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Ramabai Espinet's *The Swinging Bridge* as a Refunctioning of Neil Bissoondath's *A Casual Brutality* and *The Worlds Within Her*

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Introduction

This study proposes a reading of Ramabai Espinet's *The Swinging Bridge* as a response to Neil Bissoondath's novels *A Casual Brutality* and *The Worlds Within Her*. These works, all of which are narratives of a return to the native land from Canada represent the situation of Indo-Trinidadian culture in the Trinidadian and Canadian contexts and in all three the protagonists undertake a recovery of a specifically Indo-Trinidadian memory. These common major features and the fact that *The Swinging Bridge* was published in 2003, after *A Casual Brutality* (1988) and *The Worlds Within Her* (1998) invite us to investigate intertextuality between *The Swinging Bridge* and Bissoondath's novels.

However some features of Espinet's novel incite us to consider modes of intertextuality other than those defined by Kristeva¹. As Espinet's use of fiction and historical nonfiction writing qualifies *The Swinging Bridge* for the category of historiographic metafiction, Linda Hutcheon's theorization about the complex combination of intertextuality, parody and history in postmodern metafictional writing provides us with the most appropriate tool to approach *The Swinging Bridge* as a "kind of seriously ironic parody" that reworks texts of the history of Trinidad and Tobago as well as Bissoondath's fiction texts (4).

In her study entitled *Parody: Ancient, Modern, and Post-Modern* Margaret Rose establishes the filiations that exist between intertextuality and parody recalling that "it was largely from the analysis of parody works that the concept had been derived in the first place" (185). She also describes the process by which parody reprocesses the parodied material to grant it a new function, a new status or a different dimension (52). Rose defines this process as "refunctioning", that is to say "a new set of functions given to the parodied material in the parody and may also entail some criticism of the parodied work" (52). This dimension of criticism is also predominant in Jonathan Arac's conception of refunctioning which he defines as "conscious revisionary polemic" (175).

Consequently, this study is mainly based on "intertextuality as refunctioning" in *The Swinging Bridge* of the literary material used by Bissoondath in *A Casual Brutality* and *The Worlds Within Her*. It first shows how Neil Bissoondath's novels *A Casual Brutality* and *The Worlds Within Her* offer a dystopian revision of the Trinidadian national narrative, before disclosing the specific modalities of Ramabai Espinet's refunctioning of these two novels. This analysis then compares the perspectives the two works open for the Indo-Trinidadian diasporic subject.

I. Neil Bissoondath's Novels: a Dystopian Refunctioning of the Trinidadian National Narrative

Bissoondath's treatment of history and memory in *A Casual Brutality*'s and *The Worlds Within Her* constitute a Dystopian refunctioning of the Trinidadian national narrative. Bissoondath sets *A Casual Brutality*'s action in Casaquemada, a fictitious Caribbean island

¹ The text "as a permutation of texts", [...] "inside a text several statements, taken from other texts, cross themselves and neutralize one another" (52).

state, recognizable as a fragmented Trinidad devastated by ethnic violence, and doomed to failure. The historical background of the novel consists of a gloomy parody of the Trinidadian national history which exposes its construction as an Afro-Trinidadian project doomed to failure. The writer recreates Trinidad and Tobago as Casaquemada by means of a dystopian use of geography, myth and history.

Bissoondath first establishes Casaquemada as a Trinidadian setting borrowing some of the Trinidadian geographical features (36). He then grants this fictitious Caribbean island with a death-stained founding myth which suggests curse and augurs tragedy. The capital of Casaquemada is called Lopez City after a Spaniard, Captain Lopez, who was temporarily isolated on the island and found dead a few weeks later by his fellow sailors. The author also contrasts the beginnings of Casaquemada and the discovery of Trinidad, setting this fictional island as a parody of the real one (37).

