CHAPTER 13

Monstrous Genealogies: Indo-Caribbean Feminist Reckonings with the Violent Past

Lisa Outar

Caribbean writing has long been preoccupied with themes of haunting by the violent past, specifically the ways in which experiences of trauma and loss borne from slavery, indentureship, colonialism, and the gendered exploitations of the plantation echo from one generation to another, refusing conventional boundaries of space and time. In various ways, Caribbean writers must confront that which is inherently irreparable, unspeakable, and unescapable about the past, while relying on cultural forms and the power of the imagination to evoke decolonial futures that make life bearable to the generations that inherit plantation legacies and navigate their contours. Of particular interest in this chapter are the ways in which Indo-Caribbean women writers seize examples of the haunting past and renarrate them through literary forms that engage and revise mythologies of the feminine and folklore. I highlight the trenchant critiques of both cultural and national norms regarding gender posed by such interventions and the innovative reimaginings of time, space, agency, and corporeality that are deployed. As I will show, writers Vashti Bowlah, Krystal M. Ramroop, and Ingrid Persaud depict the ways in which

L. Outar (✉)
Independent Scholar, Rome, Italy

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personal and collective trauma and its repression pierce the lives of Caribbean women in nonlinear, noncontainable ways, requiring them to live trapped by violent pasts but also equipped with potentially radical tools with which to shape new presents and futures. In redirecting images of monstrous femininity contained both within patriarchal understandings of gender and within folklore, these Indo-Caribbean women writers challenge conventional understandings of the relation between past and present, the human and the nonhuman, the monstrous and the maternal in order to offer feminist visions of revenge for the injustices of the past and the specter of more empowered futures. We see in particular a seizing upon a theme of the return of the repressed: what is bottled up about traumatic pasts by the characters themselves and by the Caribbean societies they inhabit roars back to powerful life in vibrant new forms. We also see violence seized upon as a reparative tool, one that can be used to mete out justice to those who harm women as well as a means of clearing space and accessing agency by figures who are deemed abject by society and even by those who love them.

I start with an examination of two recent short stories: Vashti Bowlah's "The Churile of Sugarcane Valley" (2015) and Krystal M. Ramroop's "Midnight's Mischievous Mistress" (2020). I draw upon scholarship on the gendered invocations of folkloric figures in Caribbean culture to explore more fully what Indo-Caribbean representations of figures such as the churile, the diablesse, and the soucouyant suggest about new possibilities for negotiating simultaneously vulnerable and powerful spaces of femininity as well as traditional modes for representing trauma and history. Bowlah and Ramroop turn to figures from Caribbean folklore to depict the prevalence of gender-based violence in our communities, to name the specificities of Indian women's experiences in the region and to force potentially liberatory inversions in their decolonizing quests. In the second half of the chapter, I assess Ingrid Persaud's 2020 novel *Love After Love* for its rejection of heteropatriarchal notions of what is considered natural in Caribbean kinship systems and its poignant exploration of how charges of monstrosity and unnaturalness are both imposed upon and redeployed by Caribbean women. The idea of vengeance, of a reckoning with what is repressed and glossed over in community narratives about women's suffering, echoes in all the texts I examine. While Persaud engages with themes of cleansing violence and with alternate models of powerful femininity to be found in Caribbean Indian religious traditions,

Bowlah and Ramroop turn to figures from Caribbean folklore to imagine new worlds where justice is attainable for women.

Folklore and Feminism

Scholars of Caribbean folklore have pointed to its complex place in Caribbean letters and cultural imagination. Gerard Besson (2012) notes the devaluation of local traditions of folklore in the push to self-definition after colonialism. Giselle Liza Anatol (2015) acknowledges the deleterious effects of colonial identity on local folklore traditions, but more optimistically sees a burgeoning of interest in such local forms in the postcolonial era even while she carefully unpacks the misogynistic and harmful messages about women contained therein. What is clear is that spectral figures limned by folklore drawn from various cultural genealogies of the region are a key part of a Caribbean literary landscape, and they challenge teleological understandings of history and time. Candace Ward argues that duppies, for instance, occupy the "liminal and disturbed space in the region's literature, a fluid interspace between the material and immaterial worlds where the fraught relationship between history and historiography is played out" (2012, 217). Little scholarly work has been done on specifically Indo-Caribbean folklore. Kumar Mahabir's 2010 *Indian Caribbean Folklore Spirits*, which primarily traces appearances of the figures of the raakhas, the churile, the saapin, Dee Baba, and the jinn Sheik Sadiq in oral testimonies with Indo-Trinidadians, is one such attempt, but much remains to be done to assess their importance for colonial-era and postcolonial expressions of identity and agency.

