South Asian Women's Narratives

South Asian Women's Narratives:

Literatures of Their Own

Edited by
Somjeeta Pandey
and Bidhu Chand Murmu

Cambridge Scholars Publishing

South Asian Women's Narratives: Literatures of Their Own

Edited by Somjeeta Pandey and Bidhu Chand Murmu

This book first published 2023

Cambridge Scholars Publishing

Lady Stephenson Library, Newcastle upon Tyne, NE6 2PA, UK

British Library Cataloguing in Publication Data
A catalogue record for this book is available from the British Library

ISBN (10): 1-5275-1529-X
ISBN (13): 978-1-5275-1529-1

CONTENTS

INTRODUCTION

BIDHU CHAND MURMU

Over the past 15 years, the 'narrative' metaphor has grown significantly in popularity and utility in clinical practice. This stresses the way people's perceptions of reality are formed by the narratives or stories they employ to interpret their day-to-day experiences. The tales that people tell define and shape who they are as individuals. Our multiple self-narratives, which comprise how we see ourselves, are molded by prevailing societal narratives (or 'meta-narratives') about gender, ethnicity, class, sexual orientation, and other distinctions, as well as by our continual interactions with important people in our life (Lee, 1-12).

The paragraph mentioned above is pertinent while discussing the 'narratives' of South Asian women. A women's narrative approach is one that considers gendered meta-narratives and specifically examines the interpersonal and social meaning-making that marginalized women engage in. Now, in literary traditions that are predominately male, South Asian women have examined problems of identity, trauma, exploitation, and belonging, in recent decades. Against this background, the Indian Independence Movement, and the Partition of India and Pakistan, have provided fresh interpretations of old concepts of gender, identity, belonging, work, and family, in South Asian women's poetry, short stories, novels, and autobiographies. More recently, they have contributed to the changes brought about by diaspora, which have inspired a lot of innovative reactions, both in, and outside, the South Asian context.

In order to investigate this strong output of writing, we will need to discuss, or at least try to focus on, interrelated concerns, like: a) How can the search for, and questions of, 'women's voices' and 'agency' be theorized and analyzed in the South Asian context?; and b) How do writers from South Asia use the concept of gender to develop and define different notions of

the ‘individual’ and the ‘community’? In response to the first question, Cecile Sandten and Ranu Uniyal in *Introduction – Voices of Their Own: South Asian Women’s Writing* argue that it is very difficult to trace the histories of women’s narratives from South Asia, due to its diverse linguistic and socio-political spectrum. They also have demonstrated in their ground-breaking work that South Asian women writers have provided fresh definitions for the traditional definitions of gender, work, and family, that have been a cultural feature of pre-colonial and colonial South Asia, Indian Independence, and the partition of India and Pakistan. These definitions have appeared in poetry, songs, short stories, and novels, as well as autobiographical and critical texts. Women writers from South Asia have more recently contributed to changes brought about by an increasingly Indian feminist perspective, which essentially criticizes Western feminism for having promoted stereotypical images of seemingly homogenous ‘third-world women’ and the notion that they need to be saved (Sandten and Uniyal, 3).

However, in order to understand as well as explore the second perspective, we have to focus on the ‘women question’ (Firdous Azim et al.) as central to the process of nation-making in South Asia. Firdous Azim et al., in *Negotiating New Terrains: South Asian Feminism* argue that male elites and colonial powers debated tradition and modernity on the subject of women's standing from the middle of the 19th to the beginning of the 20th centuries, which was seen as a marker of a society's ‘progressiveness’ or ‘backwardness’. As a result, women were used as a gauge for whether or not colonies were suitable for self-government. Conversely, conservative masculine elites made their anti-imperialism known by disengaging from the discussion and asserting that maintaining national autonomy required protecting the sphere of tradition from Western colonial meddling. Although middle-class women participated in these discussions actively and passionately, their contributions to the resolution were insignificant from the viewpoint of the dominant male discourse (Firdous Azim et al., 1-8).

Firdous Azim also points out that the participation of women in the anti-colonial movement ultimately resulted in the creation of ‘national ideas’ incorporated with a view towards the liberation and rights of women. To him, this legacy has been carried over into the decades that have passed

since independence. During that time, the various social movements that have emerged in the region have had to address issues of gender equality, violence against women, women's social positioning, and so forth. These questions have arisen either as a result of the interventions of very active autonomous women's movements, or as a result of internal feminist pressures within these movements. South Asia has experienced internal strife and power conflicts since independence. With the end of British colonialism came partition, which drew new borders between India and the newly established state of Pakistan (Firdous Azim et al.,1-8).

The geographical separation of Pakistan into two parts was accompanied by linguistic disparities, which quickly turned into a fight for different nationalities. The two parts of the organization, which were founded on the basis of shared religious identity, took distinct paths after 1947. The Eastern region quickly became aware of a new form of colonialism being practised over it. The formation of the state of Bangladesh in 1971 was the result of a 'second' liberation movement that was sparked by linguistic and cultural differences, as well as the problem of economic exploitation. Once more, women became emblematic in this conflict, but this time it was about how to define the 'Bengali' woman, as opposed to the 'Muslim' woman. Bangladesh still has a difficult time defining both its political and cultural identities. Anyway, what Firdous Azim tries to point out is that discourses of 'modernity' and 'tradition' have continued to clash over the course of these decades. Similar to the colonial era, in certain discourses women are seen as the symbols of transition from tradition to modernity, while in others they serve as the locus of nationalist assertions against the globalizing 'West' (Firdous Azim et al.,1-8).