Trinidadian national history is severely criticized when Bissoondath negatively re-connotes the meaning of the Trinidadian trinity, setting the independence of Casaquemada as one element of a disastrous trinity, of which two other terms are the arrest of Nelson Mandela, the death of Marilyn Monroe. The dark hours of the execution of Indo-Guyanese strikers by an Afro-Guyanese police force and events of 1970 Black Power Revolution in Trinidad, are combined with a military landing evoking the US interventions in Cuba and Grenada to create an atmosphere of insecurity. Casaquemada is so much plagued with violence that "the cemetery [is] as crowded as the cell." (99).

A Casual Brutality's plot equally contributes to the gloomy character of Casaquemada. The horrors of the protagonist's son and wife slaughter leave him with no other perspective than fleeing Casaquemada. Authorial voice and narrative semantics contribute to Bissoondath's dark parody of Trinidad and Tobago. In this novel the dystopian character of Casaquemada is also obtained by the direct deconstruction of the narrative of the Trinidadian nation by the protagonist narrator Raj Singh. This narrator explains (to the reader) that the island had failed to "solidify into a recognizable entity" (313) and that its population was "formed of too many bits and pieces (313-14). He challenges the "Together we aspire, together we achieve" Trinidadian motto reading carnival, a symbol of Trinidad and Tobago's unity, as the manifestation of a fragmented national culture. He argues that if every race was in the streets, "Whites were with Whites, Blacks with Blacks, Indians with Indians" (303). Therefore, Casaquemadian identity is presented as a fabricated discourse composed to promote the island tourist industry (313-314).

The representation of the Afro-Trinidadian /Indo-Trinidadian ethnic divide also contributes to the construction of Casaquemada as a dystopian Trinidad. Its deep exploration of the complexities of the Indian/African ethnic divide characteristic of Trinidad expresses the idea that there is no hope for a change (30).

A decade after the publication of *A Casual Brutality* Bissoondath also chooses a dystopian setting for *The Worlds Within Her* which in this respect appears as a sequel to *A Casual Brutality*. He creates an unnamed West Indian Island with a violent past and a tragic future as a setting for *The Worlds Within Her*. If the writing of *A Casual Brutality* was informed by the Black Power Revolution of the 70's, the impact of the Black Muslims' coup of 1990 is quite apparent in *The Worlds Within Her*. Indeed, the protagonist Yasmin perceives the traces of this event as signs of apocalypse. (*The Worlds* 50). This early perception of the protagonist is confirmed by the necessity for her to be accompanied by armed people. In addition Cyril, one the author's authorized voices, describes the country as place going back to the jungle (*The Worlds* 370). Therefore, the characters appear to live at the mercy of unpredictable human or natural fatal violence. To create the West Indian island in which the action is set as a "bad

place," Bissoondath reactivates the horizon of expectations established by *A Casual Brutality* (Moynlan 43).

This sequel to *A Casual Brutality* however presents an interesting focus on the situation of the Indo-Trinidadian group within the Trinidadian nation. *The Worlds Within Her* conveys a discourse on history that reiterates the vision developed in *A Casual Brutality* of the marginalization of the Indo-Trinidadian voice from Trinidad's national narrative. The novel however acknowledges the irreversibility of transculturation and integration while putting the stress on the drawbacks to this process which resulted from political violence (360). Unsurprisingly, Bissoondath's philosophical discourse about identity on the ultimate page indicates that Yasmin only retains from her exploration of memory in her native land the conviction that she does not have an identity and that identity is a process.

I.1. *The Swinging Bridge* as Refunctioning of Neil Bissoondath's *A Casual Brutality*

The Swinging Bridge appears as an antithetic refunctioning of Bissoondath's vision of Trinidad's nationalism and culture in *A Casual Brutality*. Espinet's novel reprocesses such features of *A Casual Brutality* as cultural fragmentation, essentialist re-indianization, and afro-orientated politics in order to show the reality of the hybrid nature of Trinidadian culture. *The Swinging Bridge* represents fragmentation and fear as components of a wound inhabited by the population of the town San Fernando, the meeting point of the rural, urban, traditional and westernized Afro-Trinidadian and Indo-Trinidadian cultures (Espinet 103). The novel discloses the Indo-Trinidadian ambivalent position of rejection of Indian culture and fear of dilution of their Indian ethnicity and failure to contribute to Trinidadian national culture which generate their ambiguous relationship to the Trinidadian nation.

