Caribbean women's literatures and scholarship.

A Dougla Poetics in *The Sly Company of People Who Care*

When the narrator in *The Sly Company of People Who Care* first sees Jan, a Guyanese working-class young mother and the central figure in my argument, in a store, he glimpses her “thin bra strap of shocking pink against burnt sugar skin” (179). This initial encounter occurs in the third and final section of Bhattacharya’s novel, after the second section is devoted entirely to the narrator’s journalistic account of Guyanese history: the initial Dutch settlement, the need to create kokers (sluices) and canals to manipulate the land, and the demand on sugarcane plantations for slave labour and later indentured labour after slavery is abolished in the British Empire. As the narrator meets Jan in the scope of the novel right after such a keen attention to the history of the land, “burnt sugar” immediately recalls the violent history of sugarcane plantations. Curiously, since the cane plantation functions as a site of trauma in both the collective postmemory of slavery as well as indenture, “burnt sugar” neither gives us nor the narrator an immediate clear sense of Jan’s ethnicity.⁸ The narrator watches her walk away and appreciates her “Caribbean derriere,” and when he tries to find her a little later in the narrative, a shopkeeper describes her as a “red gal,” a vernacular or creolised way of describing mixed blood.

In their second meeting, the narrator asks Jan what her name is short for. He hears and spells out her name as “Janaki,” a patronym that means “daughter of Janata” who is a king and father of Sita in the Hindu epic *Ramayana*; this makes Janaki synonymous with Sita. That the narrator is from India is crucial here; he constantly reads Jan in ways that are familiar to him, such as “Janaki,” and is sure of a shared Indianness between them.

⁸ “Postmemory” is Marianne Hirsch’s concept of belated memories of trauma that those who did not directly experience can possess.

Sita is of particular importance in thinking about the ways coolie women have been rendered in colonialist and nationalist discourse, which are arguably similar in terms of the desire to value purity and regulate women's bodies. Such a desire in nationalist discourse is most visible in instances like the 1913 newspaper publication of "The Far Cry of an Indian Woman from Fiji", a letter relaying the story of an indentured woman, Kunti, who jumped into a river to escape sexual advances from an overseer—a letter swiftly taken up by the Indian nationalist cause. Kunti was immediately likened to Sita, the wife of Ram in the *Ramayana*, who in the epic is abducted by the demon king Ravan and must be rescued by her husband, all during a period of exile. After coming back to Ram, Sita is forced to undergo the test of walking through a sacrificial fire to prove that she did not succumb to any of Ravan's sexual advances, and is "pure" to be accepted again by her husband. Kunti is applauded by nationalists for her similar resistance to sexual exploitation and colonial power, but perhaps more so for her choice to privilege purity over her own life (though she did survive).

In light of Janaki as a mythological figure, for the narrator, Jan as Janaki becomes not only fixed as someone of Indian descent, but also the kind of woman who values her purity or chastity and who does not rehearse the colonial stereotype of a coolie woman: sexually transgressive and disloyal to a partner. To fix Jan in this way potentially also reflects the narrator's hopes that she, like Sita, will be loyal to him. Jan immediately corrects him—she spells her name "Jankey," which can longer connote the same thing. The narrator persists in his attempts to locate ethnic purity, asking if she knows who Janaki is, and when she admits to a knowledge of *Ramayana*, he jokes: "Look at you—a full-blooded coolie-gal!" (198). He attempts to locate an ethnic purity in the same way

that Indo-Caribbean feminist scholarship is occasionally guilty of. Jan laughs, but again corrects him: “Not all the way. My father got a lil Brazzo in him.” (198).

The imposition of “Janaki” on Jan, and the gap between the narrator’s understanding of her and her understanding of herself, fleshes out this project’s main charge: to argue that *The Sly Company of People Of Care* offers us alternative models of belonging and selfhood that do not rely on ethnic purity and alternative ways of reading coolie sexuality. The fact that “Janaki” simultaneously inscribes ethnic purity and a particular sexuality onto Jan’s body suggests that these markers are connected, and also affords me my final claim—that sexual choice and multiple partners can be a way of formulating and organizing belonging, as opposed to ethnic purity.

Both of Jan’s interjections to the narrator—that her name is Jankey, or Jan, and that she not full-bloodedly of Indian descent—give rise to my first claim that Jan embodies a dougla poetics to articulate belonging and kinship. By doing this, Jan disavows Indianness and refuses the need that we often witness in Indo-Caribbean feminist scholarship to posit the Indo-Caribbean experience and scholarship as minor to a dominant Afro-Caribbean discourse, or to attempt to make the Indo-Caribbean experience dominant. I argue that instead, Jan performs what transnational scholars Françoise Lionnet and Shu-Mei Shih conceptualize as “minor transnationalism.” To posit the importance of a dougla poetics model for situating the Indo-Caribbean, her coolie history and scholarship, this paper first looks at contours of the different theoretical fields that Indo-Caribbean feminist scholarship intervenes in, and the ways in which Shalini Puri’s formulation of “dougla poetics” enters such debates. I also draw upon the limitations of Indo-Caribbean feminist thought in its current state, and then offer ways in

which *The Sly Company of People Who Care* grants us ways of overcoming the shortcomings of the field.