So, while having the intention to illuminate the above regions of discussion, our essays will focus on the intersections of gender, caste, class, religion, and sexuality in women's literature and non-fiction, with a focus on ideas like 'tradition', 'modernity', 'country', 'genre', and 'body', from both South Asian and Western views of literary theory. As elaborated by Cecile Sandten and Ranu Uniyal, alongside the above-mentioned contemporary aspects, extra attention needs to shift towards the concept of the 'New Indian Woman', because this idealized representation is a made-up character, who can harmoniously resolve the prevailing tension between tradition and

modernization, and manoeuvre, seemingly without difficulty, between the public and private worlds (Sandten and Uniyal, 4). In so doing, the essays in this volume will also focus on the ‘double marginalization’ that Spivak has elaborated in her subaltern studies. Apart from marginalized positioning, our essays will also focus on the notions of identity, trauma, memory, nation, and displacement.

It is true that South Asia, and South Asian narratives of women, cannot be placed within an easily identifiable or singular framework, but nevertheless, there are enough characteristics that can justify this volume as looking at feminist activism and thinking in the region of South Asia. South Asian writers, working in a trans-national and trans-cultural era, feel an urgent need to change the traditional modes of discourse against the backdrop of the rupturing and melting borders of modern states. This is because of globalization, mass migration, and the rapid dissemination of information. The writers of the Indian subcontinent have created a new subgenre of fiction over the past few decades which conveys their notion of home, and their ambition to highlight issues of displacement, interracial conflict, trauma and exploitation, and the negotiating of socio-political cultural identity. In both women's and postcolonial writing, the idea that a border or a society gives physical presence to a situation of marginality is common. Similar concepts include those of invisible barriers and gender-based spatial segregation.

The first essay, by Rudrani Dasgupta Chaudhuri is centered on diaspora, trauma, and body politics. A striking development in the region of South Asia is always the possibility to challenge and renegotiate the meaning of spaces or place, and the creation of new spaces is essential to many feminists and postcolonial work. The writings of female immigrants from the subcontinent have mostly concentrated on the hybrid identity and daily struggles with class, race, and gender. It's interesting how the sudden influx of female writers from the Indian subcontinent who have migrated in the last thirty years has caught the attention of the entire world. In her essay, Rudrani has spoken about the complex relationship between women and nation. Where symbols are ingrained in nations, the forces that control the formation of nations, and the collective consciousness of national subject-hoods are given strength through symbolic meanings, and the way these

emblems carry a significant burden for a nation's female citizens. In so doing, she also points out that diasporic and non-normative identities already inhabit a threshold space with regard to national identification, and where the nation in question has a history of civil war and ethnic violence, it has clouded the post-colonial nation-building process. As a result, it might be argued that the diasporic space opens itself up to be claimed by liminal identities and intersectional ways of conceiving the home, because it is inherently a threshold space.

This debate on identity politics, diaspora, and its relation to trauma and violence is continued in the essay of Pritha Banerjee. In her essay, she highlights how the girmitiya woman is an ambiguous textual entity exemplifying the role of traumatic exile in a transcolonial Trinidad. Within this, she also highlights how the history of 'creolization' and 'catachresis' in the plantation diaspora establishes the female as a 'New World Nomad'. In so doing, the essay tries to convert the novelistic spatio-temporalities in Peggy Mohan's *Jahajin* (2008) and *The Swinging Bridge* by Ramabai Espinet (2003) into an interdiscursive re-writing of the feminine home. This proposes to situate the diaspora in an anatomical terrain, holding within its fact-of-being, several creolized cross-influences. In *Jahajin* for example, the protagonist Deeda and her confidante Sunnariya trace the lost narrative of a Bhojpuri Lokkatha, Rani Saranga Sadavriksh, which entails a pilgrimage for love. In both novels, the active proponent is the working female. In Mohan's second novel, Rosa is a subversive Academician, and Mona works as a film researcher in Montreal after shifting from Trinidad. When the novel is confronted with an exaggerated response (in terms of quasi-medical realism) physical disintegration follows. The characters ask why people choose to leave their home country for an illusion of a better life, while at the same time trying to resurrect their lost agency.

The next essay, by Dr. Soumik Banerjee, deals with the partition of Punjab and those reflecting on the disturbing aftermath of the separation of Bengal and Assam. In spite of these differences in the effects of partition in Punjab and Bengal, the experience of women during that stormy episode of Indian history was almost identical. The trope of the nation was fashioned in a highly gendered way by a discourse of cultural nationalism which emerged in 19th century India. The idea of nation, as metaphorized as woman —

rather the holy 'mother' was reinforced in the various stages of the anticolonial nationalist struggle of India. The partition of India was followed by genocide, loss of property, homelessness, and mass rape. At that time, female bodies became the most vulnerable object of gratifying sexual and political desires of the 'enemies'. Raping or violating the bodies of women belonging to different communities establishes the victory of the aggressor over the victim. About 30,000 women (12,000 Muslims and 18,000 non-Muslims) were rescued by the police and social workers from both India and Pakistan between 1947 and 1952. Most of these women were physically and emotionally brutalized, raped, converted, forced to leave their homes. By highlighting these miserable experiences of women, Dr. Banerjee critiques the aspect of female body as divided between ‘pure’ and ‘spoiled’.