However *The Swinging Bridge* goes beyond mere presentation of fragmentation and cultural conflict as proofs that invalidate of the Trinidadian national narrative. The novel's positive depiction of an identificational rebinding with India to which women of Indian descent contribute through the collecting of traditional objects for a museum dedicated to Indian culture in Trinidad invalidates the reconstruction of Indian heritage as an essentialist patriarchal project. Modern emancipated women promote Indian heritage as a contribution to Trinidadian culture.

The Swinging Bridge also deals with the issue of Afro-orientated nationalism in the newly independent Trinidadian nation. Mona's exploration of history consists of a search for a better understanding of her parent's choice to migrate to Canada. Without being complacent about Williams' government, the novel's representation of the historical issues of the early years of independence aims at bringing new knowledge about the articulation of events which resulted in the situations Indo-Trinidadians are confronted to.

The Swinging Bridge also answers *A Casual Brutality*'s deconstruction of carnival and calypso as symbols of Trinidad's national culture to re-endorse them. The protagonist's depiction of her father's love for calypso and carnival discloses a genuine Indo-Trinidadian perspective on this cultural feature and pleads for the acknowledgement by Indo-Trinidadians of the reality of the transculturation that took place between the two competing ethnicities: "Da-Da and I shared a passion for J'ouvert, like our passion for calypso." (Espinet 99). This narrative of the protagonist's happy childhood experience of Calypso revalidates this Afro-Trinidadian cultural element as belonging to Indo-Trinidadian culture.

If *The Swinging Bridge* analyses the conflict between cultures that fragments Trinidad's national culture and political life, but also opposes Indo-Trinidadian men to Indo-Trinidadian women, it also presents Indo-Trinidadians with the necessary self-transformation they need to operate in order to move beyond their fear of disappearing under the domination of Creole

culture, beyond their shame about Indian culture, perceived as archaic, but also beyond patriarchy and essentialism.

1.2. *The Swinging Bridge*: a systematic rewriting of *The Worlds Within Her*

If *The Swinging Bridge* emerges as being an antithesis to Bissoondath's discourse in *A Casual Brutality*, it also possesses the dimension of a more systematic rewriting of *The Worlds Within Her*. Diegetic similarities and differences between *The Worlds Within Her* and *The Swinging Bridge* support the idea of Ramabai Espinet's novel as an intertextual refunctioning of Bissoondath's novel.

The agony of a character is a central element for the creation of tension in the plots of the two novels. While in *The Worlds Within Her* Mrs. Livingstone's death throes provides Shakti (the protagonist's mother) with an opportunity to tell the untold story of her family in Trinidad and Tobago and her migration to Canada, in *The Swinging Bridge* the news of Kello's agony constitutes the inciting incident of the plot. Tension is created by the protagonists' involvement in a quest to retrieve the memory of an emblematic member of their family. Yasmin, who returns to her native island to bring back the ashes of her mother, becomes absorbed in a quest for the memory of her Indo-Caribbean father, a man of significant political influence whose assassination had provoked their migration to Canada. Similarly, in *The Swinging Bridge*, Mona who returns to Trinidad to buy back the family land gets involved in a quest for her grandmother Gainder, a figure of Indian female resistance to patriarchal domination.

Characterization also indicates a refunctioning writing. The two protagonists are Indo-Trinidadian women in their 40's living in Canada. While Yasmin is a television newscaster living isolated from other West Indians in Canada, Mona is a documentarist involved in West Indian cultural promotion. Both Yasmin and Mona are independent women whose close companions are not West Indians. However, if Mona's return to Trinidad and Tobago results in an ending of relationship with her Irish boyfriend Roddy, Yasmin's marriage is not affected by her West Indian episode.