MINOR TRANSNATIONALISM: POSTCOLONIAL DEBATES

In order to argue that Jan enacts minor transnationalism and a dougla poetics, I begin by situating Indo-Caribbean feminist scholarship in larger conversations and current concerns of postcolonial, transnational and diaspora studies. A 2005 collection of essays, *Postcolonial Studies and Beyond*, edited by Ania Loomba and Jed Esty among other prominent postcolonial scholars, reflects the current anxieties in the field about globalization—a hegemonic force from above that uses “spatio-temporal leveling of the globe” to mask “blind Eurocentricism,” as observed by Susie O’Brien and Imre Szeman (8). The field is invested in determining how to distinguish transnationalisms that are informed by globalization, from those from below, that work towards an internationalist imagining of freedom, as first seen in Fanon’s movements from Martinique to Algeria. Such an investment in liberatory transnationalism aligns with postcolonial theory’s habit of associating anti-colonialism with nationalism and its attendant problematic erasures, and associating postcolonialism with internationalism. Laura Chrisman articulates her ambivalence with these associations through her work on Sol Plaatje and Peter Abrahams, who employ nationalism and pan-African internationalism respectively in their literatures as strategies of resistance. By considering the circumstances that may have played into these South African writers’ choices to self-identify as “native” or “Negro,” Chrisman invites us to consider of whether all nationalism can be understood as “oppressive” and all transnationalism as “liberatory” (255).

Transnationalism has been closely linked to questions of diaspora, but in a postcolonial framework both terms still tend to privilege a particular metropole, falling

into the trap of Eurocentricism. Françoise Lionnet and Shu-Mei Shih observe that in transnationalism we often “study the center and the margin but rarely examine the relationships between different margins” (2). Diaspora studies tends to operate similarly; both Chandani Patel and Marina Carter gesture towards Bill Ashcroft’s definition of “diaspora” in *Key Concepts in Postcolonial Studies*, where he claims that “the most recent and most socially significant diasporic movements have been those of colonized people back to the metropolitan center.” (Patel 2). The metropolitan center remains in focus in thinking through transnationalism, and shifting this focus has become a central concern of postcolonial, transnational and diaspora studies scholarship.

The dichotomy between center and periphery has also typically influenced the ways in which we read minority subjects and their cultural production. As Lionnet and Shih observe, “minority subjects identify themselves in opposition to a dominant discourse rather than vis-a-vis each other and other minority groups” (2). They gesture towards the need to think about the relationship between different margins that does not need to rely on some kind of mediation through metropolitan centers. Lionnet and Shih invoke the figure of a rhizome to argue that it suggests “an uncontainable invisible symbolic geography of relations” that can become the way minority subjects identify and interact—thus enacting a genuine transnationalism “from below” as sought in *Postcolonial Studies and Beyond* (2).

Yet even while the rhizome structure promotes the dismantling of a binary of major and minor, Lionnet and Shih observe that Deleuze and Guattari undo some of the work they aim to accomplish. They create a “recentered model of “minor literature,” where the significance of the minor still relies on its function to oppose the major: this preserves a binary and vertical relationship (Lionnet and Shih 16). This function of

opposition still seems to be key in transnational theories, since for minority subjects, their experiences and cultural production depend on a “politics of recognition”: they become legible only through how resistant they can be to the necessary dominant (16). To overcome such a politics and the tendency to fall back into the structures that are to be broken down, Shih and Lionnet propose “minor transnationalism” as an intervention. This concept attends to the many relations between national and transnational, but aims to concentrate on relationships or relationality between different margins that do not require a dominant to be opposed; this effectively decenters the metropole.

Indo-Caribbean feminist scholarship enters such debates with high stakes. On one it is interested in destabilizing postcolonial and post-Cold War understandings of diaspora as situated in the metropole; Bill Ashcroft’s elaboration of “diaspora” casts aside older migrations like indenture. Indenture also troubles the assumption in diaspora studies of a necessary longing for homeland, a longing that Bhattacharya’s Indian national narrator occasionally projects onto whom he imagines are his diasporic counterparts in Guyana. Torabully’s *Coolitude*, for example, shifts the originary point for the descendants of indentured labourers from India to the sea and the crossing; Marina Carter contends that it “avoids any essentialism and connection with an idealized Mother India” (15). Chandani Patel, in her dissertation on literatures that reimagine older Indian movement to Africa—in the form of indentured labourers, lascars, and convicts—claims the ship as an ancestral figure, rather than rooting an ancestry in India. The stakes of making such a claim, she contends, lie in exposing the fact that “ancestral origins are a selective process of historical recuperation” (203).

Indo-Caribbean scholarship also enters the larger debate of nationalism and transnationalism, but with a set of contradictions. We must first keep in mind that we are

applying such terms retroactively; the crossing of Indians to the Caribbean and other sites of indenture occurs in a moment during Empire, before the creation of nation states; Chandani Patel recommends that we must imagine “beyond the nation in thinking about belonging” (1). Nationalism can be imagined or mapped onto the case of indenture in two ways: as a commitment to the nation left behind, so that transnationalism occurs through the process of indentured Indians migrating to the Caribbean, or nationalism as a commitment to Caribbean nation-building. Nationalism as a kind of belonging to India requires a connection and sense of belonging to homeland, which Indo-Caribbean movements and scholarship have been labouring to frustrate. In arguing for a liminal space, such as the ship or ocean, as an organizing center or ancestral figure for Indo-Caribbeans, Indo-Caribbean scholarship strives to articulate indentured labourers and their descendants as part of neither Indian nor Caribbean paradigms of nationalism. Belonging is alternatively constructed through the common experience or history of making a crossing.

The contradiction lies in the fact that Indo-Caribbean scholarship articulates the desire to participate in both kinds of nationalism. On one hand, the Indo-Caribbean feminism in particular wants to recall a history of indenture and foreground the subaltern coolie woman, but this foregrounding relies on some kind of belonging that binds indentured labourers and their descendants, but separates them from everyone else in the Caribbean—Afro-Caribbeans, indigenous populations, and white colonial elements. While this belonging, Indo-Caribbean scholarship proposes, is not an attachment or nationalism tied to India, nationalism instead can be recoded as ethnic distinctiveness or purity: all those of Indian descent, who possess a “postmemory” of indenture.