In his essay, Alekhya Mandal continues to explore the aforementioned topics of violence towards women, but he has manifested 'violence' from a singular perspective, i.e., ‘silence’. According to Mandal, silence is not an attempt to conduct a halt to communication. Instead, it approaches a level of intricacy comparable to language because of its diverse range of colors and functions. Using silence to inflict violence and trauma can be a tool for acquiring power, which Mandal has elaborated on, using the poetry of Sujata Bhatt as an example. At the same time, this ‘silence’ can act as a catalyst for healing and resistance. As a result, silence is used to build and dismantle power structures. In Mandal’s essay, comparison reveals that Sujata Bhatt is in favor of avoiding silence which produces negative feelings, especially in her later poems, from the book *Poppies in Translation*.

Soumyadeep Chakraborty argues the interaction in the Shashi Deshpande’s text, *The Dark Holds No Terrors* (1980), around the creation and destruction of systematized relational binaries and gender ideals. The narrative digs deeply into complicated and dense relational issues, despite appearing to be a feminist novel which highlights Sarita, the female heroine, as she struggles and achieves independence. So far, we have been talking about the violence, torture, and exploitation of women in patriarchal socio-political scenarios, but in this essay Chakraborty has highlighted masculinist problems, crises, and masculinist angst, due to empowerment of women, and the way this empowering creates a catalyst for crises of gender relations, and masculinity.

Here Chakraborty shows that the Deshpande's novels are relational rather than inherently feminist. She has stated that the tensions, setbacks, struggles, and accomplishments of the female characters are given equal weight to those of the male characters in Deshpande's stories. In *The Dark Holds No Terrors*, Manohar is charged with defrauding others while holding a top position in the bureaucracy. Sarita, a doctor, works very hard to earn her position as a wife. All of Sarita's attempts to express her decisions, and her hesitancy, can be interpreted as a strategy for freeing herself from the constraints of traditional gender norms. However, in a paradoxical twist, this begins to produce a variety of threats to Manohar's social, familial, and domestic identity.

Apart from gender-related threat, the other threat that becomes quite pertinent in South Asian literature is a challenge to identity and belonging, which Dr. Anindita Shome has presented in her essay as '(un)Belonging', i.e., diasporic spaces of belonging and contestations. In her essay, Shome deals with issues of belonging, diaspora identities, religious identities, fragile and fraught ties in a Muslim family, and the meaning of home. In so doing, she tries to point out how the different generations of the diaspora meander home, and across the outside world. She specifically discusses the Islamophobia that has led to the othering of Muslim bodies, and has fostered an attitude where Muslim lives are often unsafe (especially in the US). She also points out that nation-state policies are formulated based on the belief that the homeland cultures of ethnic communities must not sully the native cultures of the host land.

While talking about gender discrimination and stereotypical treatment towards women, it becomes necessary to say that, even after a lot of progress, in most settled countries women of all classes have a very low position, face persecution, and are often exploited. In every social class and in every culture, males have held women as slaves. Women everywhere, even in Asia, Europe, and the Middle East, are powerless to change the political, religious, or cultural tenets of their societies. Similarly, restrictions prevent women from participating in most social or political events around the world. If they do participate, they are often left without any acknowledgment or credit. Despite having highly important functions both inside and outside their homes, women are consistently seen as 'the weaker

sex', beneath their male counterparts. Women experience gender discrimination, a problem that exists everywhere in the world. Regardless of their culture or upbringing, they are all viewed as 'weak' and inferior to their male counterparts. Regardless of ethnicity, religion, or geographic location, women experience the same pain of discrimination (Tawhida Akhter 2020).

In their essay, Amlan Baisya and Dr. Reena Sanasam have focused on this discriminatory aspect of society towards women. By giving reference to the Naxalbari Movement of Bengal during 1967-1972, they clarify many doubts about the participation of women in the movement. Through Krishna Bandopadhyay, an active participant, they open up a vast, hitherto undisturbed, area of the existing scholarship regarding the kinds of roles women 'comrades' were assigned by their male counterparts. In the book *Naxal Andolone Meyera*, Bandopadhyay recounts how the death of Charu Mazumdar created layers of distrust and suspicion amongst the revolutionaries. Shelters (safe houses) were raided, revolutionaries were captured, and rigorous tortures were perpetrated on the prisoners, especially the females. At that time, Bhubaneswari Bhaduri was a militant activist in one freedom movement group. She committed suicide, and the reason was unknowingly attributed to her alleged illicit affair with a male activist. This shows how patriarchy disowned the female body in political activism.

It is true that in South Asian traditions and literature have manifested women's roles as passive, obedient, and subservient to the patriarchy, as well as placing them as victims of other discrimination in society. However, feminist movements in the region have started to challenge these traditions or norms, with literature having a significant influence on the movements. The essay here by Somjeeta Pandey, sheds considerable light on this area. It brings together this new-found 'self' of women, with the rise of popular literature and the publishing industry. In so doing, she also talks about how these pieces allow for the development of new female roles while also showcasing a variety of female experiences.

Lastly, it can be said that all the contributors and their essays have primarily explored the voicing aspects of processes from colonialism to postcolonialism, from patriarchal social discrimination to the crisis of patriarchy and the

diaspora, as well as conflict associated with diasporic identity at the level of gender. All these have had enduring effects on women within a South Asian cultural context.

Works Cited

Akhter, Tawhida. "Gender Inequality and Literature: A Contemporary Issue". *Advances in Social Science, Education and Humanities Research.* Atlantis Press SARL. Volume 510. 2020

Chaudhuri, Maitrayee (2014). "Gender, Media and Popular Culture in a Global India." Leela Fernandes, ed. *Routledge Handbook of Gender in South Asia*. Routledge, 2018. Pp. 145 – 159.

Lee, Janet. "Women Re-Authoring Their Lives Through Feminist Narrative Therapy." *Women &Amp; Therapy*, vol. 20, no. 3, Informa UK Limited, Oct. 1997, pp. 1–12. https://doi.org/10.1300/j015v20n03_01.