The two short stories that I examine here challenge the reinscription of "traditional gender, class and race messages" (74) that Anatol warns can arrive with folklore and that she sees as part of the conditioning of girls and women to accept roles of docility (a critque echoed in the indictment of conservative religious communities that we see in Persaud's novel). These works show how that which is denigrated about womanhood emerges in folkloric figures and in the real lives of the region's women, whether living at home or in the diaspora. Folklore here serves as an archive of women's suffering.

Vashti Bowlah employs the churile in such a manner in her short story "The Churile of Sugarcane Valley" and further uses the fearsome figure from Indo-Caribbean folklore to put forward a vision of feminist

retribution. A description of the standard understanding of the churile as a woman who has died in childbirth is included within the story itself:

> Her long jet-black hair; unbound and disheveled, streams over her face as she wails sorrowfully, while her child cries for milk like a kitten's meow. Ever since she died during childbirth she has been seen dressed in a white gown covering her ankles as she seeks revenge on those who wronged her. Not that anyone believed in such things anymore, but a few elders in the village swore that they have seen her; sometimes standing at the side of the road, or under a tree. "A *churile* always gets revenge on those who hurt her," everyone agreed.

The main character of Neela is implied rather than explicitly named as the churile. With its structure in which Neela herself is never given voice, the story highlights how those who fall outside of the conventions of patriarchal societal ordering become the subject of suspicion and gossip and do not get to control their own stories. Upon her appearance in the village, Neela is immediately suspect because of her unmarried status: "At the ripe old age of thirty-three, she was the subject of old-maid jokes wherever she went. She was also the topic of choice when housewives met at the vegetable stalls or while they waited near the gate to collect their children after school." Filling at least one expectation of gendered labor by being caregiver to her grandmother does not dispel the gossip. The story in one way seems to confirm the community's perception of the older, unmarried woman as being a threat to societal order when Neela falls pregnant by the lothario, Raj, and subsequently dies in childbirth. Importantly, however, Bowlah does not end on the idea of the threat being thus removed and of social order being restored but rather suggests Neela's transformation into the feared churile and her rumored vengeful aspect. After Neela dies, "It wasn't long before Raj's body was pulled out of the rice lagoon by a farmer. It was rumored that the last thing he did was scream out Miss Neela's name in the dead of the night under the huge mango tree. The *churile* was never sighted again." Bowlah unerringly conveys the ways in which such myths, with all of their latent fears about uncontrollable women, were imposed upon some of the most vulnerable members of Caribbean society. Despite evidence of her unfair treatment, in life and death, Neela becomes a figure to be simultaneously scorned and feared for her disruption of a patriarchal order that attempts to hold female sexuality in firm check.

The nonpresence in the story of Neela, of the grandmother, and indeed of the illicit child itself means that their "real" temporality in the story is also rendered ghostly, itself an indictment by Bowlah of the erasure of women's complex personhood by the narratives forced upon them. Their identities remain at the level of community gossip with all of its superstitiousness and unconfirmed rumors. I would also argue however that Bowlah's story offers a reading of the churile as not just to be feared but onto whom can be displaced the sublimated desires of other women trapped within a patriarchal order that does not deliver justice for those devoured by it. While the story is in part an indictment of the gossiping, judgmental community of women who fail to protect one of their own by not warning her about Raj, Neela also becomes an agent for the comeuppance the women themselves desire for exploitative men: "'Well, I still feel sorry for she, for letting a good-for-nothing man like Raj fool she up like that,' added the third woman. 'If she did only ask somebody they woulda tell she about the other girls he fool up and then drop them like ah old shoe.'" No tears appear to be shed for the dead Raj and the detail that the churile is never seen again after his death is emphasized, implying that her rage is not directed at others in the community. Pity, fear, dread, and admiration are thus comingled in the perception of the churile and her potential to upend the hierarchical ordering of marital status and maternal identity as being the ultimate containers of female sexuality and self-definition.