At the same time, the need to include Indo-Caribbean women's labours in the Caribbean national imaginary expresses the urge to be included in the project in Caribbean nation-building. If we try to map nationalism and transnationalism onto indenture, then nationalism articulates itself through ethnic difference and the specificity of indenture, while transnationalism becomes the process of formulating horizontal comradeship and belonging with other groups and creolizing, within the larger frame of the Caribbean nation. The instability of Indo-Caribbean feminist scholarship arises when the Afro-Caribbean presence—in terms of population, academic discourse, historiography, and feminism—is constructed by Indo-Caribbean scholarship as the dominant mode. When this occurs, it becomes impossible to recognize the Afro-Caribbean as another margin of the British metropole and one that the Indo-Caribbean can relate to, in terms of Lionnet and Shih's proposed "minor transnationalism" or Glissant's poetics of relation. Instead, the nationalism of Indo-Caribbean specificity and ethnic purity—understood as "bad" in postcolonial discourse—eclipses the transnationalism of building community, kinship networks, and coalitions with women of colour.

Indo-Caribbean scholarship frequently runs into enacting precisely that which Lionnet and Shih want postcolonial and transnational scholarship to steer clear of: the politics of recognition and the necessary positing of Otherness. When Caribbean discourse is identified in Indo-Caribbean scholarship as the "dominant," Indo-Caribbean scholarship automatically locates itself as the "minor literature" that relies on a major or dominant mode to resist. As much as feminists try to employ tools to disrupt the vertical relationship between dominant and marginalized, such as Mehta's "kala pani poetics," Puri's "dougla poetics," Pirbhai's "jahaji-bhain principle" and Mahabir's rhizomatic

“pumpkin vine principle”, much of Indo-Caribbean scholarship still focuses on bringing indenture and the Indo-Caribbean to the fore, so that the vertical relationship is simply inverted, and “nationalism” displaces “transnationalism.” When the dualism is only inverted, as observed by Gurminder Bhambra of postcolonial theory, it only stands to “preserve the very structure that is being challenged” (Boelhower 88). Indo-Caribbean feminism has the capacity to make an important intervention in postcolonial and transnational studies, but only if it can imagine transnationalisms with other communities in the Caribbean and recognize them as also marginal. While the scholarship proposes to form such horizontal relations, I argue that it often falls back into the limitations of nationalism that postcolonialism is so invested in exposing and rejecting.

DOUGLA POETICS

One such tool employed for models of relationality and horizontal solidarity is Shalini Puri’s “douglA poetics.” Her formulation draws upon Glissant’s poetics of relation to draw attention to interracial contact and the interculturalization of African and Indian elements, and complicate Caribbean feminism with Indo-Caribbean experiences; Puri aims to “enrich” Caribbean feminism with Indo-Caribbean experiences. While douglA poetics promotes a more inclusive model of feminism, much of Indo-Caribbean feminist scholarship easily falls back into the paradigm of displacing the assumed Afro-Caribbean dominance with a new Indo-Caribbean dominance. To prevent this displacement, Kanhai attempts to locate sites of feminist douglA inclusion that do not rely on separate Afro-Caribbean and Indo-Caribbean discourses, such as literal mixed offspring.

While Puri’s formulation enacts a “minor transnationalism,” there seems to be very little emerging literature and scholarship that engages with it without the pitfalls of a

dominant-minor binary. One such novel that successfully demonstrates a politics of solidarity is Jan Shinebourne's *The Last English Plantation*, which concerns the friendship between an Afro-Caribbean girl and Indo-Caribbean girl at a Trinidadian secondary school. But this douglarized friendship still presupposes ethnic purity that then intermingles.

I now turn again to *The Sly Company of People Who Care* to demonstrate how Jan can be read as an embodiment of a dougla poetics but also speaks to Glissant's poetics of relation and through this, changes the way this tool can be used in Indo-Caribbean feminist scholarship. When the narrator asks Jan whether she is a full-blooded coolie-gal, and she clarifies that she isn't purely of Indian descent, he describes the two of them: "We stood in the flush shade, surprised by one another's Indianness" (198). While this seems to encourage desire in both of them, there are actually no real signs that she feels the same way that he does. The narrator clearly imagines a sense of belonging and solidarity between them that she does not necessarily align with. The novel hardly demonstrates any performance of "Indianness" on Jan's part. While she is terribly preoccupied with wanting to leave Guyana and live "some place develop" because Guyana "got nothing," and eventually expects the narrator to take her to live in India with him, she is not particularly interested in India as a specific place (199). She asks how many people there are there, when they experience crowded streets in Caracas, but otherwise does not seem concerned with the particularities. I posit that Jan formulates a different construction of belonging by privileging the plausibility of departure and the actual crossing over the actual place to cross over to.

If anything, Jan occasionally distances herself from what we might call an "authentic Indianness," or even refuses the "too Indian" performance. When the narrator

demonstrates his capacity to speak creolese (Guyanese Creole) and tells Jan he will “go fetch me cutlass jus now,” she responds: “Now you getting too coolie for me” (215). Jan refuses to participate in coolie-ness but also disassociates from “country-country cooliegals” and “blackgirls,” when she asks the narrator if her English is better than theirs. This pulling away from various ethnic groups articulates a distinct but also douglarized identity, one that refuses alignment with either the “coolie-gal” or the “blackgirl.” She does not participate in an imagined solidarity of Indianness that the narrator occasionally tends to place onto her. But then how might Jan assert belonging with those interested in crossing? What alternatives does the novel recommend? In the following sections this paper demonstrates the functions of coolie sexuality and ways in which sexuality might enable a shared kinship for Jan.

Coolie-Gal Sexuality and Rupturing the Bildungsroman

In this section I argue for two specific functions of Jan as a character through her sexuality. First, while Jan embodies a dougla poetics, she also channels the unconscious of a coolie ancestor, through her sexual choices. Secondly, through this channeling, Jan disrupts the bildungsroman of the narrator, which imparts new ways of reading and articulating a coolie woman's sexuality that overcome some of the limitations of Indo-Caribbean feminist discourse. These assertions first require an understanding of some visible tendencies in Indo-Caribbean feminist discourse, and overview of the structure of the novel, and a history of the coolie woman's crossings and sexual transgressions.