South Asian Feminisms: Negotiating New Terrains: Feminist Review: Issue 91. 2009th ed., Palgrave Macmillan, 2009.

Sandten, Cecile, and Ranu Uniyal. "Introduction – Voices of Their Own: South Asian Women's Writing." *Zeitschrift Für Anglistik Und Amerikanistik*, vol. 66, no. 1, Walter de Gruyter GmbH, Mar. 2018, pp. 3–9. https://doi.org/10.1515/zaa-2018-0002

BEING BROWN, DOING 'FEMME': FEMINISM, FEMININITY, BODY POLITICS AND DIASPORIC IDENTITY IN THE WORKS OF LEAH LAXMI PIEPZNA-SAMARASINHA

RUDRANI DASGUPTA CHAUDHURI

Introduction

there is an unexploded landmine heart in us
under every breast chest
waiting for breath
Tears a moan
to crack the land open
and let the stories come walking
out of the scar.
—Leah Lakshmi Piepzna-Samarasinha, "Landmine Heart"

Women and Nation have a complex relationship. Nations are built in symbols. Symbolic meanings give power to the forces that govern the creation of nations, and the collective consciousness of national subjecthoods. The weight of these symbols falls heavily on the female subjects of a nation. 'National culture' and 'national identity' are rugged terrains of contest, where the limits of nationally-sanctioned ideas of womanhood are pushed by other transgressive identities. Uma Narayan says, in her book *Dislocating Cultures: Identities, Traditions and Third-World Feminism,* "My sense of entitlement to contest 'my culture' is threaded through with both confidence and doubt". (Narayan, 6) Such anxieties are heightened when the nation in question has a history of civil war and ethnic violence that has darkened the post-colonial nation-building process, and especially so in diasporic and non-normative identities that already occupy a threshold space in relation to national identity.

Diasporic identities are marked by displacement. It is a collective imaginary that defines itself with reference to a home left behind, and struggles with an insider/outsider dichotomy. Avtar Brah defines diasporic space as "[...] the intersectionality of diaspora, border, and dis/location as a point of confluence of economic, political, cultural, and psychic processes. It is where multiple subject positions are juxtaposed, contested, proclaimed or disavowed" (Brah, 205). Being in itself a threshold space, the diasporic space, it can be argued, opens itself up to be claimed by liminal identities and intersectional ways of imagining the home. In the last few decades, diasporic Sri Lankan women writers have made important contributions towards examining the problem of identity. Writers like Yasmine Gooneratne, Chandani Lokugé, Roma Tearne and V.V. Ganeshanathan, have shed light upon diasporic and gendered perspectives of Sri Lankan identity. These woman-identified experiences are further complicated by racial identities, the Sinhalese/Tamil/Westerner biases, linguistic differences, class differences, etc. There are also the homogenizing identities of 'Asian', 'brown', or 'immigrant', which drown out the Sri Lankan-ness. In the poetry of Samarasinha, we can see a successful negotiation and assimilation of all these contesting identities in a psyche that is at once, woman and not-woman; Sri Lankan-Canadian-American, brown, queer, poor, femme, and disabled. It is an identity that finds 'home' in the community that gathers along the margins and multiplicities that exist within.

Portrait of an artist as an activist

Leah Lakshmi Piepzna-Samarasinha was born April 21 1975, in Worcester, Massachusetts where she spent the majority of her early years. In 1996, following an abusive childhood, the young-adult poet decided to escape. With two backpacks as her only possessions, Leah caught a Greyhound bus and ended up in Toronto, Canada. Their whirlwind years were spent in a community of queer punks of color, navigating love, revolution, violence, injustice, understanding pathways of healing from abuse, coming to terms with her own intersectional identity, all the while longing for a homecoming. She was a finalist in the 2016 Lambda Literary Awards, with her memoir, *Dirty River: A Queer Femme of Color Dreaming Her Way Home,* which records this dream/nightmare-scape of dance nights with

queer femme South Asians in salwars and bangles, immigration court line-ups, homelessness, found homes and found families, and the riveting and passionate journey towards self-love and acceptance.

Piepzna-Samarasinha started performing as a spoken word artist in 1998. Since then, they have dedicated them to an ingenious confluence of art and activism. They describe them as a 'non-binary autistic femme' and use she/her and they/them pronouns interchangeably. Her identity as a poet, performer and activist is similarly in flux, each complementing the other and coming together under the umbrella of a life being lived in quest of, and in service to 'healing'. Piepzna-Samarashinha is a member of Bad Ass Visionary Healers, a California-based activist healing collective that follows the practice of 'intuitive counseling'. As a spoken-word artist they have performed throughout Canada, America and Sri Lanka. Samarasinha has engaged with her Sri Lankan Tamil 'Burgher' ancestry, not only in her poetry but also as a feminist peace activist with The Canadian Sri Lankan Women's Network during the Sri Lankan civil war.

The realities of racism in white-majority queer and trans spaces and homophobia within colored communities inspired her to begin Browngirlworld in 2001, as a safe-space for poetry and performance by queer and trans people of color. Much of her work involves collaborations with other artists of color with the goal of creating communities and opportunities for young queer people. Along with Gein Wong, an interdisciplinary director, playwright, spoken word poet, music composer, and video artist of First Nations and Asian descent, Piepzna-Samarasinha co-founded Asian Arts Freedom School in 2005. It is a space of alternative radical education where marginalized Asian/Pacific Islander history is taught along with writing and performance. Along with Canadian black activist, artist and scholar Syrus Marcus Ware, Piepzna-Samarasinha co-created the collective Performance. Disability. Art (PDA). Piepzna-Samarasinha has taught in the University of California Berkeley's June Jordan's Poetry for the People (P4P) Program in 2007. She has dedicated herself to radical living and learning, and creating support networks for LGBTQ+ youth.

