



Indo-Caribbean feminist thought: genealogies, theories, enactments

Delphine Munos

To cite this article: Delphine Munos (2018): Indo-Caribbean feminist thought: genealogies, theories, enactments, South Asian Diaspora, DOI: [10.1080/19438192.2018.1466409](https://doi.org/10.1080/19438192.2018.1466409)

To link to this article: <https://doi.org/10.1080/19438192.2018.1466409>



Published online: 22 Apr 2018.



Submit your article to this journal [↗](#)



Article views: 1



View related articles [↗](#)



View Crossmark data [↗](#)

BOOK REVIEW

Indo-Caribbean feminist thought: genealogies, theories, enactments, edited by Gabrielle Jamela Hosein and Lisa Outar, London, Palgrave Macmillan, 2016, 349 pp., €93.59 (hardcover), ISBN 978-1-137-57079-6

Indo-Caribbean feminism has emerged as a compelling and exciting area of scholarship in the past thirty years or so, although its distinctive achievements have suffered from lack of visibility. This lack of visibility owes to cumulative factors, some of which are traditionally traced back to the marginalisation of Indian communities and the predominance of the creolisation discourse within Afro-centered Caribbean contexts. However, it is less acknowledged that the under-representation of Indo-Caribbean cultural products and scholarship in general (and that of Indo-Caribbean women's achievements in particular) also owes to a critical consensus privileging certain paradigms and theoretical frameworks to the detriment of others. In her influential *Diasporic (Dis)locations* (2004), Brinda Mehta already suggests as much when she notes that neither the field of Caribbean studies nor that of South Asian Diaspora studies have done a great job at taking on board Indo-Caribbean experiences. Whether this is because of the predominance of the black/white paradigm in scholarship on the Caribbean, or because of the foregrounding of U.S and U.K.-based diasporic communities in discussions of the Indian diaspora, the specificities of Indo-Caribbean subjectivities, experiences, and cultural productions have generally flown beneath the critical radar. And such critical invisibility takes on abysmal proportions when gender enters the equation. The suggestion that Indo-Caribbean female voices have been doubly marginalised – firstly on account of communal belonging, secondly on account of gender – is emphasised by the fact that Indo-Caribbean women writers only emerged on the literary scene from the late 1980s onwards – that is, long after their male counterparts started establishing themselves. It is also revealing that female perspectives on Indenture were edited from migratory history until very recently.

Today, even if there appears to be an ever-increasing interest in Indo-Caribbean women writers and in female indenture narratives – Gaiutra Bahadur's excellent *Coolie Woman* (2014) is a case in point – what remains understudied are the feminist critical genealogies and intellectual legacies upon which contemporary Indo-Caribbean women writers have built. It is nonetheless of crucial importance to contextualise and historicise the emergence of Indo-Caribbean female voices as a transdisciplinary and transgenerational phenomenon, one in which feminist scholars have played a foundational part. Gabrielle Jamela Hosein's and Lisa Outar's edited collection *Indo-Caribbean Feminist Thought* is an important book for various reasons, the first of which is that it sets the record straight, by shifting the terrain of analysis to the fruitful interaction taking place between Indo-Caribbean feminist theorists and Indo-Caribbean women writers, activists and artists since the 1980s (and even before that date, as evidenced in Anita Baksh's chapter on the ways in which Rajkumari Singh's mentorship influenced Mahadai Das, or in Outar's discussion of cosmopolitan feminism in *The Spectator*, a journal published in Trinidad from 1948 to 1965). Defining Indo-Caribbean feminist thought as 'work that has advanced theorizing of the intersections of Indianness, Caribbean, gender and feminism' (3), Hosein's and Outar's volume brings together three different generations of scholars whose main goal is to trace the genealogy of Indo-Caribbean feminisms 'through indentureship and post-indentureship experience rather than through an Indian subcontinental diaspora framework' (9). In other words, moving beyond the yardstick of Western feminism as well as beyond an 'orthodoxy of intersectionality' (94)