A KALA PANI POETICS AND THE DOUBLE DIASPORA

Much of Indo-Caribbean feminist scholarship and literature has been characterized by Brinda Mehta's conception of a "kala pani poetics" and the narrative device of a double diaspora framework. Kala pani poetics derives from the transgressive potential of the kala pani, the Hindu belief that crossing the "black waters" causes one to lose caste, a belief that has been subverted by many indentured labourers, who transformed this "loss" into "gain" by inverting or dismantling many oppressive Hindu social structures. Brinda Mehta conceptualizes "kala pani poetics" as a gendered discourse concentrating on the coolie woman's subjectivity, but this has also been largely applied to the act of writing. Kanhai observes that the kala pani has been used to draw analogies between the actual historical crossing and the "discursive crossing of boundaries that occur in writing" (74).

Mehta more specifically recognizes self-assertions in literary production by Indo-Caribbean women as a transgressive boundary crossing, but also claims that novels with a double diaspora framework use kala pani poetics for two objectives. The first is to

“convert the pariah status of widowhood in India into the transnational mobility of migration,” while the second is to provide the protagonist with a “necessary coming-of-age script to uncover the fragmented and dispersed genealogy of a mother history” (Engendering 22). Novels like *The Swinging Bridge* or Joy Mahabir’s *Jouvert* tend to excavate coolie histories and collapse temporality for the sake of the protagonist’s “coming-of-age script” and development; the protagonist makes sense of a present crossing and a new diasporic environment through the older historical crossing. When Mona in *The Swinging Bridge* discovers Gainder, her coolie ancestor, and traces a jahajibhain history, she is at the starting point of a family history that her Indo-Trinidadian family is not interested in. Mehta observes that Gainder becomes an anchoring point and demonstrates the need to revise colonial and Indo-Caribbean historiographies, enabling what Wilson Harris calls a “backward resurrection” (Diasporic 5). Kala pani poetics provides a script for the protagonist but also a script for Indo-Caribbean women writers to “negotiate the simultaneous ambiguities, contradictions, affirmations and contestations involved in subjective representation” (Mehta, *Diasporic Dislocations* 6).

While it is important to highlight the contributions of Indo-Caribbean women emerging over the last three decades and their transgressions through a kala pani poetics, this discourse is limiting and undoes a lot of work that Indo-Caribbean scholarship strives to accomplish. In privileging the double diaspora as a site where kala pani poetics can be effective, the more recent migration to the metropole as a consequence of globalization eclipses an older crossing. This frustrates the labour of Indo-Caribbean scholarship to destabilise postcolonial understandings of diaspora. Additionally, a kala pani poetics determines the moment of maturation in double diaspora bildungsroman novels to either be the moment of departure or the moment of coming to terms with the recent departure.

To be “successful” is to participate in the narrative of leaving the global south for the north. Departure becomes the only way to resist different forms of oppression—from India or from the Caribbean. Yet while coolie women may have originally left India as an escape, how many more kala pani crossings presented themselves as opportunities? The stakes of glorifying a crossing as automatically transgressive and part of a kala pani poetics are twofold. The labour of women to cope and overcome new or reconstructed old oppressions of the homeland—from colonialism, gender, or Hindu structures—are erased, and there are no futurities imagined for women unable to make such a transgressive crossing.

To posit that *The Sly Company of People Who Care* resists the shortcomings of a kala pani poetics first needs an overview of the novel, which is split into three sections with no real continuous narrative arc, apart from the fact that the narrator is in Guyana throughout. The narrator spends the course of the novel in short episodic bursts with various mostly Indo-Caribbean characters, and initially, despite no real connection between the various sections, the novel resembles a bildungsroman. At the outset our protagonist, from the position of a privileged wandering tourist, romanticizes his surroundings: “Guyana had the feel of an accidental place. Partly it was epic indolence. Partly it was ethnic composition” (4). The narrator takes the effort to retract this position in the second section, which he devotes to sketching a trajectory of Guyanese colonial history. He describes the initial Dutch settlement, the need to create kokers and canals to manipulate the land, and the demand for slave labour and later indentured labour after slavery is abolished in the British Empire. The narrator comes to the realization that Guyana cannot have an “accidental feel” and is very self-aware of his own development since the beginning of the narrative arc: “raw, accidental, those used to be my words.

How long it took me to see that everything was brought here” (109).

His account of Guyanese history is journalistic and ruptures the narrative arc from the first section, which mostly involves a porkknocking adventure with a motley host of characters.⁹ This separation of narrative and historical account is what distinguishes *The Sly Company of People Who Care* from much of Indo-Caribbean feminist fiction that employs a *kala pani* poetics: here the terrain of Guyanese history is untangled from the narrative arc, so that a coolie history is not excavated by a Guyanese character for the purposes of her own development, but instead is offered as a backdrop to be later invoked through Jan’s sexual choices. Jan does not need to consciously “discover” her ancestor in order to tell her own story and make sense of her world.

In the second section of the novel, the narrator also entertains the fantasy of the Indian diasporic subject as an appendage of India, constantly gazing homewards nostalgically. He projects a sense of belonging onto Indo-Guyanese farmers in the countryside, and determines a diasporic connection between them and himself: “I felt they carried this intimacy with them in their blood and their veins from the soil of India to the soil of Guyana” (100). I want to argue that our narrator functions as an embodiment of many dominant narratives and discourses that Indo-Caribbean scholarship and particularly feminist scholarship aims to destabilise. In projecting a fantasy of the Indian diasporic subject onto Indo-Guyanese, the narrator represents postcolonial and diaspora studies discourses that expect the metropolitan diasporic subject to experience kinship with the homeland left behind. Jan disrupts the narrator’s expectations of diaspora, female sexuality, and his own development, and calls for the ways coolie women’s sexualities can be articulated as resistance and rupture.