Of the texts I examine in this chapter, Krystal Ramroop's story, "Midnight's Mischievous Mistress," offers the most powerful fantasy of what it would be like if individual women and children had some recourse for the harm that is done to them or if there was a powerful feminine figure who could stand up for those who are not able to effect justice for themselves. Patricia Mohammed (2009) describes the Caribbean folkloric figure of the diablesse as "one of the most popular of the archetypes [of gender in the region], [she] is the quintessential woman as devil, the temptress who leads the unwitting men astray into the forests at night, the cloven hoof character who disguises her animal instincts with a pretty dress" (75). Angelo Bissessarsingh (2013) highlights the cross-regional nature of this figure arguing that in Trinidad "the devil woman herself almost always makes an appearance clothed in the style which has become synonymous with the French Antilles." Maica Gugolati's (2018) work usefully traces appearances of the figure in both Martinique and Trinidad concluding, "Based on interviews on both islands, it emerged that La

Djablesse teases men and the concept of masculinity, while challenging ideas of domination and the perceived gender boundaries in the public as well as the private domain. This legendary female figure challenges the stereotypes of the gender system constructed during the colonial and postindependence period" (152).

Following the archetype, Ramroop's diablesse, Marie, is a chimera, taking the form of a beautiful woman, aligned with the underworld, who possesses a cloven hoof. In her choice of name, Ramroop evokes "Ti-Marie"—the local Trinidadian name for the mimosa plant known variously as "shame bush," "Mary," "Mary shut your door," and "Touch Me Not!" elsewhere in the region, which withdraws onto itself when touched aggressively—as well as the various biblical Marys who run the gamut from virginal to prostitute. The name "Marie" thus signals both violated innocence and the possibility of powerful, protective femininity. Ramroop's story is also notable for her gender-confounding naming of a "Monsieur Diablesse" who, though recognizable as the archetypal ruler of the Underworld, also appears to be a force for gender justice, for wreaking vengeance against those responsible for the violence done to women in Trinidad. The story is thereby also a potent reversal of the Ti-Marie folktale tradition of the lesser Antilles, where the devil is the one who lies in wait for the young Ti-Marie, wanting to literally consume her.[1] The devils, the true face of evil in the world of Ramroop's story, appear to be the human men who harm the women they claim to love. The underworld depicted in the story is filled with their victims:

> At every hour of the day in the vibrant Caribbean country, domestic violence cases against women—accompanied by public and private footage for the Underworld records—poured into their department left, right, and center … Marie had only met Monsieur Diablesse last year and after selling her soul to him for a small fee of revenge on the man who left her for dead (literally), he employed her full-time in the Underworld. She'd also seen and heard about the magic that her colleagues—though the women on Earth despised them—worked that left drunken men enchanted and disoriented and tonight, on her first death anniversary, Marie was keen on proving her competency to Monsieur Diablesse and earning her rank amongst the best.

The dreaded diablesse figure is thus herself identified as a victim of domestic violence, as both prey and predator, who seeks to punish the perpetrators of gendered violence. Ramroop does not shrink from including details of the nature of the horrific crimes committed against

women—describing, for instance, Marie's childhood friend, Josephine, as present in the underworld because her husband doused her in gasoline and burned her alive—thereby preparing ground for the story's terrain of proposing that violence needs to be met with violence.

Marie proves her competence as a deliverer of just punishment on her first mission by strangling her prey, Steven, after he is seduced by her beauty and tries to pick her up: "She was glad he couldn't see her roll her eyes … She was, however, ready to give him what he deserved." Here, we find a literal rejection of the archetype of "the angel in the house" for a powerful female devil, emerging from the underworld, upending divisions of life/death, human/animal and offering alternate imaginaries to the very real statistics of gendered violence in Trinidad and elsewhere in the Caribbean. In the absence of effective legal systems for punishing domestic violence and supporting its victims, writers turn to the realm of folklore and the fantastic, creating what Jana Evans Braziel calls "alterrains" within which "the devil (or author) is a source of rebellion, knowledge, and creation" (2001, 83).