that often overemphasises the relationship of women of colour to a white norm and thus reinscribes the centrality of the West, the collection seeks to unsettle cultural nationalisms of all sorts, including Indian ones. Specifically, if on the one hand *Indo-Caribbean Feminist Thought* challenges the elision of Indo-Caribbean experiences effected by a ‘celebratory creolization discourse’ (3) in the Caribbean, the book also problematises notions of Indian purity which are prevalent in the Indian diaspora, claiming forms of Indianness that are ‘multiple, ambiguous, ambivalent, and cross-pollinated’ (3) instead. Throughout seventeen chapters which bring together work from ethnography, literature and visual arts, among other fields, the contributors to the volume contextualise and/or revisit key feminist concepts rooted in the Caribbean and in the experience of Indenture, such as ‘gender negotiations,’ ‘dougl’a poetics,’ ‘kala pani poetics,’ and ‘jahaji bhain principle.’ In the Introduction, Hosein and Outar also introduce two concepts to the field of Indo-Caribbean studies, namely that of ‘feminist navigations’ and ‘post-indentureship feminisms.’ The first concept complements Patricia Mohammed’s notion of ‘gender negotiations’ in an attempt to better express a generational shift in Indo-Caribbean women’s gender consciousness, from ‘negotiating with patriarchy’ in the past, to ‘navigating new conceptions of femininity itself’ in the contemporary moment (32). As for the notion of ‘post-indentureship feminisms,’ it gestures towards relational historiographies of indentureship beyond the Caribbean, and is specifically evidenced in Outar’s comparison of works by the Guyanese writer Ryhaan Shah and by the Mauritian writers Ananda Devi and Natacha Appanah. Outar’s interview with the multimedia Guadeloupean artist Kelly Sinnapah Mary also bears witness to a resolve to correct the lacunae in Indo-Caribbean studies, by redirecting attention to Caribbean spaces that are non-Anglophone and that are outside of the fold of Guyana and Trinidad. It is noteworthy that two chapters focus on the underexplored topic of Indo-Caribbean masculinities: while Rhoda Reddock’s contribution provides a general overview of how Indo-Caribbean men have been located in the gendered landscape of the region over the last four decades, Michael Niblett’s chapter addresses the pressures placed on Indo-Martinican masculinity by Martinique’s deindustrialisation, as represented in Michel Ponna-mah’s first novel, *Dérive de Josapahat*. A whole section of *Indo-Caribbean Feminist Thought* is devoted to dougl’a feminisms and Hosein’s chapter offers a particularly compelling analysis of the genesis of the term douglarization, its various meanings across contexts, its deployment by critics, but also its pertinence in the present, provided that Dougl’a becomes ‘an experience of Indianness’ (214) and that Dougl’a poetics are not ‘burdened with the weight of representing potentially progressive cultural projects delegitimized by both the Afro-Creole dominant culture and the Indian “Mother Culture”’ (215).

Apart from Outar’s (and to a certain extent Niblett’s) contributions, the volume does not really deliver on its promise to engage with comparative feminist historiographies of indentureship across regional and linguistic divides. Indeed, as Hosein and Outar themselves acknowledge, ‘the volume is heavily weighted toward perspectives from Trinidad and Tobago and Guyana and their diasporas’ (16), and toward Anglophone perspectives at that. In the Afterword to the collection, Shalini Puri underlines the many strengths of the collection, among which the ways in which it ‘historicizes the emergence and changing emphases and agendas of Indo-Caribbean feminisms’ (326). But she also remarks that, save from Niblett’s chapter, the volume raises a question that it does not pursue – that of ‘the tension between collective advancement and individual advancement in capitalist modernity in the contemporary moment’ (326). And indeed, due to the ‘post-indentureship’ framing of the volume, it is perhaps inevitable that issues related to ‘the systemic economic underpinnings of the present’ (326) be eclipsed by historical considerations about Indenture and its heritage. I have also felt that the taken-for-granted association of Indo-Caribbean subjectivity with Indenture in the volume is problematic, in that it rules out more recent Indian communities

in the Caribbean (say, the Gujarati-Muslim community in Barbados) from the conversation. There is also a sense that the volume all-too-hastily consigns the diaspora/transnational approach to a conservative agenda, thus turning a blind eye to the ways in which Indo-Caribbean subjectivities may also be impacted by contemporary developments in the two-way relationship between today's India and its diaspora. But these minor reservations do not detract from Hosein's and Outar's and their contributors' massive achievement here; the collection is a must-read for scholars and students interested in gender studies, Caribbean studies and South Asian Diaspora studies.

Delphine Munos
Goethe University and Humboldt Foundation, Germany

 Munos@em.uni-frankfurt.de

© 2018 Delphine Munos
<https://doi.org/10.1080/19438192.2018.1466409>