⁹ Porkknocking is a colloquial way of describing diamond hunting.

COOLIE-GAL HISTORY AND COLONIAL DISCOURSE

How, then, does Jan channel the coolie woman's unconscious, without the kind of excavation of a coolie ancestor that we witness so frequently in Indo-Caribbean feminist scholarship? I posit that we must consider Jan's sexuality and choices, and the ways in which they are consumed by the narrator. When the narrator and Jan, budding lovers, get drunk on a trip to Venezuela together, a few months into knowing one another, Jan asks her lover: "You carryin me back to India, right?" (240). Catching the narrator off-guard, he initially assures her of this only to repeal his reassurances: "It's not a nice place. I don't think you'll like it there" (240). Jan interjects to tell him that she could decide that for herself, a decisive moment where she refuses his ventriloquism of her as a narrator. After realizing that the narrator is happy to take her on this trip to Venezuela and spend money on her but has no intention of actually taking her back to India with him once his stay in Guyana ends, she tips out of the narrative. Jan stops speaking entirely to the narrator, and since this is our main way of accessing her subjectivity, she becomes fairly indiscernible to the narrator and to us.

On their way back to Guyana, Jan and the narrator are still not on speaking terms, and Jan is spotted with another man that the narrator describes as "a well put-together chap, an Indian" (255). The narrator is clearly jealous as he continues to describe Jan's new potential interest as "smiling and chatting, now walking and chatting, and he was carrying her bag, looking for all the world that it was them together on vacation" (255). This dynamic suggests that in a matter of days, Jan has found a replacement for the narrator and a better one; in taking her bags, he might be willing to take her with him wherever he goes, unlike the narrator.

I contend that in choosing a new partner, Jan channels a coolie woman's history and sexuality, and demands sexualities to be conceptualized differently. In order to make such an argument, we must first sketch a brief history of indentured women's crossings, and an overview of how coolie women are constructed in colonialist and Indian nationalist discourse. With the formal abolition of slavery across the British Empire in 1833, economic demands for labour, mostly on plantations, were fulfilled by recruiting indentured labourers from British India. Women, particularly widows, often volunteered to enter indenture to escape oppressive social conditions and benefit from the *kala pani* crossing. Many men and particularly women were also forced or duped into indenture. Recruiters would lie about the conditions of labour at indenture sites and the length of the sea voyage, and would often seduce or frame women so that they would be ostracized by husbands and families and then forced to take up indenture.

Bahadur's findings suggest that the policing of women's bodies has always been for economic gain, and the behavior of the body in question becomes irrelevant. For instance, the 1883 Indian Emigration Act attempted to stop Indian women from volunteering into indenture to escape their husbands. Sir George Grierson, a British civil servant leading an inquiry on the conditions of coolie recruitment at the time, responded negatively to such a law: "A wife will not leave her husband in this country without extreme pressure of some kind or another, and if she insists on going... I do not think any government has the right to stop her" (Bahadur 37). Bahadur asserts that while this rhetoric almost sounds feminist, it is more likely that the defense of women was necessary to meet the empire's economic demands. Other feminist-sounding mid 19th century laws—like those banning *sati* and child marriage, and enabling widow remarriage—were necessary, as Ashrufa Faruquee observes, to justify the colonial

presence as a necessary benign force, and used as “strategic arsenal for the civilizing mission” (61). ¹⁰By restraining women who were keen to leave their husbands, the 1883 Emigration Act demonstrates how coolie women were understood to be sexually transgressive even before the kala pani crossing.

Did women actually have the freedom to articulate new sexual desires? Apart from the transgressive potential of a kala pani crossing, the dramatically low ratio between indentured women to indentured men—as low as 1:10 on British Guianese sugar cane plantations and only as high as 1:2—may have encouraged this. While women were often assigned to men by plantation overseers, or traded between men who could often negotiate with overseers for a woman of their choice, rehearsing the Indian patriarchal marriage dynamic, Bahadur calls our attention to a particular sexual leverage women may have enjoyed. Such low ratios also engendered new sexual arrangements: women living alone, women taking on different male partners, moving from one home to another, polygamy (but she acknowledges this is rare), and a combination of men and women living together without any formal marriages (87).

Indo-Caribbean women’s writing tends to also be characterized by an anxiety of what kinds of sexual leverage coolie women had in such situations; as scarce commodities did they have a new kind of power? Or should we understand their sexual choices as pragmatic decisions, since female wages were considerably lower, and money could be a plausible incentive for multiple partners? Faruqee reminds us that colonial discourse emphasizes that Indian men could easily woo women with “presents of jewelry or other articles of personal adornment” (65). This observation resonates sharply with

¹⁰ Sati refers to the largely obsolete Hindu practice of a widow immolating herself on her husband’s funeral pyre, a practice banned by the British colonial system in 1829. It has been most famously discussed in Gayatri Spivak’s “Can the subaltern speak?” as a case of what colonial discourse understands as “the white man saving the brown woman from the brown man.”

Robert Mitchell's imagining of the Magistrate's reasoning that women would leave their husbands to enter indenture "for a sari worth a shilling."

While there are numerous accounts that reaffirm the coolie woman's power to change sexual partners or have various living arrangements, the high number of wife murders in British Guiana—thirty six between 1884 and 1895—proves that such sexual transgressions were not always welcome. Scholars like Bahadur attribute male violence to the poor conditions of indentured labour that were internalized and then taken out on women, whereas colonialist discourse tended to place the blame of such violence on the sexual transgressions of women, which men rightly needed to restrain. Faruqee points to C.F. Andrews, an opponent of the indentured system, who describes the looseness of coolie women in Fiji: "The Hindu women in this country are like a rudderless vessel with its mast broken drifting from the rocks!" (Faruqee 64). The great irony of such discourse is the frequent sexual exploitation of coolie women by white overseers, such as Walter Gill, one such overseer in Fiji, who described coolie women as "taking up lovers as a ship takes rough sea; surging up to the one who would smother her" (Faruqee 73). A doctor at Cayenne asserted that the material conditions of coolie women were better than that of men, because women changed partners so many times; the cause and effect of this discourse has been reversed by indenture scholars: women perhaps needed to switch partners multiple times for minimal financial comfort and protection (Faruqee 65).