One of the other compelling features of this story is the subtle but telling way in which Ramroop critiques the misogynistic underpinnings of certain Caribbean folklore traditions such as the figure of the soucouyant. The description of the unfaithful Steven as an abuser who would "leave black and blue marks on his wife, Nikita,—as if a soucouyant had sucked the blood from her skin—whenever she'd accuse him of infidelity" reads as a deliberate rejection of the trope that Anatol (2015) and others note of the othering and ascribing of malevolent powers to marginalized and vulnerable female members of a society, wherein, for example, older women who live alone are accused of being soucouyants. Ramroop initiates a key inversion here where male violence is given as the more likely reason for bruised women and children in the morning. She highlights in this description of Steven's abuse the very real possibility of the soucouyant being used as a convenient excuse to hide domestic violence. Existing as Gugolati describes "between invisibility and visibility, between silence and speech, between the sacred and the profane, and between the dreamy imaginary and reality" (2018, 174); the diablesse/jablesse thus becomes a vehicle for reconsidering the conservative applications of folklore to women's lives as well as the agent of a potent revenge fantasy, one of the many iterations of Caribbean feminist imagination. Mohammed (2009) notes the ways in which such folkloric figures are continually reconfigured within Caribbean feminist traditions:

> The persona of La Diablesse has never been static in the evolving femininity of this terrain. She is constantly transforming herself, shedding layers of clothing and dispensing with the cloven hoof, as the much sought-after jammette of Port of Spain carnival in the 19th century, the ambiguous Jean and Dinah heroines of American occupation of the nineteen fifties, and in the Bacchanal woman celebrated by David Rudder. (80)

Braziel (2001) identifies Caribbean authors such as Jamaica Kincaid as themselves a jablesse who dispels "annihilating silence" (84) and "acts divinely: creating and destroying" (82). Here, Ramroop offers the diablesse as a Caribbean woman who maintains an ethical responsibility to her sistren even from beyond the grave. She deploys a "politics of alterity" (Braziel 2001, 86) in which the diablesse, rather than being "diabolical" as understood within a binary model of good/evil, is a figure who protects other women and offers visions of more just worlds.

Bowlah and Ramroop are part of an ongoing movement by contemporary Caribbean writers to take up this evolving culture of folklore and bring it to dazzling new life.[2] Both are pushing back against what Anatol (2015) calls "the inherently coercive social nature of folk-tales" (47). The "subversive power relationship" of these folkloric figures noted by Andre Bagoo in his conversation with Nicholas Laughlin (2013) about douens is part of what renders them so irresistible to this new generation of Caribbean writers as they challenge linear understandings of the effects of the violent past and flesh out new models for decolonizing and anti-patriarchal progress. As Mohammed reminds us, "The monsters of the Caribbean are not those which the Old World carried around in its head" (2009, 81). The meting out of justice these transgressive figures allow emerges as part of a distinctively Caribbean project of decolonization. Mohammed's allusion to the carnivalesque is apt: "This band of characters … are the opening act in the jour'overt of our own origin stories, with characters that are neither European nor African, with roots and branches in many cosmologies and offering a free space for our imagination" (2009, 81).

Cleansing Violence, Creolized Religious Practices, and the Erotic

Ingrid Persaud's 2020 novel *Love After Love* also draws upon the uniquely creolized cosmologies of the Caribbean in its repudiation of heteropatriarchal violence and constraining models of femininity. As with her first novel,

If I Never Went Home (2013), in *Love After Love* the tentacles of traumatic pasts continue to haunt Caribbean peoples and their descendants. For example, the main character of Betty feels the ghostly traces of her abusive deceased husband: "Thing is, worse than the pain in my arm is Sunil's spirit in the house. The man in the walls, on the stairs, in the rooms. Before he passed he must have put he bad eye on me for truth" (Persaud 2020, 17). The violent past thus haunts Betty physically and spiritually. She feels real and phantom pain from her past injuries at the hands of her husband whom she killed in an act of self-defense and protectiveness toward her son. Despite his death, Betty continues to experience a vague sense of lingering malevolence as evidenced by the quote above.