If Bissoondath's protagonist returns to a fictitious native Caribbean island Ramabai Espinet's hero returns to a place clearly identified as being Trinidad. Bissoondath chooses distance whereas Ramabai Espinet names very precisely Trinidadian places of action as she considers that what takes place in Caroni or Toco is as important as what takes place in Park Avenue in New York or Westminster in England. Unable to name or recognize any place, Yasmin starts her exploration of memory with the stereotyped vision given by the North American media: "The island reputation for bacchanalia has prepared her for noise, a continuous pandemonium. The silence unsettles her." (Bissoondath, *The Worlds* 21). Her role is limited to the function of receiving what other characters from the islands have to say about its history. She appears as reduced to a literary device in the author's sophisticated narrative strategy enabling him to let the reader hear the voices of other characters, those indo-Trinidadians who had not migrated to Canada and whose vision the author compares to that of Shakti who had left the country never to return.

The exploration of memory and history realized through this device results in no significant change in Yasmin's life when she returns to Canada nor does it change anything in the Caribbean island which by the end of the novel remains a place doomed to tragedy. When Yasmin returns to Canada she does not feel a stronger sense of belonging to her native island; she simply resumes her Canadian life.

By contrast Mona's stay in Trinidad widens her perspective and results in her re-rooting in Trinidad and final settlement in Canada. Finally, the characterization of Mona appears as a re-

creation of Yasmin that grants her with more operative qualities, such as a wider knowledge and memory about the native country, for a more extended recovery of memory.

The protagonists' exploration of memory confirms the idea of a methodical rewriting. Yasmin's exploration of family memory is realized through her interaction with Amie, (whom the plot will reveal to be her biological mother) while conversations with Cyril, one of her cousins, portray her father and disclose the social and political history of the Island. Information brought by Cyril and Amie is contextualized by Shakti's narrative of her life story to Mrs. Livingstone. Therefore, Yasmin appears more as the one who mediates the reader's access to authorial analysis of historical, social and political evolution of the Indian group in Trinidad. Actually it is Yasmin's mother's postmortem narrative that gives the reader clues to understand the meaning and scope of the protagonist's findings, providing information Yasmin does not possess.

Interaction with her cousin Bess an independent woman of African and Indian descent and with her mother Muddie supports Mona's quest. Mona can get access to the real meaning of things thanks to the continuous updating by her parents of information she gains in her quest. They are decisive providers of clues facilitating Mona's access to memory and history. Mona instigates and catalyses the process of construction of a social collective memory starting from her memories about places and people (Halbwachs 182).

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The *Swinging Bridge* revisits Trinidad's national history but also interrogates Indo-Trinidadian patriarchal narratives in order to introduce the reader to new perspectives. If in *The Worlds Within Her* the protagonist's roaming in her native island results in a discovery of her family's past and of the political and cultural evolution of the country, its scope is more limited than in *The Swinging Bridge*. The modality of *The Swinging Bridge's* exploration of history contrasts with Bissoondath's as it is more documented. The protagonist's revision is based on documents and objects of her family's private sphere that acquire the status of valid archives introducing the reader to the feelings of the people at the moment of the historical split between Eric Williams and Indo-Trinidadians. In addition to the use of research in the family archives piled in the attic of their house in Toronto, the narrator of *The Swinging Bridge* uses other archives. The rands' songs appear as archives holding knowledge about the migration to Trinidad of independent Indian women resisting male domination during the journey, an aspect of Indian female memory that needs to be re-connected with other Indo-Trinidadian memories. *The Swinging Bridge* undertakes a revision of the construction of the Indo-Trinidadian woman as subjected to men that resulted from male exclusion of these memories from the collective memory.