Piepzna-Samarasinha's journey as an artist has been very much autoethnographic. In her first one-woman show in 2006, *Grown Woman*

Show she talks about being a survivor of incest and abuse by her mother, something that she delves further into later in her memoir. Piepzna-Samarasinha has been published in a number of magazines and anthologies and has authored nine books of poetry and academic non-fiction. She won the Lamda Literary Award for Lesbian Poetry in 2012 for *Love Cake* and was subsequently nominated for a number of awards. The anthology of poems is a queer act of resistance through love and desire in the face of violence and racial hatred. The poems reflect the trauma faced by people of color during the aftermath of 9/11, and the effect of the Sri Lankan civil war on the psyche of the diaspora. The collection is a celebration of the beauty of queer persistence in the face of danger and turmoil. Her first collection of poems, *Consensual Genocide,* also dealt with many of the same issues. In the poems, Samarasinha traces their bodily and emotional lineage from Sri Lanka to the streets of Brooklyn and Toronto. The poems celebrate high femme identities and rebellions, in an attempt to archive queer lived experiences through poetic historiography.

In *Bodymap* Piepzna-Samarasinha works towards a poetics of the sick and disabled queer body. The poems engage with survivorhood, and transformative love and desire in the non-normative body. In her latest poetry collection, *Tonguebreaker,* Piepzna-Samarasinha dreams of a collective queer femme future. The poems curate moments of disabled queer femme living on the streets and in the bedroom. For Piepzna-Samarasinha, poetry is activism, and activism is poetry. Living through hate-crimes, sickness, rising fascism, love, communities and kinships, Piepzna-Samarasinha's poetry is the making of a ritual of queer survival.

The disabled body and crip identity

Adrienne Rich writes that poetry "[...] can uncover desires and appetites buried under the accumulating emergencies of our lives; [...] it's an instrument for embodied experience" (Rich, 12-13). Such an embodied poetics resists abstractions and localizes unified feminist sensibilities within the physicality of pain and suffering of the poet-body. When the body is the site of politics, embodiment and subjectivity constitute each other. Rich's own experience of disabling rheumatoid arthritis made her feel "signified by pain" (Rich, 13). She envisioned a particular localized body from which

to speak of the pain of those like her. Similarly, Piepzna-Samarasinha's poetry and performances speak of her autobiographical experiences of disability. In Piepzna-Samarasinha's art, the body enacts a relationship between corporeal, political, geographical and cultural ordeals of pain.

Piepzna-Samarasinha's body and poetics are marked by multiple specific identities. These complex identities cannot be spliced or individuated. They acknowledge each other. Her experience of depression cannot be narrated without her experience of queer desire. At the same time the poet is acutely aware of how their singular body is bound in perpetuity with a community of bodies. In the 2009 project *Sins Invalid: An Unshamed Claim to Beauty in the Face of Invisibility* performed at the Brava Theatre in San Francisco, Piepzna-Samarasinha asks, "what if our working class, fucked up, chronically ill, sick, survivor bodies" were seen to be "beautiful, just like they are" (Piepzna-Samarasinha *Sins Invalid*, 2009). The question feels all the more impactful because of her simple and precise movements in a satin nightgown and minimal traditional stage set-up. Throughout history, disabled bodies have either been excluded from the theatrical space or sensationalized as something monstrous to be gawked at. Samarasinha's art, thus, made visible the compelling tension between the traditional theatre space and the disabled body. They neither deny nor minimize their disabled identity. Samarasinha in her performance art and spoken-word poetry aims to "address the question of embodiment without fetishizing the body", as Sarah Ahmed and Jackie Stacey theorized in *Thinking Through the Skin* (Shmed & Stacey, 3).

In her poetry Piepzna-Samarasinha has replaced the word 'disabled' with the word 'crip'. It is a contested term, even within disability activism and academia. Reclamation of 'crip' is a discourse that has much in common with the discourse of reclaiming 'queer' as an empowered term. Crip and queer are in fact intersectional identities, complexly intertwined in their existence as weird, odd, stigmatized, and abject - outside the umbrella of the 'normal'. In his book *Crip Theory: Cultural Signs of Queerness and Disability,* Robert McRuer says:

> "Compulsory heterosexuality is intertwined with compulsory able-bodiedness; both systems work to (re)produce the able-body and heterosexuality. But

> precisely because these systems depend on a queer/disabled existence that can never quite be contained, able-bodied heterosexuality's hegemony is always in danger of collapse […] in contrast to an able-bodied culture that holds out the promise of a substantive (but paradoxically always elusive) ideal, crip theory would resist delimiting the kinds of bodies and abilities that are acceptable or that will bring about change" (McRuer, 31).

In her writing, Piepzna-Samarasinha fleshes out the queer and crip desire, and queer and crip domesticity that McRuer theorizes. In the poem *I know Crips Live Here,* everyday domesticity is an act of defiance:

> "*I know crips live here.* Only house on the block with a homemade ramp, property standards so mad" (Piepzna-Samarasinha, 4-5).

