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Book Review: Bindi: Multifaceted Lives of Indo-Caribbean Women

Lomarsh Roopnarine

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Rossanne Kanhai, *Bindi: Multifaceted Lives of Indo-Caribbean Women*, Kingston: University of the West Indies Press, 2011, 250 pages, ISBN 9789766402389

Reviewed by Lomarsh Roopnarine¹

The ten contributors to *Bindi: Multifaceted Lives of Indo-Caribbean Women* impressively situate the multi-faceted discourse on Indo-Caribbean women within the center of the predominantly male Indian historiography and the wider Euro-Afro-centric Caribbean. Editor Rossanne Kanhai writes:

“The pride and boldness of bindi – not to be missed in the center of the forehead [a red dot] – is an outward manifestation of the inner intellectual and spiritual strengths upon which Indo-Caribbeans draw to take advantage of available opportunities and influences.”

Put simply, *bindi* is a form of Indian ancestral identity which Indo-Caribbean women have used effectively to define a place for themselves by themselves in almost every social domain of Caribbean life. The book is essentially an academic journey of Indian women's experience since they arrived in the Caribbean as indentured servants over one hundred and seventy-five years ago. Since that time, Indian women have been battling and coping with colonialism, domination, marginalization, patriarchy, and sexism. These experiences have led to the development of diverse ways of life among Indo-Caribbean women, complemented by a freer and more flexible Caribbean social structure compared to that of their ancestral homeland. The analyses in this book span three broad sections and revolve around the transformation and empowerment of Indian women, ranging from defeatism to determination to development, and from resignation to resurgence to resistance.

Section One “Religion in the Global Context” shows that while the strength and spirituality of women the world over have generally been suppressed to foster and favor patriarchal trends, this has not always been the case for Indo-Caribbean women. Indian women have not had to convert to Christianity to gain access to opportunities. Instead, they have maintained their ancestral Hindu and Islamic religions to empower self and familial development in their new Caribbean domicile. Sherry Ann Singh argues that Indian women in Trinidad have maintained Ramayana traditions without being secularized. She claims that Indian women are responsible for transmitting and maintaining Ramayana traditions in Trinidad and therefore “have played a key role in the evolution of that tradition as both mirror and metaphor of the Hindu experience in Trinidad.” Likewise Halima Sa'adia Kassim shows that Indo-Muslim women in Trinidad have not been constrained by the restrictive patriarchal aspects of Islam but have experienced a liberal transition in gender relations, religion, and education. Indo-Muslim women do not have to be confined to arranged marriages and household chores, for example. They have the right to divorce, exposure to western education, and the freedom of engagement with the wider Trinidad society and the global environment through technology—without dismissing their Islamic identity. The author warns, however, that the Internet and social media

¹ Jackson State University

have created a new reality among young Indian Muslims in Trinidad, which the Muslim community will have to come to grips with.

Section two “Constructing Self” shows how Indo-Caribbean women have transmitted their ancestral culture as well as adjusted and developed new identities in Trinidad. Shaheeda Hosein examines the roles of Indo-Trinidad women in the early post-indenture period and shows impressively how women dominated the domestic spheres like matriarchs. These women did not only carry the domestic Indian culture but also transmitted it to future generations. The love for the family including girl children, the desire for a good education for children, the determination to save more and spend less, the respect for the mother-in-law in the extended family and the practice of folk medicine in contemporary Trinidad are a direct throwback to the 1920s. To add to the analysis of “Constructing Self,” Valerie Youssef interviewed a number of Indo-Caribbean people to demonstrate their transitional and complex lives. She contends that from the interviews Indian women showed little connection to India but have adapted well to Trinidad with their own Indian culture. Family relations were strong despite some internal conflicts. The last contributor to this section, Gabrielle Jamela Hosien, provides a personal essay of her experience in the “Mastana Bahar Indian Cultural Pageant” and concludes that it is a place where she discovers the multiple aspects of her identity, agency, and womanhood.

Section three “Survival and Creativity” emphasizes the survival of Indian traditional cultural practices as well as expression of arts in literature. Kumar Mahabir shows how Indo-Caribbean women have used non-Western medical practices to deal with various illnesses while Brenda Gopeesingh demonstrates how Guyanese female Artist Bernadette Persaud relies on art not only to find herself but also to deal with the post-independence African dictatorship in Guyana (1966–1992). The last two contributors, Anita Singh and Paula A. Morgan, provide a narrative of representation of Indian women in literature. They posit that Indian women are no longer marginal but central to Caribbean women’s literary discourse.

The strength of the book is really the information about the diverse lifestyles of mainly Indo-Trinidad women. They are practically involved in meaningful ways in every domain in Trinidad society. The book also shows the transition Indian women have made from the household to public life both in urban and rural Trinidad. There are, however, a few weaknesses. The title is misleading. The book focuses mainly Indian women in Trinidad, and begs the question, if Guyana and Suriname (where Indian people are the majority) were included, would the findings have been different given the lower socio-economic status of Indians in these countries? Some of the chapters are not substantial; they are reworked articles or personal opinions. Perhaps the most obvious weakness is that the word Bindi is barely mentioned after the lengthy introduction, revealing a lack of unifying theme throughout the book. Nonetheless, the book is a welcome addition to Caribbean historiography. Readers and researchers will find the book useful.