Through such characters as Mona and Bess the novel addresses the female Indo-Trinidadian contemporary dilemma of choosing between an Indian heritage with a patriarchal interpretation of Indian female identity and emancipation conceived as a westernization that requires abandoning an Indian culture reduced to its patriarchal features. Such an alternative implies choosing between Trinidad and Canada as a place for a living. While *A Casual Brutality* and *The Worlds Within Her* mainly lament the alienation due to minoration and self depreciation of Indian culture ("There was, in our family, no myth of nobility, no maharajahs, and no palaces. Ours was a background of grinding poverty alleviated only by claims to the sagacity of brahminism (Bissoondath, *A Casual* 313) and warn against an essentialist use of the recaptured memory, *The Swinging Bridge* reconnects it to other memories and experiences in order to create new knowledge for the future. The recovery of memory also creates a

diasporic inter-connection between the scattered memories of Trinidadian people. Recapturing memory and re-purchasing the land in Manahambre Road results in a new rooting of Mona's family in Trinidad and the re-creation of ties between Indo-Trinidadians living in Canada with their mother-land.

II. Divergent Perspectives for the Indo-Trinidadian Diasporic Subject.

The two writers' respective representations of Indo-Trinidadian culture in Trinidad and Tobago and Canada also open to different perspectives for the diasporic subject. In the epilogue *The Worlds Within Her* delivers a message that appears as Bissoondath's thesis about identity. Shakti criticizes the trend that made "a fetish of identity" (361). She posits that people are individualized creatures of history, society, and family and that identities are to be defined individually (361-362). Through Yasmin's voice, the novel proposes a vision of identity which reduces it to a process and occults other dimensions such as belonging to a group: "*I am not a final product, Mrs. Livingston. I am a process. As are you. As is everyone* (417). Yasmin's definition of identity strangely sounds like "I have no identity": *My dear, I haven't got an identity. None of us does. What a great tragedy that would be, don't you think?* (417). Blurred by Bissoondath's impulse to promote the individual and dismiss the community Yasmin's message about identity in the last page of *The World Within Her* does not celebrate the various cultural elements that contribute to the current form of a valuable diasporic Indo-Trinidadian identity. It eliminates the perspective of a collective exploration of a multifaceted and multidimensional identity.

The Swinging Bridge develops the survey of the Indo-Trinidadian group undertaken in *A Casual Brutality* and *The Worlds Within Her*. The reader of Espinet's novel finds again the divides exposed by Bissoondath in *A Casual Brutality* and the problematic issue of identity formulated in *The Worlds Within Her* which depicts options chosen by characters including assimilation to English culture, creolization, neo-indianization and essentialist re-indianization (Bissoondath, *The Worlds* 360).

The Swinging Bridge introduces other dimensions of the issue of Indo-Trinidadian identity in Trinidadian national culture that encompass the options expounded in Bissoondath's text. For instance, it introduces readers to the contribution of an Indian female tradition of resistance and independence to Trinidad and Tobago's culture. In addition, this novel's survey of these Indo-Trinidadian identity options builds bridges between them and brings the Indo-Trinidadian subject (or reader) to a vision of culture in terms of continuity. *The Swinging Bridge* brings readers to the awareness of the bridges which exist between the various components of Trinidadian cultural identity advocating for an approach in terms of continuum rather than in terms of concurrent fragments.

The Swinging Bridge also stands as the novel of Espinet's response to Bissoondath's treatment of such issues as endogamy, essentialism, and hybridity. In *The Worlds Within Her* the episode dedicated to aborted marriage between the Indo-Trinidadian Penny and the black man Zebulon Crook testifies to the prevalence of endogamy. Penny decided that she would no longer see Zebulon Crooks because as a member of Vernon Ramessar's family her marriage to a black man would end any hope of political success this man could have. (Bissoondath, *The Worlds* 336). If *The Worlds Within Her* presents the importance of endogamy for the credibility of Vernon Ramessar as an Indo-Trinidadian political leader, *The Swinging Bridge* invites the reader to a deeper examination of this issue. This process operates through the characterization of Bess. The illegitimate daughter of an Indian father and of an Afro-Trinidadian mother, Bess fights for the recognition of her belonging to her Indian family to ultimately emerge as the legatee of the family's Indian memory. Such a status challenges prevailing disavowal of African-Indian biological hybridity to invalidate endogamy.