COOLIE SEXUALITY IN *THE SLY COMPANY*

In light of renderings of coolie sexuality in colonial and Indian nationalist discourse, I assert that Jan's decision to replace the narrator with another possible lover is the first instance that the coolie woman (and her similar choices to "take on many lovers") is invoked. The narrator is clearly jealous and frustrated by her choice to leave

him; he even expresses wanting to find another lover as replacement himself: “I wish there was a girl equivalent of the man I could talk with, slower and closer than they, laugh sweeter than they” (255). This threat to male security and ownership mirrors that of colonial administrators, Indian nationalists and male coolies. By reading Jan’s choice against the narrator’s frustrations, coolie sexuality takes on the capacity to undercut male narratives of control and success.

After the narrator sees Jan with another man, he and the novel labour to make Jan increasingly unlikeable, particularly through the elaborate scene of humiliation for the narrator that follows. A constable suspects the narrator of carrying cocaine and conducts an extensive search, making the narrator, whose Guyanese visa as well as return ticket to India will soon expire, panic. After being cleared, the confused narrator asks why such a search had to be performed, to which the constable admits that Jan accused the narrator of not only carrying cocaine but also planting the drug on her. The accusation seems to fit a revenge plot for the narrator’s dismissal of her desire to go to India: a drug accusation could potentially deny the narrator his chance to go to India in the same way that he denied her the chance. The narrator encourages his reader to read Jan as impulsive, insensitive and unlikeable.

The narrator’s reaction and officer’s remarks about Jan afford us new ways of articulating the coolie woman’s sexuality. When the officer tells the confused narrator why he had to be searched for cocaine, he mocks Jan: “*Put drugs on she!* Is what every blasted mule does say” (270). The officer asks the narrator if Jan asked him for money, and then continues, “Trust me, chap, I seen things. Is always wha they say” (270). The judgment that the officer easily passes on Jan’s character and morality is eerily reminiscent of the judgment that appears in colonialist discourse regarding coolie women.

The exchange also recalls earlier moments in the novel in which the narrator is increasingly frustrated with Jan's constant materialistic demands during their trip to Venezuela. He seems more frustrated with her total unawareness that there may be something exploitative in her requests than the requests themselves; he sees Jan as simply expecting a kind of lavish treatment from her lover. In one of their last arguments that the novel tracks, Jan tells the narrator that the father of her son, "a dog," would treat her better than him, to which the narrator retorts: "You'd go away with any fool if he gave you a couple of things" (249).

The narrator and officer's judgments are identical to that of colonial discourse: the Magistrate who restricts women's access to indenture in 1883 is imagined by Mitchell to do so because he fears they would "leave their husbands for a sari worth a shilling." Colonial discourse also accuses coolie women of being easily lured by jewels. Jan enacts the easy exchange of sexual partners associated with coolie women; she has not completed her trip with the narrator yet when someone else has literally picked up her bag. She is judged for lying to the officer, performing visible interest in a new partner, and for having material desires. If the narrator and officer embody representatives of colonial and nationalist discourse, then Jan embodies or channels the coolie woman in her transgressions.

Why might she choose to take on a new partner and lie? Our narrator cannot provide any reasons. After being searched and told that Jan accused him of carrying cocaine, he leaves Venezuela without being able to say anything to Jan, and leaves with blood rushing to his head. The protagonist, who seems to be on an arc of progress in the first two sections of the novel—if we consider his shift from idly romanticizing Guyana's "accidental feel" to understanding its violent history and constructed land accidental-

ness—now returns to Guyana and soon to India with his bildungsroman ruptured. He cannot make sense of what has happened with Jan, and cannot be read as “successful” in coming to a point of maturation or understanding. Only through this failure can we recognize the potential of female transgressive sexual expression as liberatory and a form of resistance.

This arrested bildungsroman is, to me, in direct contrast with the ways in which much of Indo-Caribbean women’s writing tends to function. While Mehta contends that a *kala pani* poetics provides the Indo-Caribbean female protagonist a “coming-of-age script” by excavating her coolie ancestor’s crossing, the same channeling of the coolie woman’s transgressions in this novel functions to disrupt the progress or the script of the protagonist. As the protagonist in *The Sly Company of People Who Care* is a male Indian national and channels colonial discourse, the coolie woman’s choices and sexuality—in terms of taking on many lovers, lying to authority figures, and in having material desires—all serve as resistances to such discourse and narratives, instead of serving as necessary agents for narratives of national development.

Jan’s choices thus force us to reimagine the coolie woman’s sexuality. She might have changed partners to find someone who would provide her with a better life, which for her specifically means fulfilling the demand of leaving Guyana. In light of coolie history, such a choice is not something we might judge Jan for in the ways that the narrator wants us to. Her financial and sexual choices urge us to think about alternative structures of family and sexuality, in the same ways that those structures changed on the plantations. We might think of her as leaving the narrator for someone else as an expression of her sexuality, or because of the narrator’s tendency to make decisions for her. Jan’s character encourages broader readings of coolie women’s sexual choices—as

not necessarily a consequence of pragmatic financial need or sexual leverage—but as emerging from desire and functioning as a site of rupture and resistance.