The reader is invited to see, smell and touch. "coconut oil, unscented conditioner and black soap; […] all the things in reach around your mattress of glory, the vibrator, the library books, the TV, the stuffed animals; […] disabled parking placard a candle in the window" (Piepzna-Samarasinha,1-8). Piepzna-Samarasinha's poetry has very little imagery or abstractions. Instead, it implodes with a realness that can only come with lived experience. Their poetry demarcates a crip spatiality with its 'everyday emergencies' and 'crisis ordinariness'. Lauren Berlant's theorization of 'crisis ordinariness' can be read here as "perpetual and/or cyclical encounters with crisis create new forms of living with and in relationship to vulnerability, precarity, and violence" (Danylevich and Patsavas, 7). Samarasinha. in her own academic writing, shows how such 'new forms of living' are nurtured through a system of sharing knowledge. The disability justice dream is possible only through a sharing of crip knowledge that ensures survival and resistance in the face of violence, rising fascism, and environmental injustices. In her 2018 book, *Care Work: Dreaming Disability Justice* Piepzna-Samarasinha writes, "With all our crazy, adaptive-deviced, loving kinship and commitment to each other, we will leave no one behind as we roll, limp, stim, sign, and create the decolonial living future" (Piepzna-Samarasinha, 135). It is a future that depends upon creativity, resilience and "dreaming like my life depends on it" (Piepzna-Samarasinha, 135). Disability justice dreams draw attention to the systems of the state that perpetuate crisis and violence by placing those who are most marginalized and victimized by the state at the center.

Queer, femme sistahlove

All the femmes come back, and I wash away
rape,
I wash away racism, I wash away femme-phobia
We witch away transmisogyny, we witch
away ableism
I wash away every too much, crazy girl
I wash away every not enough, you fucked
that up
—Leah Lakshmi Piepzna Samarasinha*, All the femmes come back*

History has not been kind to femininity. Along with traditional patriarchal discourses, western feminist thought has also been guilty of 'femmephobia', or a systemic devaluation of all things feminine. Makeup, bangles, and frilly dresses, have always been met with derision in some way or another. Second wave feminist Germaine Greer's words echoed the sentiments of many when she said, "the women who dare not go outside without their fake eyelashes are in serious psychic trouble" (Greer, 325). This view has been perpetuated by the marginalization of femininity into the normative figure of privileged identity- white, middle-class, heterosexual, able-bodied and without agency. It has been largely overlooked that empowered femininity can have the potential for 'otherness'. However, discourses of lesbian butch/femme binaries have always recognized the disruptive power of non-normative femme identity. As Hannah McCann says in her book *Queering Femininity: Sexuality, Feminism and the Politics of Presentation,* "[…] queer femme embodiments, allows for an unpacking of femininity in a way that blurs identity lines and generously attends to attachments that may be perceived as in line with the "normative" (McCann, 7) Femme as a queer potential, opens up ways of unravelling normative gendering as well as mainstream feminist thought.

For artists like Piepzna-Samarasinha, femme like queer, is as much 'doing' as 'being'. Femme is lipstick, miniskirts, makeup, and jewelry. Femme is also undaunted crip voices at protests, brown-black solidarities, and messy, unkempt co-living spaces. Above all, femme is radical love and intersectional survival. Queer femme identities reject the notion that femininity is passive. In *Femmes of Power*, Del Legrace Volcano and Ulrika

Dahl re-read femme as "resistance and solidarity" (Del Legrace Volcano & Dahl,18) Doing femme is a political act of rejecting cis-heteropatriarchy and making way for queer trans expressions. It is a reframing of all things feminine that are rejected as trivial by patriarchy, as significant and empowering. In the preface to *Tonguebreaker*, Piepzna-Samarasinha writes about the Japanese art of *kintsugi,*

"[...] there is something very femme about it. The idea that adornment is a form of reverence, of binding together. The notion that our cracks, our wounds, can be beautiful too. So much femme labor, femme love, comes from that place of breaking. It is what teaches us how to see each other" (Piepzna-Samarasinha, 5).

Femme calls for a collective survival - one that can be ensured by mutual recognition, acknowledgement and a sharing of knowledge and resources. In the poem "Femme houses" Piepzna-Samarasinha articulates this 'seeing' and sharing -

> "I see your femme abundance,
> your row of grandmother's pompadour pictures from
> East Los in the '30s
> Your laugh crackle breaking out, how you say, *m'ija,*
> *take anything you need*" (Piepzna-Samarasinha, 9-13).

Femme solidarity is the realization that within the racist, imperialist, patriarchal discourse of power, the most radical act is vulnerability and sharing access.

Color and home

> *This is a road map. True romance. Leaving America, finding a one-room apartment, true brown love revolution and bullshit, finding yourself in your own*
> *body memories, chronic illness, brown sisterfemmes, homemade Diwalis, walking away, and building a new family. Not the easy way that we brown girls*
> *think about it sometimes. Those words, Family and Home, are so seductive…*
> ―Leah Lakshmi Piepzna-Samarasinha*, Dirty River: A Queer t Femme of Color Dreaming Her Way Home*

The traditional imagery, iconography, and symbolism, that circulate in the imagination of the South Asian diaspora often elicit a conceptualization of femininity that is patriarchal and hegemonic. If one is to think of representative Sri Lankan femininity, the Sigiriya frescoes come to mind. Painted in 480 AD and 'discovered' in the 19th century by Westerners, they represent a nationalist femininity while emanating seductive exoticism not unlike the icons of many colonized Asian nations. The gendered racial, as well as economic, concerns of an emerging nation are mapped retroactively onto its art. (Franco, qtd. in Gunasena, 57) Such imaginations pose discursive limits onto femininity, making it heteronormative, racially Sinhalese or Aryan, and submissive to patriarchal power. Ironically, such images contain within themselves the potential for disruption. With no men in sight, the Sigiriya women, having noticeably Dravidian features like large frames, thick lips and voluptuous breasts, can very well be imagined to be living out a fantasy of Sapphic domesticity. Diasporic Sri Lankan women's subjectivities challenge the nationalistic hegemonies. The mixed-race, queer, femme bodies in Piepzna-Samarasinha's poetry embody this challenge and pose as an alternative way of visualizing Sri Lankan femininity against patriarchal and racist discourses of nationhood and identity.