As Bess first appears in the novel as a dougla¹, her position as the legatee of her family's Indian memory as well as her function in the plot first contribute to the rehabilitation of the dougla figure. However as the protagonist's reconstruction of family memory discloses the existence of a white man in Bess' genealogy, action in the novel brings additional dimensions to Bess' ethnic identity taking the issue of hybridity away from the African-Indian divide.

Conclusion: Moving Beyond Binaries: a Diasporic Culture

The Swinging Bridge reworks Bissoondath's recovery of memory showing that the process can go beyond the immediate recapturing of family story over thirty years and reach the shores of India without necessarily being an essentialist endeavor. Espinet integrates the "many bits and parts" that Bissoondath presented as evidence of the falsity of the idea of a Trinidadian nation, in order to reveal or testify to the links that exist between the various components of Trinidadian Culture and to build bridges (with the reader) between the dislocated components of this country's cultural identity.

Action in the novel brings to completion Mona's awareness of belonging to Trinidad. "I left Trinidad in the afternoon with a mixture of sadness and excitement. In a strange way, I felt as if I was leaving home for the first time (Espinet 304)." It also allows her sense of belonging to Canada to develop: "I am part of this city I live in, and right now I want no other place. Like any other migrant I bring my own beat to the land around me" (Espinet 305).

Mona has become a diasporic subject whose belonging to Trinidad is not contradictory to her belonging to Canada. Espinet's representation of her Indo-Trinidadian-Canadian protagonist's re-rooting in her Trinidadian homeland and revisionary recapturing of Indian heritage turns into a narrative of the establishment of relationships between divided Indo-Trinidadian communities in Trinidad, Canada the United States and England bringing characters and readers to the awareness of belonging to an Indo-Trinidadian Diaspora. Therefore *The Swinging Bridge's* response to *A Casual Brutality* and *The Worlds Within Her* appears as an intertextual counter-dystopian rewriting of Bissoondath's deconstructive revisiting of the Trinidadian national narrative, refunctioning the same historical and cultural elements for a different purpose.

The two Indo-Trinidadian-Canadian writers develop representations of Trinidadian history pursuing divergent goals and presenting the diasporic subject living in North America with contradictory perspectives. If all three novels challenge canonical interpretations of history, in *A Casual Brutality* and *The Worlds Within Her* Neil Bissoondath creates dystopian forms of Trinidadian society, reconstructing a history that deconstructs the Trinidadian state nationalist discourse. His representations of cultural conflict condemn Trinidadian society to dislocation in ethnic violence. In addition, Indo-Caribbean migrants to Canada are doomed to dislocation as they are urged to disconnect from their Caribbean past in order to become Canadians.

By contrast, Ramabai Espinet's *The Swinging Bridge* allows the diasporic subject to come to terms with a traumatic past and to map new transcultural spaces, reconnecting same and other. This novel challenges canonical interpretations of the history of Indian migration to Trinidad and promotes a new vision of Indo-Trinidadian women that emerges from the recovery of a diasporic female Indian memory. This is what the following extract from the novel's epilogue summarises: "I heard the beat of the hosay drum inside the steelband, heard chac-chac and dholak, dhantal, cuatro, and iron, coming to me in a rhythm that had transfixed me for hours. A dub rhythm, the Caroni Dub" (305).

The Swinging Bridge situates the diasporic subject in an unlimited diasporic time and space which displaces home and away constructing India, Trinidad and Canada as components of a

diasporic home. Its reconstruction of history promotes cultural hybridity and diasporic belongings as options to cultural conflict and dislocation.

Notes

ⁱ In Trinidad and Tobago the term “douglá” designates a person born from Indian- Descendent and Afro-Descendent parents.

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