As with Bowlah and Ramroop's stories, death is not presented as a permanent boundary. Instead, we find an embrace of local cosmologies where past and present, natural and supernatural, are entwined. Betty slowly loses her hope that respectable faith leaders can help her to free herself from the ways in which past suffering continually ruptures her current timeline: "Truth is I believe Sunil's spirit, his nasty bad eye, ain't ever leaving me no matter how much jharay I get" (20). In this way, Persaud establishes the non-teleological passage of time for those harmed by domestic abuse, the well-established patterns laid out by trauma theory of entrapment in past wounds.

Within this terrain, Persaud offers a powerful portrait of a nonheteronormative family. The novel lays out the rocky path of recovery for Betty and her son, Solo, after the abuse Betty suffered in her marriage, and their entwined journey with the memorable Mr. Chetan, who struggles with openly expressing his sexual identity in a Trinidad where he fears that public displays of same-sex love risk incurring violence. We find Persaud, as with Alison Donnell in *Creolized Sexualities* (2022), balancing not ignoring homophobia in the Caribbean while also seeing the region as a place where heteronormativity is "undone." *Love After Love* is a site where both homophobia and radical nonheteronormative possibilities are invoked simultaneously. The violence that Betty had already experienced at the hands of her husband and the perceived threat of violence that hovers over Mr. Chetan should he live his full self openly unites the characters and establishes a trust and solidarity built not upon revelation and public declarations of identity, but on mutual vulnerability, tenderness, and quiet acceptance. Betty is able to provide a loving substitute father figure for Solo in the form of Mr. Chetan: "He's not a father but he's a natural at fathering" (15). Persaud troubles ideas around what is "natural" for

definitions of family, kinship, manhood, sexuality, and parenting. She reimagines the possibilities for family in the Caribbean, for what are healing relationships that can sustain women, men, and children alike.

One critique I offer of the novel is the way in which the resolution of the conflict between mother and son is dependent on the Christ-like sacrifice of Mr. Chetan's gentle, nurturing body to the maws of homophobic violence. Solo's mourning the disappearance of this paternal figure and Betty's anger and pain at the loss of their deep, mostly platonic friendship finally brings mother and son together again, leaving the novel vulnerable to the trope Rosamond S. King identifies in *Island Bodies* (2014), where queer figures are instrumentalized in Caribbean literature, employed to deliver others to better versions of themselves though perhaps Persaud's novel is not fully "the backhanded gesture" that King describes.

Persaud's treatment of the son, Solo, is perhaps the best illustration of this author's embrace of the erotic as a site of healing and reparative justice. The character of Solo is a complex one in the novel, as he is both the integral third member of the nonheteronormative, tender family unit that Persaud portrays as well as a potent means of dispelling the ever present and virulent stereotype of gay male identity as being coterminous with child sexual abuse. The young Solo benefits from a particularly supportive and nurturing adoptive father-son relationship with Mr. Chetan. Despite the loving household that Betty is able to assemble in the wake of her marriage however, Solo's psyche and body reflect the unprocessed trauma of the past. Much of the novel depicts his struggle to reconcile Betty's role as a mother with her status as a woman capable of killing. The self-cutting that Solo engages in is one manifestation of his inability to deal with the upheaval of a conventionally understood social order where a mother can rise up to kill the husband who abuses her and threatens her child and who can embrace her sexuality in the aftermath of her marriage. In the novel, Solo, along with the suggestively named Mr. England (who is looking to make Betty his girlfriend/caregiver) and other figures of religious authority, propagates a debilitating binary between the maternal and the monstrous, the feminine and the frightening.

Solo's inability to reconcile the happy life he knew with the monstrous vision of an "unnatural" mother renders him incapable of accepting her maternal love even while it engenders self-loathing. Self-harm becomes a way of managing his unresolved trauma and strong emotions that cannot be directed at their sources: "I quickly learned to hide the marks. I wish I could explain how it made life easier. Licks shouldn't make you feel

peaceful inside but, for me, that's how it was…I've come to accept pain as a second skin covering my whole body" (149, 167). This powerful image of pain creating a new person, a new identity is echoed in Persaud's invocation of the "splitting" deployed by Solo as by many victims of trauma, of separation from the self as a means of survival: "Ever since I started this cutting I avoid mirrors. I don't want to see Solo Ramdin, aka Habib Khan. I hate him" (152).