Jahaji-Bhain Belonging

My main assertion straddles the idea of Jan as an embodiment of dougla poetics, and Jan's sexuality as channeling a coolie-gal unconscious: I argue that sexuality and choosing sexual partners becomes a way of constructing an alternative model of belonging. This model has the capacity to draw upon Indo-Caribbean female subjectivities while performing a minor transnationalism and horizontal solidarities with other ethnic groups, but also speaks to Glissant's poetics of relation.

JAJAJI-BHAIN PRINCIPLE

I use Indo-Caribbean feminist Miriam Pirbhai's formulation of the "jahaji-bhain" or ship-sister principle to posit such an alternative framework of belonging. This principle is a feminist reworking of the concept of jahaji-bhai or ship-brother/ (male) shipmate. The jahaji-bhai, according to Sean Lokaisingh-Meighoo, is a "central trope of Indo-Caribbean identity [that] interpellates the Indo-Caribbean subject as masculine," and emphasizes kinship through brotherhood formed on the sea crossing (80). The principle recalls ideas of Coolitude, which displace India as a binding agent and ancestral homeland with the ship and oceanic in-between spaces. The idea of the jahaji-bhai also summons Vijay Mishra's idea that a diasporic poetics is created by rupture—through the *kala pani*, the ship and the plantation.

While Lokaisingh-Meighoo conceives of jahaji-bhai as gender-neutral, Brinda Mehta understands the principle as a bond of fraternity that enables nationalism that inscribes Hinducentric ideals of femininity onto coolie women's bodies. This masculine-centric principle of belonging is reworked to jahaji-bhain (ship-sister), which calls for a women-centered history, and starts with the *aji* or grandmother figure who crosses the *kala pani*. We see this trope in Indo-Caribbean women's novels, in the form of Gainder in *The*

Swinging Bridge or Deeda in Peggy Mohan's *Jahajin*, but also in historical excavations like Sujaria in Bahadur's *Coolie Woman*. The jahaji-bhain principle, of course, must be careful, as Pirbhai warns us, not to "reproduce the image of the *aji* figure as an idealized 'symbol of female familial authority' (an authority which is in turn compatible with patriarchal ideology)" (47). This tool can also run the same risks that a dougla poetics does—that of valorizing a particular ethnic identity that emerges with sharing the experience of indentured crossing and a ship-sisterhood.

Joy Mahabir proposes that the jahaji-bhain principle can avoid the violences of requiring ethnic purity, which Pirbhai calls "the narrow trajectories of blood that circumscribe diasporic identity" by adopting a "pumpkin-vine principle" (51). This is a rhizomatic conception of community that is not limited by the exclusive jahaji-bhain experience, but instead promotes a "poetics of resistance and agency but also politics of coalition –building with other women of colour" (51). This is helpful in understanding that Jan's sexual choices might be her way of finding jahaji-bhain and belonging that does not depend on the Indianness that the narrator projects onto her.

(TRANS)OCEANIC STUDIES

The invocation of the ship as ancestral figure or identifying an oceanic space as that which garners a sense of belonging and kinship invites Indo-Caribbean feminist scholarship into larger debates of oceanic studies. Chandani Patel asserts that the ship becomes a space of transcultural production, but is also oriented towards the future, as it "births a future community that understands its belonging via the remembering of the ship as its point of origin" (199). To locate the ship and sea as an originary point recalls oceanic studies, which primarily looks to "enlarge a greater range of complexity beyond structures of the nation state" (Boelhower 89). The ocean becomes a space of

“dispersion, conjunction, distribution, contingency, and heterogeneity” and offers an alternative site for belonging that does not involve ties to land.

Indo-Caribbean scholarship makes visible the limitations of oceanic studies as a field today, and calls for a model of transoceanic studies. The field as it stands today tends to divide itself between Atlantic Ocean studies and Indian Ocean studies, which enable very different kinds of discourses to develop. Atlantic oceanic studies is largely marked and haunted by the Middle Passage, and understanding the Atlantic seaboard “as the site for the emergence of capitalist modernity as a transnational system” (Hoffmeyr 4). The sea as host to the transatlantic slave trade, and as a site of trauma, becomes what Boelhower calls the Atlantic world’s “most significant archive”; he further invokes Francois Hartog’s idea that because of the many bodies that drowned during the Middle Passage and fell to the ocean floor, any history from below concerning the Atlantic Ocean can only mean that the historian begins with a debt (94). Atlantic oceanic studies is marked by absences and the irretrievable archive at the bottom of the ocean, which Agamben characterizes as the “glory from below.”

Indian oceanic studies is framed fairly differently: it engages more with the history of sea routes and the effects of colonialism on Indian ocean emerging indigenous capitalisms and trade. The Indian oceanic space is constructed very differently than that of the Atlantic in terms of slave migrations, which in this oceanic space were much older and not in one direction, but also not necessarily connected to race in the same ways the Atlantic slave trade has come to be. Through its history of older trade routes, Isabel Hoffmeyr observes, this space often is rendered as pre-modern.

Then Indo-Caribbean scholarship poses the following question to oceanic studies: what does it mean for a body to literally occupy and traverse both the Atlantic and Indian

oceanic spaces? Gaurav Desai's work on Zanzibari trade merchants in the pre-Civil War United States to trade cotton cultivated by African descendants in the US South is preoccupied with similar questions. If the Indo-Caribbean can belong neither fully to an Atlantic or Indian Ocean space, his or her oceanic origins become mixed, or a douglarized oceanic space. If Coolitude locates the ocean as the "nodal moment of migration" or the ship as ancestral figure, then the oceanic space becomes a way of forming horizontal communities with other crossings. The Indo-Caribbean traverses the same route of the Middle Passage, and while he or she can never claim the same history or trauma, this traversal lends itself to the possibility of kinship with Afro-Caribbeans with the same oceanic origin but with a very different remembering of the crossing. The indentured labourer's crossing of the Indian Ocean occurs in a moment of capitalism where race and labour were certainly tied in very specific ways. Indo-Caribbean scholarship could potentially intervene in oceanic studies to call for a new trans-oceanic framework, that complicates understandings of the Indian Ocean. In turn, this new oceanic space could aid in imagining minor transnationalism and jahaji-bhain networks that do not rely on the specific experience of indenture or ethnic purity.