In the poem "Don't fuck anybody you wouldn't want to be", Piepzna-Samarasinha rejects hegemonic patriarchy as a conscious choice:

> "I gave up two things this New Years
> I gave up cigarettes and white boys" (Piepzna-Samarasinha, 1-2).

She speaks at length about white men fetishizing "colored pussy" because they are "just dark enuf to be sexy/not dark enuf to be scary" (Piepzna-Samarasinha, 3-4). It is a defiance of the white imperialist symbolism of the exotic feminine as an object of conquest. She also opens up the experience of identification with black femininity in opposition to the rejection of dark skin in the racist Sri Lankan nationalist discourse. Her images of "mango sucking" may seem to fetishize brown women, but they contain in them deeper stories of empowerment and survival. (Piepzna-Samarasinha, 4) Mangoes that are native to South Asia also flourish in the Caribbean. They bring with them stories of indentured labor, and of black and brown transgressive femininity, 'sucking' and sustaining life force. Piepzna-

Samarasinha articulates a deep lustful longing for femininity that provides a space of belonging for the diasporic subject:

> "and our hair naps into one forest of kink
> Our colors don't clash
> as she lies on my earth
> sucks coconut cream from my breast" (Piepzna-Samarasinha, 8-11).

Thick and curly, distinctively Sri Lankan hair does not tether Sri Lankan women to heteronormative nationalist images of femininity, but weaves queer, femme, Sri Lankan and diasporic subjectivities together. Piepzna-Samarasinha's poetry can be said to be queerly disrupting the schema of nationalist hegemony by "rerouting desire and queerness through, not despite, the symbolic field of 'home' (Gunasena, 59). However, this home is not one that is easily attainable. Home is a constant process of survival, heartbreak, making meaning out of chaos, and coming to terms with a perpetual sense of exile:

> "but I'm still going back home
> This isn't home we can't go home" (Piepzna-Samarasinha, 15-17)

For Piepzna-Samarasinha, a space to call home has never been something stable or finite. Instead, they find home in an acute faith in generational belonging. They imagine an unbroken thread of resistance, solidarity and nurturing. In the poem "Femme Futures" Piepzna-Samarasinha writes:

> "Sri Lankan radical women never come alone.
> We have a tradition of coming in groups of three or four, minimum.
> […]
> We do things like, oh, start the first rape crisis center in Jaffna in a war zone in someone's living room with no funding" (Piepzna-Samarasinha, 3-4, 14-15).

Piepzna-Samarasinha finds home in the loves, friendships, alliances, resistances and histories of her people. Such imaginings not only hark back to a shared past, but look forward to a future; one that is perpetually coming into being as femme bodies of color come to themselves.

Conclusion

Piepzna-Samarasinha's life and art centers around the exhilarating rituals of feminist intimacies and the powerful feelings of collective identity they instill. In the essay that can be considered a manifesto, "Browngirlworld: Queergirlofcolor Organizing, Sistahood, Heartbreak" she writes about the euphoria of femme friendships: "We fly with each other, there is nothin' like our brilliance, shrieking, lifesaving giggles, orgasms. Oh, how we fly" (Piepzna-Samarasinha, 9). The emotional labor and vulnerability invested in these relationships are rewarded with belonging, collective consciousness, and pleasure, that exist beyond heteropatriarchal definitions. Piepzna-Samarasinha is inspired by many feminist writers of color, like Gloria Anzaldua, Chrystos, and Cherrie Moraga. They envision a feminist utopia where friends are the chosen family, the one that nourishes, comforts and heals in a hostile world.

However, such a utopia also meets its fair share of heartbreak and betrayal in the real world. Piepzna-Samarasinha writes about betrayal with as much passion as she writes about desire. They know how to forge alliances but sometimes fail at sustaining them. There are unfulfilled expectations, breached trust and situations that devolve over time.

> "I am leaving you, you are leaving me. We fucked each other over. To give the details would violate confidentiality. Would violate us. S/he needed to leave friends behind, me included, to be who s/he needed to be. But we needed each other to survive" (Piepzna-Samarasinha, 12)

These words express an emotional maturity that accounts for how unsustainable the world is for femme survival. Feminists friendships are difficult and fleeting under hegemonic forces of racism, imperialism and patriarchy. However, the adrenaline rush of collective being is far too strong. Queer femmes of color continue to meet in protest marches, poetry slams, "on the edge of Women Studies classes" (Piepzna-Samarasinha, 12), conferences, drop-in centers. They travel in packs, wake up together in half-way houses, and continue to nourish and sustain each other, fleetingly.

References

Ahmed, Sara, and Jackie Stacey. *Thinking Through the Skin*. Routledge, 2001.

Dahl, Ulrika and Del LaGrace Volcano. *Femmes of Power: Exploding Queer Femininities*. Serpent's Tail, 2009.

Danylevich, Theodora and Alyson Patsavas. "Cripistemologies of Crisis: Emergent Knowledges for the Present". *Lateral.* Issue 10.1, Spring 2021. pp-3-20. *Jstor.:* https://www.jstor.org/stable/10.2307/48671629

Greer, Germaine. *The Female Eunuch*. London: MacGibbon & Kee,1970.