Unlike in the short stories, where Bowlah and Ramroop depict the direction of violence outward toward abusers, Persaud presents the *erotic* application of physical pain as a way of managing unresolved suffering. Ironically then, violence becomes part of the self-reparative work that is necessary to manage the wounds of the past. In describing his relationship with an immigrant from St. Lucia turned Brooklyn dominatrix, Solo states: "When it's bad the pain inside coils the barbwire tight right through my body. Loretta knows exactly how to cut me loose. The belt swipes my bare bamsee and the noise in my head dies down. … Each welt on my body has cut the barbwire" (265–6). Loretta's role in this loving application of punishment is part of the novel's distinct landscape of inversion of concepts of love and pain necessary for negotiating the complexities of Trinidadian and Trinidadian diasporic contemporary life. Loretta's role as a substitute mother figure is clear in the text, and her playing it illustrates the multiple temporal spaces which the wounded characters occupy at any one time. Solo's arrival to her apartment is always accompanied by a ritual of a presentation of a birthday cake with precisely five candles—"Can't forget the candles" (263)—to Loretta who pretends to be surprised to receive it and then sings happy birthday to Solo: "I can hear Mammy saying, make a wish" (264). The five candles of course offer a signal of Solo's reversion to a moment in his childhood when he felt safe and loved, but also when he was prematurely burdened by his father's poisonous image of masculinity. The memory of his mother inviting him to make a wish is immediately followed by these lines: "Apparently Daddy used to tell me, Solo boy, you go get married, drink rum, have children, and then dead" (264).

Loretta's erotic use of the belt to beat Solo and to "cut him loose" from such tortured and irresolvable memories is paired with her indulgent manner with him and his desired role-playing. As an alternative mother figure and a mirror for Betty, Loretta balances the safety associated with the maternal role with its sharp-edged nature, potential for danger, and its psychosexual dimensions for the child. Solo's understandings of

masculinity are very much tied up with the sexually charged physicality of his encounters with Loretta, the memories of his Janus-faced mother, and the ghostly presence of his father as is evident in this suggestive passage: "I wanted her to see me as a real man, with a little swagger, cool as this fall evening. Instead I opened my mouth and all kind of gibberish fell out. The mirror reflects a skinny Indian, eyes big, big like he's just seen a jumbie" (263). The text does not place heavy emphasis on stereotypes of Indo-Caribbean men as not as "manly" as compared to Afro-Caribbean and white men, but the way in which such narratives permeate a Caribbean landscape and shape the self-perception of young men is clear in this statement. The combination of Loretta's cooing "what a good boy" as Solo enacts the birthday ritual and her subsequent taunting of him with "Take it like a real man" as she whips him before intercourse all suggest the complex temporal positioning that these diasporic Caribbean characters must deploy as they attempt to confront the damage wrought both by personal history and the colonial past. Of vital importance for this imaginary is that the application of violence brings pain to the surface rather than allowing it to be repressed and passed on.[3]

Persaud's text also challenges theologies which can condone and help to support systems of colonial, racial, and gendered exploitation in the region's past and present. Betty recalls the failure of her religious community to acknowledge the suffering she underwent during the period of her marriage: "one time a woman in the church had the nerve to look me straight in my eye and tell me that if your husband doesn't put two good lash on you every now and then, how will you know he loves you" (121)? In addition to its suggestive relationship to the eponymous Derek Walcott poem about self-acceptance, the title, *Love After Love*, can be read in terms of the need to survive the landscape created by such expectations of heterosexual relationships. Persaud also uses the tender relationship that emerges between Betty and Mr. Chetan—first as roommates, then as friends and co-parents—to highlight the other failures of conservative church communities to serve the stigmatized. Mr. Chetan's experience of religion was one where "the leaders of the main churches—Catholics, Muslims, Hindus—were warning the government not to give the LGBTQ population protection under the Equal Opportunity Act … When Miss Betty asks me why I'm always hiding myself I will remind her that apparently, I am not a child of any god" (258, 259).