JAN'S LOVERS AS JHAJHI-BHAIN

The jahaji-bhain principle and transoceanic framework are useful, then, in locating Jan's construction of belonging that is not tied to Indianness or a particular land, like India. Jan enables the argument that a coolie woman's sexual freedom also allows for a different imagining of belonging, and performs a minor transnationalism. Jan's understanding of belonging is visible through the gap between her perceptions and choices and the narrator's projections onto her. First, when the narrator hears and spells Jan's real name as "Janaki," he implicitly associates her with Sita. In the *Ramayana*,

Janaki or Sita is not born out of a womb but is found born in the ground, arguably embodying the earth herself. In some versions of the epic she eventually kills herself by asking the earth to engulf her. In hearing his future love interest's name as "Janaki," the narrator literally pins her to the earth, erasing any potential identifications or ancestry an Indo-Caribbean woman may feel with the ship, the sea, or with descendants of other jahaji-bhains.

When Jan demonstrates some cultural awareness of a story like the *Ramayan*, the narrator anticipates that they are both surprised by each other's Indianness, even though we have no evidence that Jan also feels this way. Later, when she decides to leave him, the narrator seems overly jealous because he identifies the new potential love interest as Indian, and perceives the exchange as a replacement. I propose that nothing in Jan's character suggests that she targets or wants men who are Indian or of Indian descent; instead, she privileges those who can offer her the guarantee of a departure and a crossing, and thus replaces the narrator with someone else willing to take her somewhere. This is expressed through the potential new love interest picking up her bag. When Jan first meets the narrator, she asks him what he is doing in Guyana, to which he answers, "I wanted to get away. Like you do" (199). Then she does not share an Indianness with the narrator, as proven when she disavows a full-blooded coolie-gal status, but instead shares his desire and need to travel, resonating with the jahaji-bhain principle.

Jan constructs belonging with those whom she believes also identify with crossing, even if they do not necessarily possess the postmemory of a kala pani crossing. These crossers might inhabit the same transoceanic space that she does. By easily taking on a new lover, she demonstrates an alternative conception of a jahaji-bhai or jahaji-bhain, that still privileges the experience of crossing, but does not fall into the trap of

what Pirbhai warns as “narrow trajectories of blood.” She establishes belonging as connected to the experience of crossing but not particularly that of indenture, which means there is no direct correlation between a jahaji-bhain and Indian ethnic purity. I argue that by embodying a dougla poetics herself and refusing to participate in “full-blooded coolie-gal”-ness, or blackness, Jan presents us with a way of visualizing minor transnationalisms and Joy Mahabir’s rhizomatic conception of the “pumpkin-vine-principle.” By identifying with those interested in crossings, Jan enables possibilities of horizontal comradeship with Afro-Caribbean women and does not claim the need to make her partial Indian descent visible and play into inverting a vertical relation of power. Furthermore, she allows us to read coolie women’s sexualities as a way of creating non-ethnic jahaji-bhain forms of belonging. She also speaks directly to Glissant’s poetics of relation, because her imagined solidarities do not begin from a place of purity: by her douglarized identity we can imagine all ethnicities as always already hybrid. Jan has the capacity to embody a dougla poetics and also channel a coolie identity—an identity generally presupposed to be purely Indian—through her sexual choices. Inhabiting these identities simultaneously enables Jan to perform horizontal solidarities that do not care for cultural purity.

Jan affords us a way of recognizing the uncanny truth of Walter Gill’s notion of women “taking on many lovers as a ship takes on rough sea”: a coolie woman’s sexuality and sexual partners can be a way of community building, but specifically community building with those with similar experiences at sea, who also imagine the sea as an origin point. Then the sea, or a crossing, becomes necessary for this sexual expression.

Conclusion

The Sly Company of People Who Care is useful in making larger interventions in the fields of Indo-Caribbean feminism, postcolonial transnational and diaspora studies, and oceanic studies. The novel firstly calls for a more inclusive framework of Indo-Caribbean feminism that can involve the literatures of those outside the small body of Indo-Caribbean women writers—men and the non-Indo-Caribbean—who can still articulate feminist projects in their novels, like Bhattacharya. Writing this novel into Indo-Caribbean feminist scholarship enables us to see particular limitations in the current scope of the field, such as the focus on *kala pani* poetics and the double diaspora framework, which runs the risk of sidelining coolie women's experiences by using them for the protagonist's bildungsroman.

Bhattacharya's novel offers us an alternative way of foregrounding the coolie woman—by channeling her through the choices and sexual freedoms of a character, and by separately offering an account of Guyanese history that does not need to be excavated by a Caribbean character. Resisting the double diaspora framework also shows us how Indo-Caribbean or douglarized feminine futurities can be imagined—we have no guarantee that Jan will make a crossing to another place in the ways that middle-class Indo-Caribbeans already have in novels like *The Swinging Bridge* or *Jouvert*. Instead, we are made to think about the ways communities and coalitions are built when the current contingencies dictate the state of staying, rather than leaving. In not having to provide an Indo-Caribbean protagonist with a “coming-of-age script,” Jan's script rather ruptures the narrator's, so that coolie women's sexual freedoms can be identified as necessary sites of resistance to male and colonial fantasies, but also to theoretical frameworks that imagine the diasporic subject in a particular limited way.

Finally, this project asserts that Jan provides a way of imagining Lionnet and Shih's minor transnationalism, and the jahaji-bhain principle, by refusing to be pinned down as Janaki, or pinned down as Indian, but instead answering Coolitude's call to center the sea as an originary point of migration. To "take lovers as a ship takes rough sea" is to take lovers who can also be jahaji-bhain, a community birthed by the sea.

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