Gunasena, Natassja B. "Something Like Kali and Durga Must've Rocked": Sri Lankan Femininity and the Poetics of Diaspora. *Women's Studies Quarterly.* Vol. 47, No. 1 & 2, ASIAN DIASPORAS (SPRING/SUMMER 2019), pp.48-64.

JStor, https://www.jstor.org/stable/26734043

Kafai, Shayda. "The politics of mad femme disclosure". *Journal of Lesbian Studies*. Volume 25, Issue 3 2020. pp-182-194. *Taylor and Francis Online.* DOI: 10.1080/10894160.2020.1778851

McCann, Hannah. *Queering Femininity: Sexuality, Feminism and the Politics of Presentation.* Routledge, 2018.

McRuer, Robert. *Crip Theory: Cultural Signs of Queerness and Disability.* New York University Press, 2006.

Piepzna-Samarasinha, Leah Lakshmi. "Browngirlworld: Queergirlofcolor Organizing sistahood heartbreak". *Colonize this! Young women of color on today's feminism.* Edited by Daisy Hernandez and Bushra Rehaman. Seal Press. 2002

Piepzna-Samarasinha, Leah Lakshmi. *Consensual Genocide.* TSAR Publications.2006.

Piepzna-Samarasinha, Leah Lakshmi. *Dirty River: A Queer Femme of Color Dreaming Her Way Home.* Arsenal Pulp Press. 2015

Piepzna-Samarasinha, Leah Lakshmi. *Tonguebreaker.* Arsenal Pulu Press. 2019

Rich, Adrienne. *What is Found There: Notebooks on Poetry and Politics.* Norton, 1993.

Sins Invalid. 2009. “Leah Lakshmi in Sins Invalid 2009—Part 1.” YouTube video, footage from a performance at Brava Theater in San Francisco. Posted 26 April 2010. http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=K3eZp2DdlLA

EXPLORING THE DIASPORIC FEMININE BODY AS THE PARTITIONED SITE OF TRAUMA, MEMORY AND TRANSLATION IN THE INDO-CARIBBEAN FICTIONS OF PEGGY MOHAN'S *JAHAJIN* AND RAMABAI ESPINET'S *THE SWINGING BRIDGE*

PRITHA BANERJEE

"Where now? Who now? When now?"
—Samuel Beckett, *The Unnamable*

"Confined on the ship, from which there is no escape, the madman is delivered to the river with its thousand arms, the sea with its thousand roads, to that great uncertainty external to everything. He is a prisoner in the midst of what is the freest, the openest of routes: bound fast at the infinite crossroads. He is the Passenger par excellence: that is, the prisoner of the passage. And the land he will come to is unknown- as is, once he disembarks, the land from which he comes… One thing at least is certain: water and madness have long been linked in the dreams of European man".
—Michel Foucault, *Madness and Civilization*

Introduction

On 14th January 2021, the British Library published the testimony of Bibee Zuhoorun, an indentured slave of 'Chinidad', in the Library's blog, *Untold Lives*. This anecdotal evidence serves as an augmentation of the casualties caused by the colonial apparatus to women's dignity. It signifies the anti-banal stance that effectuates oral narratives in the history of the 'neo-slave' trade in the Caribbean. Nevertheless, it is ironic that Anglophone authoritarianism is still lurking in its vested centralism, evident in a tweet declaring 'ceremonial silence' on the death of Her Majesty the Queen (published on the same page of the website). One of the most urgent tasks

of the readership with regard to indenture politics is doubtlessly to facilitate the necessity of 'reading into the re-reading' of the said epoch. In other words, the vitality of autochthonous dispositions tends to lose out on its devout 'oath of remembrance' as soon as the politics of transferral and translation adopt an effective middle-ground for compromise.

The 'fact of the novel' is unapologetically replaced by the 'reality' of the courtly ritual of mourning (the Queen). This relocates the perused performativity of 'reading' and forgoes the materiality of the 'text as a body'. Effectively, it underlines concurrent possibilities of postcolonial literature, displacing the 'history' of chattel slavery into a critical 'discipline' of obligatorial academic transaction, often to the detriment of bona-fide affirmative action. The juxtaposition of the Master (the Queen) and the Slave (the girmitiya women) is not an ontological malfunction. The nomenclature of the 'Queen' does not serve as a translation of the dialectical 'self-as-the-Other' (master-as-slave). Rather, such autocratic installations come to fruition only at the cost of the 'personal', where language is the sole embodiment of faithful "meaning-construction".

This essay tries to creatively convert the novelistic spatio-temporalities in *Jahajin* (2008) and *The Swinging Bridge* (2003) into an interdiscursive re-writing of the feminine home. As the point of entry into the metonymic space of the 'woman' is her body, the essay proposes situating the diaspora in her anatomical terrain, holding within its fact-of-being several creolized cross-influences. According to Barbara Godard, the 'dubbed rhythms' of translated fictions are shapeless. Life narratives in the first-person often "change from the tedium of the forced effort of the daily task to the exhilaration of sudden insight" (Simon 1996). Like the Indo-Trinidadian exponentialism, final versions of textual narratives cannot ever be realized. The language of diasporic aporia and its ambitious 'art of approach' exposes deliberate elisions between memory and culture. Such a filiation, between semantic ambiguity and interventionist abstraction, decodes a deeply accessorial bond between '*de facto* representation' and 'sui generis *reconstruction'*. The literary devices used in translating the feminine separates and foregrounds polysemic alterities. They consciously scatter the power of speech into successive tropes of dis-concord, often through provocative signifiers.