While there are examples of creolized religion throughout the text, Persaud presents kali mai worship, its transgression of certain parameters

of feminine respectability, and its practitioners' occupation of multiple states of reality at once when "trancing" as the pathway to true healing and self-acceptance for Betty. While scholars such as Stephanie Lou Jackson (2016) have pointed out the limitations of celebratory discourses when it comes to kali mai puja since, in practice, it often includes prescriptions for how women are permitted to participate, in *Love After Love* kali mai is offered as a woman-centered practice that enables Betty to embrace that which is marginalized, to break bonds of respectability, and to allow her wounded body and spirit to travel between past, present, and future in order to approach healing and full self-acceptance. Persaud explicitly ties the imagery of these practices to a kind of rebirth—a reconfiguration of the expectations of the maternal body (deemed unnatural and monstrous by her son) to the needs of self-preservation and surviving a painful past—"They scream and then stop, scream and stop. It didn't sound like pain—more like pushing something out from inside your body" (268).

Betty is at first cautious and surreptitious in her approach to this new form of embodied spiritual practice, aware of the judgments that will ensue from both middle-class Christian communities and conventional Hindu ones: "I could make the Presbyterian church my whole life and nobody would make an objection because that is correct devotion. This other thing's real different, too wild. Nobody must find out if I go to Kali temple" (270). Here, as with the depiction of Solo's journey, imagery of violence is seized and reconfigured as a feature of the essential reparative work that Betty must undergo: "Vibrations from the tassa drums were making my flesh shake. It was like a hammer breaking up all of the loneliness I was carrying" (155).

Betty's exploration of kali mai is synonymous with an acceptance of the powerful, terrifying aspects of womanhood as expressed in Hindu and Indo-Caribbean cosmologies and also an embrace of syncretic religious practices that work against the neat preservation of borders and hierarchies of community identity and respectability. In this way, the text pushes back against the Sita ideal of the faithful, submissive, chaste, long-suffering wife and mother that Sherry-Ann Singh (2012) argues wielded powerful influence on early Indo-Caribbean communities and that affects even non-Hindu Indo-Caribbean women. Drawing upon Singh's work, Aliyah Khan (2020) argues, "Humility and deference to her husband are her ultimate virtues … The Sita ideal of Indo-Caribbean women persisted until at least the 1970s, and it is never entirely absent from discussions of Indo-Caribbean women's public and private behavior that continue to frame

the community's self-perceptions at home and abroad" (75). In her embrace of kali mai, Betty literally rejects ever-faithful Sita for celebration of the more terrifying goddess Kali, who has deep roots in Indian tribal folklore and who is usually depicted holding a severed male head in one of her hands, a sword in another, and is known to destroy the evil to protect the innocent. Persaud's novel thereby contains a potent critique of which versions of docile femininity are urged by conventional religious communities and which are bracketed as dangerous and marginalized. Unlike with the diablesse who Gugolati notes is marked by "the complete absence of maternity" (2018, 167), Kali, with a name that in Sanskrit invokes time, doomsday, and death, is associated with the possibility of violent liberation, sexuality, *and* motherly love. We can see Persaud's work as continuing then in the rich tradition that Ivette Romero-Cesareo notes of "Caribbean women writers whose works portray images of both destructive and constructive women/goddesses" (1997, 263).

Betty's embrace and celebration of kali mai involves a foregrounding of the frightening and the unruly aspects of womanhood, of the anti-patriarchal, the fiercely maternal—a harnessing of the monstrous for the purposes of women's liberation:

> Tanty and I made offerings to Mudder—a candle and cherries from my tree. It wasn't so long ago that I was frightened to even look at this murti with her tongue hanging out, all them skulls and blood dripping down. Now I understand that, yes, she is terrifying but that is on purpose. Mudder is the destroyer of evil. She's also a mother and woman. Her foot is on Shiva for women like me to know that we don't have to take shit from no man. At least that is how I understand it. One man in particular is trying to put his foot on me. We go see about that. (271)

The embodied "vibrating" and "trancing" which is part of kali mai worship [the policing of which when practiced by women is laid out in Jackson's work (2016)] is pushed from its latent sexual connotations to explicit articulation in Persaud's literary imaginary:

> I wanted to vibrate, to dance away all the worries I was holding. In that crowded, loud, smoky temple I suddenly felt strong. I let the drumbeat rock me until the energy, the Shakti, was flowing through my veins, warming me from inside, and when it reached my navel it exploded and I jumped up. I closed my eyes. Whatever was going to happen would happen. I surrender. My long hair is loose and the breeze is blowing through it. The white horse

> I am riding is going too fast but I hold on. When I swing my cutlass is not just one tree falling. The whole forest just drop down. At the top of the mountain I climb on a man and we fuck until I scream. Mudder lifts me up as if I don't weigh an ounce and in the middle of the sky her bloody tongue licks me and I want to wrap myself around her leg. I pick up the baby and put him inside my dress. A hurricane is coming. (272)

In this potent scene where Betty is imagined as Kali herself, swinging her cleansing weapon, and also as the recipient of the care of a powerful mother figure, we see the transformative power of the storm Betty undergoes and that she herself will become in the social order around her.

Mr. England, who has returned from the diaspora to look for a good Trini woman to care for him in his declining years, is frightened when he comes upon Betty in the grips of this ecstatic worship and self-healing:

> Bhadra Kali Kapalini Durga. Betty, you're frightening me. Stop this nonsense now. Stop it. This is black magic. I felt him grab me but Mudder told me to stop being afraid. With him or without him I'm just as alone and lonely. I don't need this blasted man. I bit his arm. What the fuck? You bit me. Why did you do that? I can't believe this is happening. Later, when the spirit had left, I looked around. Mr. England was gone. I don't think he will be back. (280)

As signaled by Persaud not demarcating Mr. England's dialogue from Betty's thoughts, "vibrating" thus operates in the text as a fugue state within which Betty can enact her violent rejection of patriarchal control. Much like Solo's sessions with the dominatrix, Loretta, a new temporal, spatial and bodily reality is entered in order to grapple with that which is too overwhelming in day-to-day life to confront head-on.

The combination of Mr. Chetan's sacrificial death and the embrace of woman-centered kali mai worship results in an opening up of even more widespread challenges to gender norms in the society. The end of the novel sees Betty insisting on carrying Mr. Chetan's coffin to its final resting place and her girlfriends stand with her: "Later they told me how proud they felt because in all the funerals they've been to, up and down Trinidad, this was the first time ever they'd seen two women carrying a coffin" (325). It is important to note that Persaud ends the novel on a note of vengeance, a moment tied up both with a rejection of patriarchal religious authority (who would dictate that only men get to carry a coffin, for example) and narratives of passive acceptance. The character Tanty,

who helps Betty along her path to embracing the transgressive and liberatory possibilities of a spiritual life in kali mai, offers a narrative of divine feminine retribution to close the text: "Mr. Chetan suffered so much he's not going to suffer in the next life. And I have no doubt Mudder will punish the demons who did this" (325). Betty herself defiantly opposes the Christian pastor who, at Mr. Chetan's wake, urges forgiveness and attention to Jesus as an example of how to live in the wake of harm at the hand of others: "Man of the cloth or not I threw Reverend's ass out of my house...Fuck forgiveness" (297–8). The text thus reorients away from both Hindu Sita-like and Christian models of passivity and forbearance that aim to preserve respectability within an unjust system that demands the silent acceptance of abuse to an imaginary where women seize upon unsanctioned feminist traditions to reject violently bodily, spiritual, and cultural restraints.

The time- and space-inverting movements and innovations that Bowlah and Ramroop employ in their use of Caribbean folklore, and Persaud in her embrace of the erotic, challenges to heteronormativity, and redeployment of marginalized Indo-Caribbean spiritual practices, emerge as part of a culturally specific Caribbean project of feminist decolonization and mythmaking rich with both the legacies of indentureship and the broader terrain of Caribbean belonging. The work that these authors do to offer liberatory visions of the Caribbean present, ones where optimistically there can be a reckoning with the past, where some kinds of reparative justice or rebirths and renegotiations of gender norms is possible, is part of why the region continues to look to its writers for hope and inspiration even while still in the grip of the haunting tentacles of our painful past.

Notes

1. For an example of this folktale, please see "Petit Jean et Petite Marie" https://www.potomitan.info/atelier/contes/conte_creole152.php
2. Jane Bryce (2014) argues that the turn to the fantastical has long been a feature of Caribbean writing, although "such writing tended to be less valued in canonical terms than more conventionally realist novels" (8).
3. Persaud shows repression operating in multiple registers in the text. We see repression of cultural knowledge, of more complex facets of motherhood and womanhood, of nonheteronormativity, and of public acknowledgment of women's abuse.

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